

Towards a new type of 'ethnographic' museum in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial museums in Africa have failed to change significantly from the western type of museums. Museums in Africa therefore need to break away from the colonial vestiges and African based museums should be established that will be responsible to their own communities. This brings the concept of establishment of theme parks in Zimbabwe such as the Shona Village established at Great Zimbabwe found in the south east of the country and the reconstruction of Old Bulawayo, Lobengula's capital (1870-1881) located about 27 kilometers south west of Zimbabwe's modern city of Bulawayo.

Introduction

Museums in Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular share a common heritage in their history as national institutions. They are by products of the colonial era and essentially 20th century creations. They were not developed to serve the local Africans but to satisfy the curiosities of the elite citizenry. This totally excluded the local people who produced the cultural materials. Most African countries hoped that these social ills were going to be healed on attainment of independence. Postcolonial museums in Africa have failed to change significantly from the western type of museums. Today these museums are still inaccessible and not enjoyed by the majority as they are located in urban areas while their collections and displays still mirror western concepts. Thus museums in Africa have remained insensitive to the interests of the communities they purport to serve, since the static nature of displays and collections are more elitist and exotic than African. Museums in Africa therefore need to break away from the colonial vestiges and African based museums be established that will be responsible to their own communities. The failure of colonial museums in Africa and in Zimbabwe renders them inapplicable and therefore the traditional definitions of a museum become irrelevant in an African and in this particular case the Zimbabwean context. A new definition with a strong African ascend is highly called for. This brings the concept of establishment of theme parks in Zimbabwe such as the Shona Village established at Great Zimbabwe found in the south east of the country and the reconstruction of Old Bulawayo, Lobengula's capital (1870-1881) located about 27 kilometers south west of Zimbabwe's modern city of Bulawayo. These two projects were developed as potential tourist attractions. Apart from being potential tourist attractions, the Shona Village at Great Zimbabwe and Old Bulawayo have been viewed as educational resources for a wider audience both local and foreign.

Socio-historical factors: the concept and development of theme parks in Zimbabwe

The concept and development of theme parks in Zimbabwe began as an attempt to move away from the old traditional colonial type of museums. The establishment of theme parks was part of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (herein NMMZ)'s master plan to conserve and develop the Zimbabwean heritage. It was envisaged that when fully developed the heritage of Zimbabwe would make profit through collection of revenue from both domestic and foreign visitors and thereby rescuing the ailing economy of the organization.

The origin of museums in Africa in general and in Zimbabwe in particular was a western concept as seen from the obsession in seeking to conserve material culture at the detriment of the intangible heritage. Museums in many African states are therefore late 19th and 20th century colonial creations which has been brandished as an attempted colonial, intellectual, conquest of Africa (Dominy 2000). Their aim was to charm the population in the home country with the 'exoticism' and 'folklore' of African countries, and in so doing, justify their presence there (Konare 1983). The collection methods undermined the values of African culture. The sacredness and value of the objects was not and is still not their priority. However, this sacred nature is what African cultures are made of. The colonial travelers, administrators, missionaries and military officials stole or confiscated objects from the owners. Violence and violation of indigenous cultures and sensibility characterized the early museums in Africa (Konare 1983). Such objects have remained in many African museums years after their independence and they have neither context nor real value and they have been reduced to common consumer goods. In addition to that, these objects in museums no longer have any relation to the living African

cultures and if they are no longer part of the people's culture it is difficult to enhance cultural awareness (Konare 1995).

The local people were not consulted for their interests since it was by then necessary to sideline them for museums were not meant to serve them. The confiscated objects were stripped of their value and were displayed in places where they could not be accessed by their creators (Konare 1983). For example, the traditional colonial type of museums in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Zambia are situated in urban areas, which are not within the reach of the bulk of rural dwellers. This isolates the majority of the indigenous people from enjoying their culture.

Many of the displays during and after colonialism, in many museums in Africa have by and large remained eurocentric in nature with a strong concentration on white settler material culture. Displays in cultural history museums in South Africa for example, were dominated by the white settler colonial history especially those associated with Afrikaner nationalist ideology and history (Dominy 2000). Pwiti (1997) notes that postcolonial Zimbabwean museums still remain colonial and target foreign tourists. As recently as 1994, for example, the Harare Museum of Human Sciences still had poor ethnographic collections, unsystematic and incomplete cataloguing while the Mutare Museum had ethnographic displays that had not been altered since 1962 (Ucko 1994).

