

# **The need to document the role of community museums in inter-cultural dialogue and peace processes: [*Experiences from Uganda*]**

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## **About community museums in Uganda**

Community museums in Uganda are in most cases, depicting and preserving the local cultural heritage. They are community initiatives, stemming from the passion of one or several Ugandans. In many instances, the founder (usually, but not always, men) is the person-in-charge. “Owners” also include NGOs (whose “museum activity” is usually a part of their overall programme work) and community groups. Some institutions, such as universities, have followed suit and constituted their own collections of artefacts.

These museums have mostly been established to exhibit cultural or historical resources. The focus is often on ethnic culture and on the preservation of culture for culture’s sake rather than, say, for tourism. They have all at least made a first step (and sometimes, very many more) in constituting a collection (artefacts, documents, etc.) that is shared with the public.

They have also made an effort to engage young people, for instance inviting school children to visit their premises. Exhibitions are also held to attract a wider audience than for static collections. Attempts have also been made to adopt museum ‘best practices’, such as by labelling artefacts, open an accession register and developing mini catalogues.

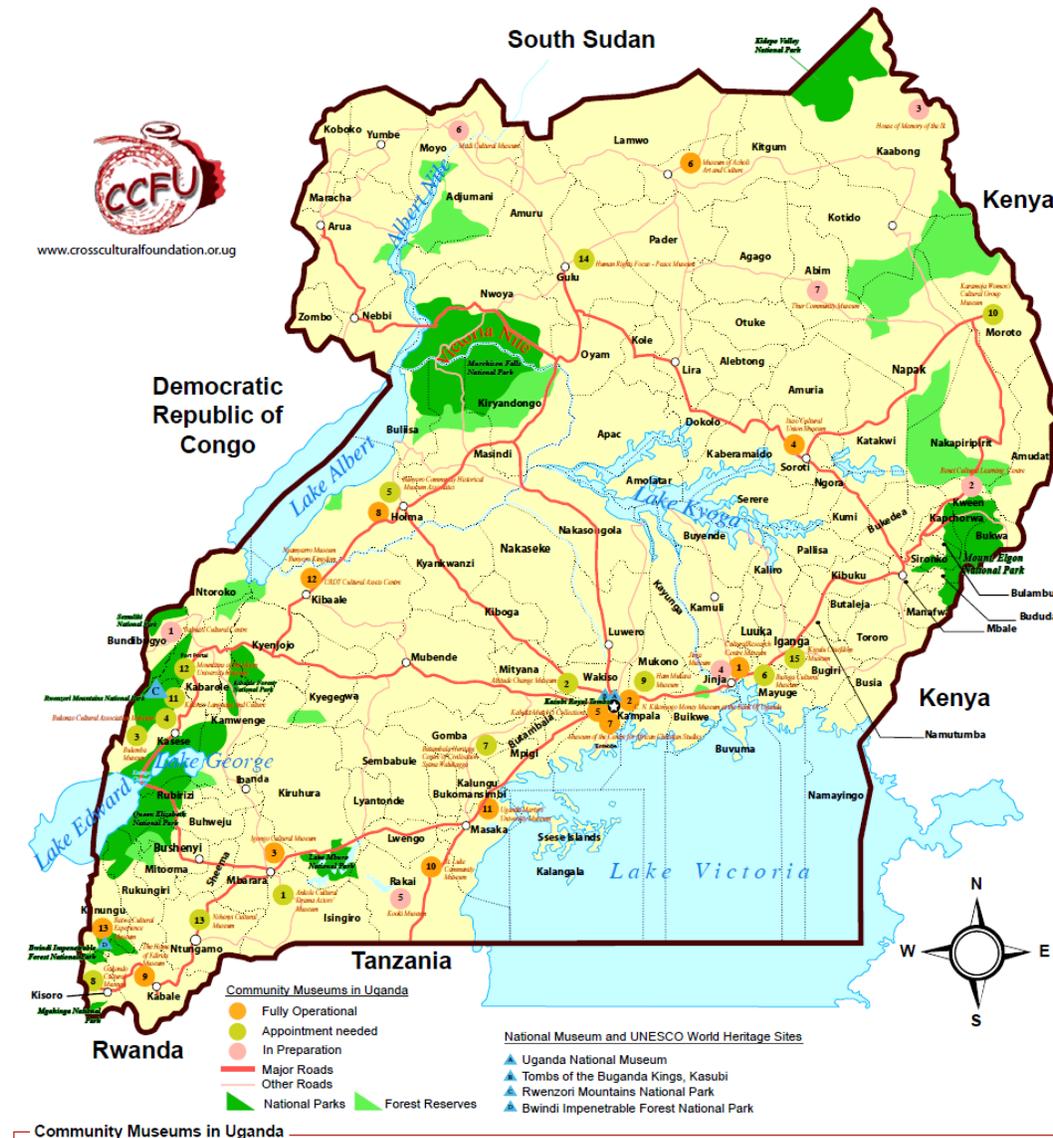
Some of the community museums are located in conflict prone areas and are trying to incorporate conflict management and inter-cultural dialogues in their outreach programmes. This paper is therefore going to highlight among other issues, the role of community museums in inter-cultural dialogue and conflict management and the need to document this role.

## **Where are these museums located?**

Uganda is mainly divided into 4 major regions – the east, north, west and central. Community museums are spread across the country and some of them are located in conflict prone areas – the north east, central north and the west. The museums include:

- The Human Rights Focus Peace museum in Gulu
- The Museum of Acholi Art and Culture in Kitgum
- The Thur Community Museum in Abim
- The Bukangama community museum in the Rwenzori region

Map of Uganda showing community museums.



