

## *Museums, myths and missionaries: redressing the past for a new South Africa*

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### **Social and cultural changes**

This chapter seeks to outline the position in South African museums after years of apartheid government, and to comment on the effects this has had on the cultural traditions and attitudes to cultural heritage in our country. It will also include examples of innovative partnerships which have been formed between some South African museums and their local communities, that demonstrate a spirit of genuine co-operation and trust.

In 1990, with the final dissolution of apartheid, the government opened the formerly 'white' state schools to all races. This move has brought a sharply increased awareness of the importance of an education that will prepare children for the multicultural contacts that are now part of their everyday lives.

It is no longer acceptable educational practice to judge and label people, and new perspectives are being sought which will teach that despite the many differences between us we all share a heritage that needs to be acknowledged and commemorated.

Many teachers have turned to museums for help with multicultural, multiethnic perspectives on the school curriculum, and as the Education Officer I find myself directly on the interface between museum, teachers and expectant school groups. As museums we owe our visitors a greater understanding of, and a broader perspective on, the people we claim to serve. There is a compelling need for us to look at comprehensive multiethnic provision very soon.

There is an African proverb which says, 'Until the lions have their historians, tales of history will always glorify the hunter.' Within this proverb lies the essence of South Africa, a country deeply rooted in the ancestral traditions of thousands of years, and at the same time one deeply divided and degraded through the ignorance and cultural arrogance of successive waves of colonists, missionaries and an apartheid government, all of whom have failed to recognize the richness and complexity of the African peoples they met and subjugated.

Largely as a result of missionary zeal and their aim to 'convert' the heathen and teach them to adopt a lifestyle similar to that of nineteenth-century Britain,

traditional religious beliefs and customs of blacks have been disrupted by western Christian ethics; the western money economy and system of taxation have severely damaged the traditional kinship system which formerly provided for all one's needs; and traditional clothing, music, foods, arts, crafts and skills have largely been subsumed by the more robust but not necessarily appropriate European culture, leaving most black South Africans living as second-class copies of their white compatriots.

At the same time the voices of these people have also been excluded from the political structure of the country, thereby reinforcing the dominance of a white minority. This also served to justify the notion that blacks have a status that is inferior to whites and not worthy of a place in history. For many years, therefore, white South Africans have learned a one-sided and distorted history of the multicultural land they live in.

In the new South Africa it is very clear that if all population groups are to gain a realistic sense of their own identity and cultural heritage, and live together in a truly multiracial society, these imbalances will have to be redressed immediately and a new approach to cultural heritage found.

Museums are by definition repositories of the past – keepers of the collective story – but as Dr John Kinnard of the Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum in Washington, DC, said on his visit to South Africa in 1987, and as was repeated by the eminent British museologist, Dr Kenneth Hudson, during his visit during 1991, 'unless South African museums make serious efforts to balance their portrayal of the country's history, they will remain monuments to white supremacy, fossilised in a biased past and utterly irrelevant' (Dr Hudson quoted in Kahn 1992: 9).

Museums in South Africa are a legacy of the British colonial era, and are by their very origin a western Eurocentric concept. As pointed out by Dr Brian Stuckenberg at the 1987 Annual Museums' Conference, 'We are *in* Africa, but not yet of Africa. It is time to outgrow our European prototypes' (Stuckenberg 1987: 297).

Ill-prepared by their upbringing, museums in South Africa may be tempted to shrink from the challenge of a new nation and pretend that their rightful place is in the past, but they cannot afford to make this mistake: our glory is not in our past track record but rather in our future. Our glory will be in the unbiased interpretation of a nation in change.

We cannot afford for the word museum to be one of outmoded, static, insulting and degrading connotations deeply rooted in a divided past. If this were to happen it would remain a word of abuse rather than celebration. The need for an authentic African approach to museums is urgent, and will require unique creativity if museums are to be able to claim a right to existence.

Because of racial superiority and Eurocentric perceptions and values it is an unfortunate fact that the richness and diversity of South African cultural history has not been given the recognition and attention it deserves – least of all in

museums where collections are heavily biased towards whites, while records of black cultural traditions are at best fragmentary and at worst non-existent. Yet as pointed out by Rhoda Levinsohn in her book *Art and Craft of Southern Africa: Treasures in Transition*,

Among the Tribal people of Southern Africa today there exists a rich and varied centuries-old artistic tradition. . . . Little known in the West . . . the treasure of material arts that expresses the physical and spiritual requirements of indigenous Southern Africans is threatened, experiencing a decline so precipitous in the last ten years, that urgency must now characterize the need to document what remains before its disappearance is complete.