When the countries concerned got independence, they did not practically challenge the goals of the educational and cultural systems inherited from their colonial administrators. As a result museums remained reserved for the minority of foreigners, tourists and intellectuals from urban centers (Konare 1983). However, one of the major problems of many African museums was lack of funding. For example, apart from structural changes and administrative changes, museums in Zimbabwe have changed very little since independence in 1980. After independence there were national priorities such as education, health and farming such that museums in Zimbabwe have competed for funds alongside with these national priorities (Ucko 1994). Low funding has reduced museum activities in Zimbabwe even twenty two years after independence except in cases where projects are donor funded. The NMMZ continued to compete for funds with the government of Zimbabwe's involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo war, the expansion of the education system in recent years, the pandemic of diseases such as AIDS and the agrarian revolution. Low funding of museums in Zimbabwe has been reflected with limited research and changes in the display content and messages. For example, the Natural History Museum in Zimbabwe has had little success in moving away from presentations of different groups of people based on colonial discourse because it still contains Cecil John Rhodes displays. Cecil John Rhodes is currently being viewed by many Zimbabweans as the source of socio-economic problems bedeviling the country. A new form of museum in the form of a theme park, it was hoped when fully developed as a tourist attraction, would make profit through revenue collection and thereby supplement the inadequate grant from the government and in turn salvage the economic problems of the NMMZ. The new forms of a museum in West Africa, in Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire, for example have been developed and they are called local museums (Konare 1995, Konate 1995, Sanhour 1995, Koffi 1995). The concept of theme parks in Zimbabwe therefore was developed as a new form of a local museum, which is supposed to respond to the perceived deficiencies of the existing traditional national museums.

In post independent Zimbabwe these local museums were developed as a potential value of knowledge of the past in nation building and the importance of the restoration of cultural pride. As a result archaeological research was encouraged alongside the expansion of museums and development as centers of education about the past (Pwiti 1997). Theme parks were established to cater for all aspects of Zimbabwean culture and life. These newly developed local museums cannot be separated from the nationally run museums and there must be no political differences between the two forms of the museums but they should be integrated into the same network (Konare 1995). Similarly the idea of theme parks in Zimbabwe must not be confused with a total replacement of traditional colonial type of museums but their development enabled the indigenous people to participate and enjoy their culture, which the colonial administrators previously denied them.

The concept and development of theme parks in Zimbabwe enabled the indigenous communities of Zimbabwe to participate by constructing the local museums themselves, performing arts, making, displaying and selling their objects to the visitors. In this case a theme park in the Zimbabwean context was defined as a 'living museum' where visitors can experience typical structures and activities of a past era (Collett 1992). Theme parks are supposed to contain static displays such as houses of a past era and past activities such as black smithing, pottery manufacturing, craft making and performing arts. This would give the visitors a look into a past era that they would never get in the traditional type of a museum (Collett 1992). The Shona village at Great Zimbabwe national monument for example, was developed along these elements. The aim of the theme park is therefore to try and present a fairly 'authentic' portrayal of a past known society.

Old Bulawayo is currently being developed along the same elements with those of a Shona Village at Great Zimbabwe. This site is located approximately 27 kilometers south of the second largest city of Zimbabwe called Bulawayo and was established by Lobengula as his capital in 1870 after the death of his father Mzilikazi in 1868. Mzilikazi was born around 1795 in the area now called Natal in South Africa and was the founder of the Ndebele State. He was under King Shaka's paramouncy. Following a dispute with his overlord in 1822, Mzilikazi fled with his followers and eventually established his state in western Zimbabwe, now known as Matebeleland (Child 1968). This site is important in the history of Zimbabwe because most of the early Europeans in Zimbabwe first appeared at the site. Their reports to the western world led to the colonial conquest by the British South Africa Company (BSA) (Collett 1992). The NMMZ decided to develop the site of Old Bulawayo into a theme park after having noticed its potential as a tourist attraction near the city of Bulawayo. The

