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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/62r8f4wc>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 28(2-3)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

2000

DOI

10.5070/F7282-3016579

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Museums in Africa: Rhetoric Versus Reality¹

Yvonne Teh

Transnational Cultural Institutions?

This is a paper about those institutions which Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge have described as being "part of a transnational order of cultural forms that...now unites much of the world" (1992:35). Although those in the urban metropolises of London, Paris and New York remain the best known, museums now also are to be found in many rural areas and nether regions of the globe. Even while there continue to be more museums in Western Europe and North America than other continents², they have become common to diverse local landscapes all over the world.

At the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century, it was estimated that there were some 27,600 museums in the world (Pearce 1991:vii). Lest this figure seem insufficiently substantial, it will be noted that one year earlier, a less conservative reckoning estimated 35,000 of these institutions existed at that time (Gilette 1990, as referenced in Proslar 1996:21). Still, new museums continue to be built and old ones enlarged, refurbished and maintained. Carol Duncan's comment that "almost weekly, newspapers publicize plans for yet another new museum or an expansion or renovation of an old one in London, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, or some other national or regional capital" seems to point to the world being in the midst of a museum-building frenzy (1991:89). Along with Sharon Macdonald's claim that "the museum at the end of the twentieth century is a focus around which many of our global and local preoccupations can coalesce," a picture is being painted of there being a similar world-wide interest in these institutions (1996:14).

While there is little doubt that there has been a global proliferation of museums, my own museological experience and anthropological observations have led me to suspect that there are localized as well as transnational reasons for these international developments. I do not mean to suggest that the existence of these establishments with specifically European roots³ does not necessarily mean that they have become completely transcultural institutions that possess similar meaning and import for all of humanity. Indeed, because museums were introduced to much of the world by colonialists, they may continue to have foreign, rather than local, associations in the minds of many of the residents of former colonies. Hence, decades after the end of European colonialism in most places in the world, the colonial factor still needs to be considered and discussed.

The global museological reality may not be as homogeneous as the rhetoric around them. There are discernible differences between what working museologists, notably those in the area(s) of the world with which I am most familiar, report and some other museological scholars suggest. I will explore in what ways and why this is so. In so doing, it is hoped that this work will provide additional perspectives on this currently thriving, and increasingly universally embraced, group of institutions. Ultimately though, the aim of the paper is to contribute towards the understanding of the historic roles of museums and how they relate to contemporary associations in Africa.

An Africanist Anthropologist's Perspective of Museums

Unlike many museologists and museographers, my regional specialty lies outside of the traditional museological metropole that is "the West". While aware of museological trends in North America and Europe, the bulk of my scholarly research has been on museums in Africa. My particular focus is on the Dar es Salaam branches of the National Museum of Tanzania and the two Zanzibar National Museums. Although I have also worked in American and British museums⁴, my most recent practical experience has been both Tanzania and in my native Malaysia.⁵ Indeed, I have studied museums in a part of the world where people often assume they do not exist.⁶

I also differ from quite a few museum scholars by being a socio-cultural anthropologist by training. I have lived with museum workers and their families, interviewed staff, board members and donors, and I surveyed non-museum-goers as well as visitors to these institutions. Tanzanian museum staff seemed to perceive me as a fellow professional colleague rather than (just) a foreign investigator. Because they saw me as a peer, they felt more able to voice opinions, ideas and concerns. If nothing else, I think that my consulting on and assisting with a variety of projects, ranging from collections inventory, to exhibit planning, to providing photographic records of exhibit openings and other special events, endowed me with invaluable "insider" knowledge of particular museums in Africa.

Many of the ideas contained in this paper first appeared during my twenty-one months in Tanzania. The knowledge garnered over the course of my Tanzanian sojourn was supplemented by that gained from visiting museums in Kenya and Zimbabwe⁸ along with library research on such institutions in other parts of Africa. Hence, my conclusions apply not only to Tanzania, but also to other countries on the continent.