(Levinsohn 1984: 5)

Museums should never underestimate the contribution that they could make towards preserving the cultural heritage of those societies that are buffeted by more dominant cultures and peoples.

I recently watched a fascinating National Geographic film on Japan where, acknowledging the need to safeguard treasures and skills of national importance, the government has adopted a unique policy in which a small number of people who are skilled in the ancient creative traditions of that country (paper making, banraku puppets, pottery, traditional styles of acting, etc.) have been selected to receive the title 'Holders of important, intangible cultural properties'. They are, however, more commonly known as National Treasures and in return for a small annual stipend these people are entrusted with the responsibility of teaching and training apprentices as well as exhibiting their crafts to keep the ancient creative traditions of Japan alive.

In South Africa a similar policy could serve to forge powerful links with our traditional past and illuminate the future with the timeless spirit of days gone by.

However, in a country where the political situation is turbulent and fragile, the role of 'patron of the arts' would probably not be high on the government's list of priorities. But, this would be an ideal opportunity for museums. As sponsors of the great masters, they would ensure that the torch of our unique artistic and cultural heritage will live beyond the numbered days of those few practising craftsmen who still live in forgotten corners of our country.

At the National Museum of Botswana a project of this kind has been running with outstanding success for many years. From remote rural areas bordering the Kalahari Desert and Okavango Delta come some of Africa's most creative basket makers.

The museum, recognizing the exceptional talent of these people, organizes an annual national basket-making competition for them. Only baskets of the most traditional designs and exceptional craftsmanship are accepted for the exhibition and subsequent sale, at which museums and collectors from around the world are able to obtain the finest examples of this national handicraft.

This is not to say, however, that museums should focus all their attention on pristine unacculturated practices and reject all that has succumbed to modernization as not being genuine. An attitude such as this would tend to reinforce the notion of a disappearing people, or of a people unchanged by the world around them.

While black and other cultures have always occupied a small place in South African museums, the appalling reality is that they have invariably been portrayed as primitive societies in a timeless present – static, dark, mysterious and passive.

In a bid to appear sophisticated, museums in South Africa have tried to emulate their great European counterparts by building big exhibitions which then remain unchanged for twenty years or longer, giving an impression of undisturbed harmony. Yet the rate of change in exhibition subject-matter and issues is far greater than museums have ever had time to acknowledge.

Too inward-looking and oblivious or even hostile to the outside world around them, museums have failed to recognize that all around us traditional Africa is either rapidly vanishing or irrevocably changing.

Urban life, western-style economically rewarding occupations, and the lure of western mass-produced goods have either quickly replaced traditional cultural objects or provoked a response which has produced a unique mixture of the two – known in South Africa as transitional art.

Skilful borrowing and their inveterate frugality has led to the throwaway items of our society being incorporated into their traditional art forms. Bottle tops, beer can tabs, plastic bags, old toothbrushes, discards from medical clinics, broken zippers, buttons, striped telephone cable wire, plastic wrapping and metal from tin cans have all been incorporated into a striking display of objects.

In addition to this the market for traditional arts and crafts has also rapidly expanded, but in order to cater for a largely 'white' buyers' market the arts and crafts are changing. New materials, new techniques, new designs and new functions have been introduced, so that while the traditional techniques of basketry, beadwork and pottery, for instance, are not changing the shapes and designs are.

Far more square shopping baskets and colourful woven handbags are now made to cater for European tastes; the traditional colours and designs for beadwork are being replaced by fashion colours, styles and shiny disco beads; and traditional clothing is being updated and restyled in order to be able to cash in on the huge surge of interest in ethnicity, but in a suitably Europeanized way.

As you have perhaps realized, we are caught in a peculiar paradox in South Africa where on the one hand our traditional arts and crafts are in danger of dying out, but at the same time the surge of interest in 'things African' that is at present sweeping the world has by the unique response of our indigenous people not served to save them, but rather to hasten their extinction, through the evolution of the artistic forms themselves. All this has produced a uniqueness

that is wholly South African, and there is a compelling need for museums to measure up to their responsibility of documenting these changes.

It would also seem to me illogical to try to separate the tangible from the intangible, and to assume that only 'objects' of cultural importance or interest should be preserved. The contribution of South Africa's black population cannot only be measured in terms of items suitable for museum display, but should also include all the foods, music, songs, dances, myths, legends, beliefs and customs that are so intimately associated with those objects. As keepers of the collective story, do museums not have a responsibility in defining national identity by providing the fullest picture possible, especially in South Africa where First World and Third World rub shoulders with inevitable exchanges affecting the traditions of both groups?

