

The Role Of Museums In Addressing Community Needs In The 21st Century

By

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My paper is an attempt to foster the development and improvement of museums in Africa and Malawi in particular forty years after independence that have followed an uneven path, reflecting the unprecedented changes that have marked every aspect of Malawian life over the past 40 years or so.

The consequence is that today many Africans/Malawians are calling into the question the very notion of museum itself posing a major challenge to receive ideas that could have profound implications for museums in Malawi. My paper will therefore critique some of the questions below because its only when these questions are squarely addressed that museums can be of relevance to the lives of our museums' communities particularly in the 21st century when both sides cannot be separated by all means:

What do museums and communities have to offer one another forty years after independence? How are they pursuing their possibilities of engagement nowadays? What should they anticipate to work towards? What shared sense of purpose and values should shape and support dynamic relationships between museums and their communities in the 21st Century? And finally, in what ways have museums contribute to the eradication of the three evils that constitute the unholy trinity of ignorance, disease and poverty in Malawi?

The passion of expatriates in colonial Africa for collecting indigenous traditional art and studying the cultural history of traditional societies, which assisted them in their governance, informed the development of museums in 1957 in Malawi. This simply reveals that African/Malawi Museums were not established for the same reasons as western museums that encouraged scholarship and provided educational enjoyment for the public and were seen as agents of change for the national growth and development.

The Museums of Malawi opened in 1957 before independence in 1964 were dedicated to the interest of the colonial power, the national elite and highly educated foreigners, all of whom formed a bulk of visiting public.

The underlining common denominator was that museums were not established to serve the needs and interests of the Malawian people who produced heritage at that time.

Now forty years after independence, Museums of Malawi cannot be said uninformed about proper practice, nor can they be regarded as infants in the museum field. To move forward, Museums of Malawi carried out an honest, incisive and in depth self-evaluation and developed a number of programmes in order to confront a number of topical issues that affect the people of Malawi.

To begin with, we discovered that there was tremendous need for Museums of Malawi to redefine our missions and visions, our roles and ourselves. There was an urgent need to break away from the colonial vestiges to create the Malawian based museums that would be responsible to our communities. Topical issues such as health, education, economic, environment, politics, social, socio-cultural, urbanisation among others ought to be regarded as important as the traditional questions of collecting, preserving, presenting, protecting and safe guarding both tangible and intangible heritage and any emerging needs of the community.

It was important therefore that new Malawian Museums should use their collections to enrich knowledge and integrate urban cultures and contemporary events into the spheres of daily activities.

A new definition with a strong Malawian flavour with new museum and community relationship was developed. It was clear that Malawians expect museums in the new millennium to create methods and strategies for interacting with the communities and create innovative programmes that will involve the community for national development and enjoyment.

Having learned from the experiences of the past forty years after independence, in order to survive in the 21st century, the Museums of Malawi discarded the classical western system, which has tended to make museums too rigid and non-dynamic to suit the communities' changing needs. It is therefore important to remind ourselves that our heritage is not an equestrian with all its anthropometrics fixed, but rather heritage is dynamic, produced, packaged and sold to the public not as products, but experiences according to the needs of the public.

The Museums of Malawi is striving to become autonomous in all areas and formulated a new workable collection, exhibition, conservation and education policies which serve as the basis of our new varied exciting programmes that in turn address the needs of our communities.

Consequently, Museums of Malawi has not be ignored completely in the museum development as we enter the 21st century in Africa for it has given birth to new ideas that have led to the development of the new Museum Models, which are both challenging and exciting. We are proud to be a shining example in Africa for developing several programmes that have demonstrated as examples in the region.

Lastly, the Museum of Malawi has incorporated issue of intangible heritage with seriousness. The oral traditions of music, language, songs, dance, testimonies, folk role, traditional foods, riddles, traditional dress and indigenous knowledge skills among others have been incorporated into our programmes. It has been globally accepted that songs and dances are not forms of illiterate group but literate. These have been regarded as resources and forms of education and passing messages. Good enough that Unesco's 33rd Convention has agreed and encouraged the practise of intangible heritage. They change people's behaviour and make museums as forms of community conversation where community experiences can be cerebrated. They are forms of communication and medium of

education. To say the least, they are original sources of information unlike the archival material that can be manipulated. Intangible heritages are forms of healing, victory and edutainment and therefore precious resource that will enrich our museums for sustainable growth and development.