European (Originating) Establishments in Africa

For all the fashionable talk of museums being an internationalizing as well as transnational phenomenon and global presence, the fact remains that some regions of the world continue to have more of, and stronger associations with,

these establishments than others. For instance, Europe remains home to the largest number of museums. Africa, however, is the geographic region which, for a variety of reasons, many people do not think has that many, if any, of these places to muse (and be amused) (See Pearce 1991:vii). If truth be told, it seems to come as a shock to many alike to learn that the second largest continent in the world had at least 554 museological institutions at the start of this decade (See Peters et al. eds. 1990). While this amount pales in comparison to Europe's 13,5000 (Pearce 1991:vii), the number of African institutions is significant.

To some extent, this underestimation of the numbers of African museums is due to museums often being perceived as immensely — some might even venture to say, inherently — “Western” establishments. Though it may be an exaggeration to say, as Susan M. Pearce has, that museums are “a characteristic part of the cultural pattern of modern Europe” (1992:1), one would not be far off the mark in stating that there are many who think that they are characteristically European in nature. This is not least because it is the identifiable home region of the first institution to be formally identified as such and also possess the archetypal attributes that we have come to associate with this category of organization⁹.

Oxford's Ashmolean Museum came into existence back in 1683 (see Hunter 1985:168). In contrast, Africa's first museum¹⁰ did not come about until 1825. Although “by the middle of the nineteenth century, almost every Western nation [c]ould boast a national museum or art gallery” (Duncan 1991:88), only a few African lands boasted museological establishments of any size and merit. They were the then white settler colony of South Africa, the Sahelian territories of Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, the islands of Mauritius and Madagascar, and the Gold Coast (known as Ghana attaining independence in 1957).

The late 19th century intercontinental museological expansion has been directly related to the West's colonizing incursions into various parts of the rest of the world (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1992:44; see also Prösler 1996). Much of what has been written about African museums seems to bear out this fact. For example, in his survey of West African museological institutions, Merrick Posnansky stated that “The[se] museums were a product of European settlement” (1996:144). Citing specific East African cases, the former curator of the Uganda Museum also asserted that: “Museums as we know them today are European transplants and...represent European interests in such matters as big game in Kenya, Islamic silverware in Zanzibar, and ethnography in Uganda and Tanganyika” (Posnansky 1996:144).

Posnansky maintains that no matter how much of an “African vision” individual curators may have possessed, the essential fact of the matter is that all the museums set up on the continent in the colonial period “were based on European models” (1996:144). This state of affairs is hardly surprising when we look at the names of the museum folk he specifically commended for being “vigorous and significant” (Posnansky 1996:144).

Bluntly put, the names of "Margaret Trowell in Uganda, Kenneth Murray in Lagos, Raymond Mauny in Dakar, Bohumil Holas in Abidjan, and Louis Leakey in Nairobi" (Posnansky 1996:144) point to those influential individuals European heritage and Western education.

The "European-ness" of the museums in colonial Africa is particularly manifest upon learning that during that period, in territories like Southern Rhodesia (renamed Zimbabwe after independence in 1980), indigenous "Africans were not included in visitor statistics and were actively discouraged from patronizing the museums" (Munjeri 1991:446).

In contrast to now conventional (Anderson 1991; see also Amahan 1992; Pivin 1992) as well as rather outlandish (Kiéthéga 1992) arguments, I will suggest that while many African museums were colonial institutions, they were not necessarily primarily intended to be colonizing instruments. This was not least because these establishments were founded with neither colonial administrators nor colonized indigenes in mind. There is ample evidence — including that supplied by Munjeri (1991) for Southern Rhodesia, Ardouin (quoted by Lacroix 1984:21, in Arnoldi 1999:28) for colonial Mali, and Rankin and Hamilton of South Africa (1999:3) — that many colonial-era museums were specifically set up for as well by Western European settlers (as opposed to colonial administrations). African indigenes were not being forced to embrace these foreign institutions and indulge in the alien practice of museum patronizing.