### Nature of conflicts

The different regions experience different types of conflicts. Whereas the central north experienced a politically engineered civil war for over 20 years, other regions such as the Rwenzori region and Karamoja have experienced clashes based on ethnicity – sometimes as a result of limited resources. In Karamoja region cattle rustling has been part of the local culture for long.

During the colonial period, the Karimojong<sup>1</sup> lost a considerable portion of their land through pacification, redrawing boundaries between Kenya and Sudan that left much of their grazing regions outside Uganda, and their expulsion from the Kidepo Valley National Park, Wildlife Reserves, and Protected Forests. The Karimojong were forced to sell their livestock and it was also confiscated to pay taxes imposed by the British.

Whenever the dry season starts in Karamoja, tensions develop between and within the various Karimojong pastoral groups. As members of one ethnic group try to exercise their rights to exclude nonmembers (Karimojong or non-Karimojong), unannounced entry into a territory belonging to another group may end up in war.

The Rwenzori region on the other hand, consisting of 7 districts (Kabarole, Kyenjojo, Kamwenge, Kasese, Kyegegwa, Ntoroko and Bundibugyo) of Western Uganda has for decades been characterized by conflicts associated with cultural and ethnic differences that exist among the people of the region. The conflicts between cultural groups have always raised questions about governance; leadership and fairness in the sharing and use of natural resources e.g. land

### **Community museums and inter-cultural dialogue, peace building and conflict management.**

In light of the devastating effects of conflicts, some of the community museums especially those in affected areas decided to explore ways of contributing to peace processes, conflict resolution and management mainly through cultural approaches.

### **Northern Uganda**

Here the Human Rights and Peace Museum and the Museum of Acholi Art and Culture are already contributing to the restoration, reconciliation and peace building processes. The Peace Museum preserves and promotes the traditional herb (*Matoput*) used to reconcile two-warring parties and this was partly advocated for and used in the aftermath of the civil war.

The traditional Acholi culture views justice as means of restoring social relations. In other words, justice in the traditional Acholi culture should be considered as restorative. The Acholi traditional culture encourages individuals to accept their mistakes and take responsibility for their actions. It is important to note that an individual does this voluntarily. Individuals are encouraged to forgive and not to seek revenge. One of the mechanisms for forgiveness and reconciliation among the Acholi is the *Mato Oput* (drinking the bitter herb).

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<sup>1</sup> The common name given to people from Karamoja region

*Mato Oput* is both a process and ritual ceremony that aims at restoring relationships between clans that would have been affected by either an intentional murder or accidental killing. It helps to bring together the two conflicting parties with the aim of promoting forgiveness and restoration, rather than revenge or punishing the offender. The Acholi conduct the *Mato Oput* ceremony because they believe that after the ceremony the "hearts of the offender and the offended will be free from holding any grudge between them

The Museum of Acholi Art and Culture (MAAC) on the other hand, showcases the history of the civil war to remind people of northern Uganda of the horrible past and to encourage them to remain peaceful

### **Karamoja region**

There are 3 small museums in Karamoja region. The Ik House of Memory (Kaabong District), Ethur community museum (Abim District) and Karamoja Women's Cultural Group Museum (Moroto District)

The curators of 2 community museums have already visited the Peace Museums of Kenya to explore their contribution to conflict management<sup>2</sup>. They are now set to do a thorough research on culture and its use in conflict management.

### **Rwenzori Region**

The curators of Bukangama community museum, Obudingiya Bwa Baamba (OBB) Museum and Koogere Foundation Museum, all located in the Rwenzori region also visited the Peace Museums of Kenya. Coming from an area prone to conflicts, they decided to work through young people to disseminate messages related to peaceful co-existence and the need for cultural pluralism. Bukangama for instance is working through a youth committee to act as messengers of peace while Koogere runs traditional music troupe which embraces and promotes the cultural diversity in the region. While the Obudingiya bwa Baamba preserves and showcases different traditional symbols of peace, justice and reconciliation.

### **Is there a need to document the role of community museums in Peace building and inter-cultural dialogue?**

Today there is more information, technology and knowledge available than ever before, but adequate wisdom is still needed to prevent conflicts, to eradicate poverty or to make it possible for all to learn in order to live in harmony in a safe world. There is wisdom embedded in the traditional peace building mechanisms which need to be

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<sup>2</sup> The visits were conducted to Lari and Embu Peace Museum of Kenya

documented and shared beyond what is commonly shared on social media and modern ICT.

Cultural approaches to conflict management and inter-cultural dialogues aim at restoring social relations rather than passing judgment or punishments contrary to the conventional justice systems. It is therefore necessary to document and promote such practices to complement the western justice systems.

In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to document and share harmonious inter-actions among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together.

Documenting the role of community museums in inter-cultural dialogue and peace building process will make them more relevant to contemporary issues affecting societies. Furthermore it will make museums more visible and be able to diversify their role beyond preservation of artefacts

But challenges are many: collections rarely have a strong thematic focus and most of the initiators adhere to a traditional concept of museum – with the ‘living’ aspect absent. They also often have a vision connected to the immediate environment and relevance to it, and these initiatives are hardly known beyond their immediate locality. Most worryingly, community museums and their role in Uganda remain largely undocumented, under-resourced skills-wise and often eke a financial existence, as they depend on the voluntary spirit of those who established them.

It is therefore important that when we talk about museum documentation, the talking should go beyond catalogues and databases for museum objects. Roles of museums and how they relate or contribute to society’s contemporary challenges need to be documented to make them much more relevant and visible.

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