Consequently, to answer the questions I raised above, the Museums of Malawi has in view of the foresaid embarked on various innovative public programmes that have changed the lives of our communities, creating real impact on them. Several public involving programmes have now received more public support and interest. Issues of intangible heritage have been wholesomely incorporated in our daily programmes. Some of such programmes include the famous children programme called '*The Saturday Morning Children's Club*' where cultural skills and intangible aspects are practised and implemented by the children of ages ranging from 6-13. As a result most of the artists in the country are products/graduates of this programme. Some are now self-employed. They have formed several associations through this programme such as Music Association of Malawi, Malawi Folk Dance Association, Visual Arts Association of Malawi, Cultural Heritage Arts Association among others. These are tangible results and Malawians have are benefiting a lot from the programme. The programme has produced several artists that are now financially viable and are employing others in their respective fields.

Secondly, a travel exhibition on how poverty affects a Malawian Child is to be mounted in the country's 28 districts with an aim of influencing action against poverty by policy makers, relevant stakeholders and the government knowing very well that children need to be given the best possible start as future leaders of every nation. A survey was done in 2005, where 900 children from both urban and rural school revealed that poverty is their priority problem and that it needs urgent action and the Museum has immediately embarked on the public awareness programme with such a travel exhibition. The launch will be done in June 2005 when the State President will be opening the Budget session of Parliament before it is taken to the 28 districts of the country.

Thirdly, documentation of intangible heritage in aspects of marriage, funeral, birth, music, dance and initiation ceremonies is underway in order to come up education resources for public education programmes and use them to teach the cultural norms in a Malawian society.

Fourth, Mobile Museum education programme on Malawi's major communities is also being implemented in some primary schools across the country. This is to teach children the history and cultural aspects and contributions these communities have made to the country. Issues of places of origin, reasons for migrating to Malawi and where they are settled, their relationship with other communities, their socio-economic and political organisation, their cultural activities and their contribution to the Malawian culture are some of the areas covered and the emphasis is also put on peace amongst all Malawians regardless of their places of origin.

Fifth, Special events and film shows on traditional dances are being staged once in a month from far where museums are not established and show their cultural skills to the town dwellers for them to appreciate the richness of Malawi's cultural heritage among others are just some examples of the new innovative public museum education programmes that are meant to create our museum as a space for the community where their experiences are celebrated and truly this has proved that we are striking the right chord that has made us achieve sending the correct signal to the public. Sometimes, these dances are organised by public demand as they are fitting very well on the national television station. This programme has been of tremendous use as the Television Malawi; the only television station in the country gets material for public programmes from our education programme. The national radio station, Malawi Broadcasting Corporation benefits a lot from the same programme too in terms of songs.

The Museum from 2004 implemented a very famous programme called '*Malaria Prevention Rural Outreach*' to schools in areas that are prone to malaria due to their geographical positions. The programme involved real teaching by museum education officers about the mosquito, body parts, life cycle, breeding sites, malaria signs and symptoms while the District health officer dealt with malaria treatment. We had video screening, drama, poems, songs, dances, demonstrations of treating mosquito nets, distribution of nets and posters among others that passed information about the pandemic. Anti-Malaria Clubs have been formed in schools and communities. This was as a result of a survey conducted by the museum where it revealed that 30% of deaths in the country's hospitals are a result of malaria. The programme was funded by UNICEF Malawi.

We have also been very active in addressing the issues of HIV/AIDS through the Positive Lives Photo travelling exhibition that was organised and funded by Action Aid UK. The exhibition was conducted in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria in Africa and the final report from the organisers revealed that Malawi was the best because we involved all organisations in the country that are dealing with the disease, each was given a day to teach children about the pandemic and what they are doing to addressing it. This was done throughout the programme that ran for three months. In addition, we involved drama groups, traditional dances, demonstrations and video shows to pass the message about the pandemic. We have been involved in all World Aids Day events but usually through outreach programmes that have been funded by the US Embassy Public, Affairs Office in Malawi.

Of late, with the coming of multiparty in 1994, there have been some reports about political violence during election campaigns, domestic violence against women and child defilement. As such, the Museums of Malawi has envisaged an exhibition on Peace Education in schools. This initiative fits in extremely well with Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM) activities because Museums and Peace have been a topic Commonwealth-wide conference of CAM more particularly during the conference that was held June 2005 in Malawi. This exhibition will be a mobile one to rural schools and the general public where there is information gap.

Let me finally mention that most of these have been achieved by involving members of the Friends of Museum where ideas are conceptualised. This has done the Museums of Malawi proud as we have developed and implemented public programmes that are directly addressing the needs of the community. They are really addressing the unholy trinity of poverty, ignorance and disease among others in Malawi.

There are lot more, which I believe, if shared with professional colleagues during the conference, will not be in vain but beneficial to all my fellow participants as well.

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