Rather, criticism of colonial-era museums in Africa should be directed more at their often purposeful exclusion and neglect of their (potential) native audience and support. Although the Southern Rhodesian case might be a particularly extreme one, the fact remains that in at least one African (settler) colony, the indigenous residents had even been dissuaded from making donations — as well as paying visits — to what they might understandably have looked upon as their local museums¹¹ (see Munjeri 1991:448). The extent of the determination to exclude native elements from the institutions can be further seen in their colonial curators having eschewed opportunities to amass and display indigenous material culture in favor of going out of their way — and at additional expense — to collect items "from as far away as the Tripolitania, Caspian and Aterian cultures" (Munjeri 1991:448).

From these and other examples, the sense is gained that many colonial-era museums were most intent on blissfully (re)creating Europe in Africa for those Europeans who had ventured onto that continent (and those of their descendants who expected to permanently settle there). This accounts for a considerable number of indigenous Africans perceiving museums as not only unwanted colonial, but also irrelevant, European vestiges. Furthermore, it cannot help the image and cause of this category of institutions that a number of them — in territories as geographically distant and administratively separate from each other as Burundi (Mapfarakora 1992:55), Madagascar (Rakotoarisoa 1992:80) and Mali (Ardouin, quoted by Lacroix:1984:21, in Arnoldi 1999:28) — are known to have additionally served during colonial

times as relays for the extraction of artifacts out of Africa to Europe.

Museums in Post-Colonial Africa

The amount and strength of negative reactions to museums in some African countries can be seen in Zimbabwe's call for the museum service to be disbanded (Ucko 1981, as referenced in Munjeri 1991:454). Likewise, museums were officially marginalized and "banished" for a time in Morocco in response to similar lobbying in that country (Amahan 1992:281). In light of such events, it is easy to envision why "most Europeans predicted a decline and even the demise of museums in independent African countries" (Mendelsohn 1992:133). Luckily, though, that gloomy prognosis has been far from the case. Though problems do beset many of the continent's museums, there also have been gains made by museums in Africa on quite a few fronts, with their numbers increasing.

Perhaps the institutions' supporters are more inclined to act than their detractors. Maybe it really was felt — as two British museologists have (pro)claimed — that: "To have no museums, in today's circumstance, is to admit that one is below the minimum level of civilization required of a modern state" (Hudson and Nicholls 1985:x). What is certain is that "in the aftermath of the nationalist fervor of independence, almost every [new(ly) African] government decreed the creation of museums" (Adedze 1992:167). Although that early political euphoria has now largely dissipated, other impetuses, including the realization that museological establishments have integral parts to play in education and leisure industries, have resulted in the setting up of still more museums. Indeed, it is so that "In West Africa, as in other parts of Africa south of the Sahara, local museums are emerging more rapidly than national museums" (Arinze 1995:36).

The question of which local groups are more actively participating in cementing and expanding the presence of museums on the continent should not detract from the point that most of the museums set up by Europeans have been allowed to continue to exist. In fact, the vast majority of African museological institutions only came into being long after the departure of colonialists from that part of the world. Only two of Tanzania's twenty odd museums were in existence prior to Tanganyika and Zanzibar's separately achieving political autonomy (in 1961 and 1963 respectively)¹². Looking at two of that East African republic's neighbors, it is similarly found that fifteen of the sixteen Ugandan and eleven out of the twelve Kenyan establishments listed in the (Peters et al. eds.) 1990 *Directory of Museums in Africa* have post-independence founding dates. All told, there are no fewer than eleven territories across the continent that did not actually come to have museums until after their decolonization¹³.

Further, this post-colonial museum expansion in terms of total number and space has been paralleled by the increase in their visitor numbers in many parts of Africa. Though one would have to be deaf to not hear the

(continued) complaints of many of their internal as well as external critics, in quite a few African countries, some of the post-independence public reaction to existing museums could be said to effectively echoed post French revolutionary demands for the Louvre to be opened up and made accessible to the populace. At least one of that continent's museologists has attested that: "With the attainment of independence in most African countries, attendance at museums has increased" (Musonda 1992:326).