documentary evidence combined with archaeological investigations as well as ethnographic research enabled the site to be reconstructed as a theme park as authentically as possible. It was recommended that part of the development at Old Bulawayo should be visitor facilities so that refreshments should be served at the site but should be restricted to type of food and drink that the Ndebele were consuming during the 1890s. Like at Great Zimbabwe, activities at Old Bulawayo should be the production of typical artifacts of the period and displayed and sold to the visitors. It was recommended that visitors should be able to exchange money for the goods produced at Old Bulawayo that would have been used as trade items during the 1890s when the settlement was in occupation (Collett 1992). It was also recommended that like the Shona Village at Great Zimbabwe, arts performers at Old Bulawayo should wear traditional attire. Infrastructure such as a shop for selling goods should be modeled on early traders' stores that were built around the site and the storekeepers should be dressed appropriately (Collett 1992). Once Old Bulawayo theme park is completed it becomes a new form of a museum in Zimbabwe where the local people are involved and entrance fees charged thereby generating revenue for NMMZ.

How can theme parks generate revenue? NMMZ's masterplan

Heritage has been regarded as a commodity that can be marketed and sold to the public and thereby generate revenue so museums can continue to exist and meet their daily targets. For example, Zimbabwe's masterplan proposed that to generate income, sites selected for developments have to be designed in such a way that visitors are maximised. When visitors are maximised, it is hoped, this would generate income for NMMZ and the rural communities living in the vicinity of these sites. Poor museums can generate income by charging entry fees, selling of curios, guidebooks and refreshments to the visitors.

Entry fees to museums are one of the sources of revenue collection and increasing entry fees can strategically increase income. However, introduction or increment of entry fees to museums has to be approached with caution because this may exclude the locals who are supposed to enjoy their heritage, as they may not be able to afford the fees. If locals are unable to afford the entry fees to museums this may lead to a serious reduction of domestic tourism and museums may then be forced to turn to unreliable foreign tourists. A more practical approach as suggested by Collett (1992) would therefore to index the cost of entry to the rate of inflation and to increase income through the sale of goods and services to visitors.

Museums can also generate revenue through selling curios to the visitors. The Zimbabwe masterplan for example, had suggested that the NMMZ could generate revenue by purchasing curios from the curio producers and in turn sell them to the visitors. This it was hoped would also benefit the locals through selling their curios to the organisation. However, the major problem has been that NMMZ's purchasing policy allowed competition and according to a research that was carried out at Great Zimbabwe for example, curios were bought from restricted producers and those left out had no option but to open up their small markets near the site (Collett 1992). For example, curio producers in Zimbabwe's Matopos National Park have established their market near World's View site where Cecil John Rhodes was interred and they sell their products direct to the visitors. When such cases happens NMMZ have no justification to stop the curio producers to establish their markets near its heritage places and revenue generation can be lost that way. It has been established that when curio producers sell their products to the visitors directly there is room for negotiating for higher prizes and in some other cases they could barter trade their products with goods such as clothes and shoes and other utilitarian products. The competition between the NMMZ and curio producers means that the former has to produce a market which is different from the market producers while a market for the latter can be established at the site and sell their curios directly to the visitors and this may be an additional attraction to the site (Collett 1992).

One of the ways theme parks can generate revenue is through opening new products lines as suggested in the NMMZ's masterplan. New products lines may be opened in situations where there is competition with the curio producers. It has been suggested in the NMMZ's masterplan that those new products such as tee shirts, hats, necklaces and books and carbonated soft drinks could be sold in addition to curios. In addition to that the new products have been recommended to exhibit characteristic features of their sites (Collett 1992). A survey that was carried out at Great Zimbabwe revealed that visitors to the site prefer to purchase products or artifacts that serve as a reminder of their visit to the site. If such products are to sold to the visitors then NMMZ was recommended to be more entrepreneurial in its approach to generate income and it has to develop appropriate design and merchandising capability.