What People Want

What Francis Musonda personally witnessed in his native Zambia has been independently corroborated by other African museologists. From the other side of the continent, there have come reports that: After independence, "the general public of Tunisia was eager to discover its own history and ready to visit museums regularly" (Ben Abed-Ben-Khader, 1992:30). Also, not only has the Moroccan government brought these institutions back into its fold, it has invested in positive publicity, organizational restructuring and physical revamping. One of them (the Batha Museum) has seen its number of visitors — more than incidentally, "consisting mainly of national tourists", as opposed to their foreign equivalents — increase fourfold over a three year period (Amahan, 1992:282). Regarding the last example, it should be underscored that museums have become a part of many indigenous African — not just expatriate or external tourist — lives. Altogether, there seems to be a rather surprising willingness — eagerness even — on the parts of many indigenous residents to give museums a second chance to work for Africans.

I would like to propose that Africa's participation in the global museum boom might be attributed less to continued Western cultural colonization and more to Africans' pragmatic realization that museums can be used for their own purposes. For a surprisingly large number of independent African governments, the museums' tarnished colonial history has been transformed to possess nationalist and nationalizing roles. As the experiences of others elsewhere in the world — including previously as well as never colonized areas of South-East Asia — have illustrated, museums have been of use to states for creating imagined communities (see Anderson 1991; see also Boylan 1990:30). It also has been recognized that — and here, the specific cited instance is the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space branch — "the museum contributes to the legitimization of the state" by drawing attention to and "applauding its accomplishments and lauding its efforts and showing its future" (Meltzer 1981:118).

Somewhat ironically though, whereas governments often look to museums to assist in national identity construction, many museum-goers are more intent on using these institutions to gain insights into unfamiliar others. A further twist in the latter trend is that, even while foreign tourists are attracted to the museums of territories they visit to view the most representative collections of indigenous material culture, local peoples the

world over are as likely to call upon their area museums to be their windows to the rest of the world. In other words, there often is a distinct disparity between how governments and the peoples perceive museums but some similarity between what foreign and local visitors seek from these institutions.

Lest we forget, there is "tradition" of museums being places where people go to behold things which are deemed to be exotic, in large part because they are from another place or time, or both.¹⁴ The British Museum is better known for possessing marble sculptures that once were part of the Parthenon rather than having treasures dug up in a part of East Anglia or a copy of British equivalent to a constitution.¹⁵ Its most popular exhibit consists of ancient Egyptian mummies rather than anything with a (much more) direct British connection. Should anyone require evidence that this phenomenon exists in other parts of "the West" and Africa, they should look to the United States and Tanzania. The most popular exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in recent years have been those which featured the creative works of Monet and Cezanne rather than, say, that by any of the Wyatts of nearby Chadds Ford. By far the best attended exhibition at the National Museum of Tanzania in the one and half years that I conducted research in that East African country being that on "The Japanese People"!

Other contemporary ironies specific to Africa are apparent. Many indigenous Africans still do not visit their own museums because their parents and grandparents may have wanted to visit but were (previously) discouraged, if not barred, from doing so. A significant number of African museums continue to place a greater onus on attracting foreign visitors, in large part because they are often legally required as well as willing and able to pay higher admission charges.¹⁶ This is not surprising considering the economic condition of many African peoples and states. As much as some people might want to ignore or forget it, and sometimes obscure the material realities by extolling the ample cultural wealth, vast natural heritage and incredible general potential of the continent, the reality is that fifteen of the twenty poorest countries in the world are African (The World Bank 1997:214).

Time and time again, over the course of my fieldwork, I was told by Tanzanians that museums held nothing of interest for them in terms of their not having anything there that could directly help them to "fill their stomachs". Meanwhile, government and museum administrators (have) identified these establishments as having a role in attracting tourists – and their much-welcomed money – to the country. More often than not, when African public officials talk about museums being able to assist in their country's development, they are much more likely to be referring to economic advancement than cultural or social unification or growth, political maturation or educational progress¹⁷. It is part of hard reality that many African museum workers are paid base wages that are not even one twentieth the amount of what their colleagues in "the West" earn.

Africanized Museums (Sought) For Africa

It must not be forgotten that many Africans live, and African museums operate, under trying economic circumstances. Nonetheless, I will caution against over-emphasizing the local lack of money and the attraction of wealthy foreign visitors as key reasons for the not uncommon contemporary African museological scenario where foreign patrons outnumber local ones. If nothing else, such an analysis is too simplistic, and convenient as well as apt to conceal other real problems that beset these institutions. Instead, it is my suggestion that a prime factor for a number of African museums not attracting as many indigenous patrons and as much local support as they are capable of doing is that they have not truly decolonized and Africanized, let alone updated, their displays.

Many exhibits continue to have labels that are in (European) languages with which many of the local populace may not be all that comfortable (See Ardouin 1992:290). They highlight achievements of foreigners at the expense of efforts of indigenes, and feature subject matter that is neither all that interesting nor meaningful to many native denizens. This is probably to be expected when it is considered that many African directors and curators (as well as conservators and others) received the highest portion of their education — and that which gave them the formal qualifications looked upon as being the most pertinent to their museum jobs — outside of the continent. This situation is undoubtedly exacerbated by many of them continuing to rely on technical as well as financial assistance from non-African sources.

It also is too often the case that while quite a bit of money and attention gets spent on the building and maintenance of museum buildings, their contents have not merited attendant care and funds. There is the related concern that in the rush to prove that they are part of the cyberspace information superhighway by computerizing, acquiring Internet connections and having web sites, the less glamorous fundamentals are neglected. Then there is the matter, raised by Alpha Oumar Konaré, the current President of Mali and — not incidentally — a past president of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), of its being so that: "Every time the question is raised we (Africans) hear it said that museums are foreign institutions, that they are not part of our culture" (1995:5).

This viewpoint is one which both underestimates the abilities of Africans to make things foreign their own and those of museums to change and adapt to local conditions (along with the times). Sally Falk Moore has presciently observed that "there are cultural artifacts and practices received from the non-African world that come to mean something entirely different in the African context in which they are used from what they mean in Winnetka" (1994:128). Kenneth Hudson has as matter-of-factly pointed out that "museums . . . [do] take on the colouring of the society in which their activity takes place" (1987:3). Taking a cue from the distinguished Africanist

and influential museologist respectively, the ultimate point that I wish to make here is that there appears to be no logical reason why African museums cannot be (come) African at the same time as they can still be museums. Indeed, it may well be that the very survival — as well as increased relevance and utility — of many of these institutions in Africa is predicated on their doing so.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was given at the 4th Annual Midwest Graduate Student Conference in African Studies at Michigan State University in September 1999. Much of it is taken from a chapter of the dissertation on which I am presently working. I conducted anthropological research on museums in Tanzania from January 1995 to July 1996. This dissertation work was funded by a Penfield Travel Scholarship from the University of Pennsylvania and a R. I. S. M.-Landes Grant from the Research Institute for the Study of Man. A June-July 1992 pilot study was funded by the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Anthropology. I would like to acknowledge the cooperation of and access provided to me by the Zanzibar National Museums, the Nyumba ya Sanaa of Dar es Salaam, and the National Museum of Tanzania. I am also grateful to the many individuals whom I met and befriended during the course of my fieldwork in Tanzania as well as visits to Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia; most of all those families who opened their homes and hearts to me.

² According to Susan M. Pearce (1991:vii), there are some 13,500 museums in Europe; some 7,000 in North America; around 2,800 others in the combined areas of Australasia and Asia, and approximately 2,000 in Africa and South America.