Selling publications, guide books and post cards is also one of the ways which the NMMZ's master plan recommended to generate at sites such as Great Zimbabwe and Old Bulawayo. It was also recommended that a range of publications relating to specific and to other archaeological heritage be sold at these sites. However if publications are to be sold to the visitors, there is need to revise them if there are new scientific research carried out at these sites. Unfortunately for Old Bulawayo no publications have been produced yet and the NMMZ may not be able to generate revenue from publications there. The NMMZ's master plan also recommended selling of carbonated drinks as refreshments to the visitors. A survey that was carried out Great Zimbabwe by Collett (1992) has shown that, people arriving at different times during the morning shows a decrease for people arriving in the mid morning period. This has been caused by visitors who left the site for lunch and it has been observed that those visitors do not return to the site in the afternoon. It was then recommended that snack meals be sold to the visitors so they can stay longer at the site. If for example, NMMZ is incompetent to sell snack meals to the visitors, it was then recommended that the facility could be contracted out or employs a caterer but the meals should be simple and well prepared. Although NMMZ's master plan recommends a number of activities to generate revenue for the master plan to work it has to be implemented. If not implemented visitors do not stay longer as there will be no provisions

for refreshments or snacks for lunch. If adequately administered, provision of snacks may generate the much needed revenue and thereby rescue the ailing economy of the organisation.

Discussion and conclusion

The concept of theme parks is suitable in conserving African culture since the local population decides on what collections to make. These collections should be based on the significance of the object to the local population. This would be unlike colonial museum staff that collected by means of force, object whose values they had no understanding. Traditional museums have been challenged but failed to use techniques that make people aware and respectful of their past.

Theme parks take the past and the present back to the community. Therefore the local people may reflect on the culture critically through their own social environment. Theme parks have a vital dimension of representing the past and the living local groups. The current Nezvigaro group represents the Shona living cultures of traditional dancers at Great Zimbabwe. Contemporary art is made, displayed and sold to the visitors by this group. The Shona Village theme park is therefore an example where Shona and Zimbabwean culture in general is depicted through pottery manufacturing, basketry and performance of traditional Shona type of dances called Jurusarema and Mbakumba.

Theme parks are a transformation from a reservoir of folklore for tourists thirsting for exotics to a living image of the past, a source of culture and a symbol of nationhood. If properly established theme parks may offer open-air schools, healthy debates, serving local dishes while local crafts are displayed and sold. This would be a museum not in western sense but a creation of an institution that emerges from traditional African society and custom. Researches and development of community involvement can signify new life and meaning for the objects and bring into context renewal and fresh creativity of a past era. Theme parks are therefore an alternative for museums that have a western concept of which Zimbabwe is a good example. If properly managed theme parks may generate revenue and contributed to the gross profit of many museum organizations through out the African continent.

Although theme parks are a potential replacement for traditional museums, they are also ridden with problems, which should be solved, if they are not to suffer the same limitations as traditional museums. For example, the community might make theme parks a battlefield as people may perceive the concept differently. For example, the community around the site of Old Bulawayo feels that it has to be consulted at every stage of reconstruction of the site and its interpretation because the researchers are considered not qualified to reconstruct and interpret the Ndebele site. If for example, families concerned are not consulted in the development of Old Bulawayo, the theme park may be viewed from a tribalistic angle and thereby transform the project into a battlefield.

Theoretically, the development of theme parks should be accessible to both rural and urban dwellers. Old Bulawayo is located at a place that is not accessible to both rural and urban dwellers. For example, there is no public transport going to the site except in cases where there are organized or private transport. In addition to that the site is inaccessible because the road which led to the site is dirty and not regularly maintained such that those with smaller vehicles fear that they may damage them. Consequently the site of Old Bulawayo may not maximise its visitors who can bring in revenue, because the road is not well maintained.

Both the Shona Village at Great Zimbabwe and Old Bulawayo are biased in favour of dominant cultural groups and theories. For example the site of Old Bulawayo is biased towards the Khumalo family which is considered as the direct descendant of king Lobengula while the Nezvigaro family represents Shona peoples at Great Zimbabwe Shona Village theme park. This leaves out other Ndebele and Shona families to participate in the Old Bulawayo and Shona Village projects. In such situations it appears to be a promotion of localised theme parks, which can be a threat to nationalism if the concept is mistaken as promotion of tribalism.

Although theme parks face such problems, they offer a more promising substitute for traditional museums in Zimbabwe. Unlike traditional museums, which take objects into permanent custody for static displays, theme parks recognises the changing nature of Zimbabwean cultures. Theme parks covers all people's culture such as researchers, intellectuals and tourists. Tourists find a living image of the culture that takes account of the past, present and future socio-economic situations. The localization of the theme parks widely caters for the diversities of African culture and accessibility to the majority while at the same time generate revenue necessary for their daily functions.

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