³ The case for museums having European origins is a strong one when one considers that at the time of existence of the prototypical Ptolemaic Mouseion of Alexandria, much of Egypt was considered to be culturally as well as politically part of Rome. Many museologists (Impey and MacGregor eds. 1985; Stocking 1985; Bennett 1995; Duncan 1995) have also opined that while etymologically museums are linked with mouseia, their arrangements actually bear more typological resemblance to the cabinets of rarities, curiosities and wonder of popularity Mediaeval and Renaissance Europeans.

⁴ During my undergraduate years, I curated two exhibits, helped install a few others, and — at different times — was the student staff member in charge of the ceramic storage area and gift shop of Beloit College's Logan Museum of Anthropology. I also completed an internship at the Museum of Mankind (the Ethnography Department of the British Museum) and have been involved with collections inventory at the University of Pennsylvania's University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

⁵ I served as a research and planning consultant on the Penang State Museum and Art Gallery's most recent renovation projects.

⁶ To give geographical context, the Selous Game Reserve, covering an area of some 55,000 square kilometers, is the largest national parks in Africa. Countries which it physically dwarfs include: Denmark (43,076 square kilometers); Switzerland (41,228 square kilometers); Taiwan (36,000 square kilometers); Israel (20,770 Square kilometers) (See Crystal, ed., 1998; Hodd, ed., 1995).

⁷ Part of the agreement reached with each of the museums which were part of my fieldwork study was that in return for my being allowed access to areas and people which are not usually accorded non-staff members, I would assist with matters within my professional capabilities as well as long as they did not conflict with my research agenda and anthropological ethics.

⁸ I paid visits to Kenya in the summer of 1986 and over the 1996 Easter period. My sole visit to Zimbabwe (and Zambia) was made in December 1995.

⁹ By this is meant that it was the first institution established which had as its principal functions the housing and exhibiting of collections for educational and scholarly purposes.

¹⁰ This honor belongs to Capetown's South African Museum.

¹¹ Bulawayo's Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe — which was established as the Rhodesia Museum — and Harare's Queen Victoria Museum — which has retained its original appellation even while the city in which it is located has undergone a name change post-independence — were founded in 1901 and thus rank as among the earliest establishments of this kind on the continent.

¹² The British-established House of Peace Museum and the former King George V Memorial Museum have become the flagship institutions of the operationally separate national museological systems of the Zanzibar Islands and the Tanzanian Mainland.

¹³ The African countries which definitely were without museums prior to their attaining political independence are (in alphabetical order): Botswana, the Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Swaziland and Togo. The ten territories whose (first) museums' founding dates I have yet to come across are (again, in alphabetical order): Cape Verde, the Comoros, Djibouti, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan and the Moroccan claimed Western Sahara.

¹⁴ I think this can help show that it was not for nothing that modern museums are seen to have evolved from Medieval *kunstkammer*, *wunderkammer*, "cabinets of wonders", "cabinets of rarities", "cabinets of curiosities", and "cabinets of the world" as well as Classical mouseia (see Alexander 1979; Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Pearce 1992; Weschler 1995).

¹⁵ For the record: The items which I am referring to are that best known as the Elgin Marbles, the Sutton Hoo (treasure) hoard, and the Magna Carta.

¹⁶ I first encountered this practice in Kenya in 1986 and subsequently have

found it to also be so in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Interestingly, I have not found this to be the case in any non-African country I have been to, including Asian as well as Australasian, European and North American ones.

¹⁷ I strongly suspect that the (then) Minister of Communication and Culture of Togo was very much in a minority with regards to his view, voiced by his representative at the *What Museums for Africa?* conference organized by the International Council of Museums, that: "In fact, when we pose the problem of development, it is primarily a matter of leading our people to win back confidence in themselves, through their cultural heritage, and to rediscover their creative and organizational capabilities, so as to fully come to terms with themselves" (1992:406).

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