### **The potential of museums**

At the Albany Museum in Grahamstown it has become one of my most pleasurable activities to tell traditional African stories to children at the beginning of every year. Brought up on a diet of 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'Cinderella' and 'Mother Goose', the majority of children have no idea of the rich treasury of stories about the people and animals of Africa that exist on our very doorstep.

Using items from the museum's collection to illustrate the stories, I have over the last six years been able to share a small part of the cultural heritage of our children with them in what I believe is a wholly enjoyable and extremely successful way.

In a rapidly changing world museums have the power to contribute to the richness of the collective human experience and to give the cultural diversity of a nation its fullest expression. They can achieve this through four key concepts:

- 1 Education in its broadest sense should be central to the museum's public service. By fostering a realistic sense of identity, heritage and contribution to the history of their country, museums can help a fragmented nation to regain a sense of self-worth and live in a state of truly multiracial harmony.
- 2 Museums must make a commitment to enlarge, enrich, understand and appreciate their collections so that they represent the full spectrum of the cultural diversity of our pluralistic society.
- 3 By broadening the base of their operations and programmes to include a wide spectrum of organizations and individuals, museums can foster partnerships and collaborative ventures which will make them more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences and reflect an expanded public dimension.
- 4 Strong leadership and the commitment of funds are central to all these issues.

This is all very well but it leaves us with a serious question which may well have struck you right through this chapter. As stated earlier, a museum is a Eurocentric concept and as such is something which has no equivalent in traditional Africa.

Many comments and judgements have been made on the worth of museums, and it is generally agreed by First World nations that they are essential as a means of preserving the past, defining national identity, and giving purpose to and providing continuity in life.

Yet are any of these considered vital by a nation in the Third World? Considering that the majority of them have either been or still are struggling to throw off the shackles of a dominant political power, it would not be surprising if wanting to erase the past was top of their list of priorities.

With only the years ahead showing any prospect at all for a brighter existence, the past may well have little or no value at all.

And although this may only be conjecture, reality in South Africa adds even more complications and does not paint a brighter picture either.

Although museums in South Africa have always been open to all races and have always had free admission on at least one day of the week, black visitors have not been enthusiastic supporters and have tended to stay away.

This may well be a result of the appallingly inadequate representations of black culture in our museums, or a lack of understanding of what museums are about (many people hold the view that museums are full of dead bodies and are therefore frightening places). Similarly, imposing building styles and identity problems with other similar-looking institutions which until recently were not open to all races have also caused confusion. Furthermore, museums being a totally Eurocentric notion, it is not generally in the black tradition to visit them, and leisure time and weekends are reserved for traditional family activities.

To further complicate matters, the former Group Areas Act, by which the apartheid government forced people of colour to live far away from the metropolitan areas, has meant that visiting a museum is an expensive and time-consuming pastime for them.

How are we to reconcile these differences without falling straight on to the horns of the dilemma where on the one hand we in museums with our Eurocentric upbringing see it as our responsibility to act as conservators and protectors of an endangered and evolving culture in South Africa, and yet on the other hand run the risk of being accused of patronization and paternalism?

As pointed out by Professor Timothy Bergen of the University of South Carolina,

[We] have sometimes been chagrined and shocked to find [our] well-intentioned plans utterly rejected by the very people whom they were intended to help. What [we] have often overlooked . . . is the fact that the well educated, middle class professional probably has a totally different set of perceptions [and hence values, attitudes and modes of behaviour] than his rural, lower class uneducated client.

Merely because the professional sees merit in a particular proposal, in no way ensures that the client will view the proposal in the same way. Indeed

it would be nearly miraculous if he did. It is precisely because of this that the demand has grown for greater participation of clients in the planning of proposals intended for their benefit.

(Bergen 1993: 7-8)

## **Collaboration and action**

It is my particular pleasure to share with you four excellent examples of collaboration between 'white' museums and 'black' people in South Africa, which form the basis of very special relationships between professional and client.

The first concerns what has become known as the Bulhoek Massacre:

On the 24th May 1921 a force of some 800 members of the South African Police clashed with the Israelites, followers of a black religious prophet, Enoch Mgijima. The police were armed with rifles, machine guns and artillery. The Israelites were armed with Old Testament style weapons, swords and spears. At the end of the day 183 Israelites lay dead and nearly one hundred were wounded. One policeman was wounded and a police horse was killed. This incident became known as the Bulhoek Massacre.

(Webb 1992: 1)

Following this a number of swords, scabbards, photographs and items of a religious nature associated with this day found their way into four nearby museums.

Time does not permit a detailed description of what happened on that fateful day; suffice it to say that the Israelites are part of a religious group known as African Independent Churches. Among their particular beliefs and rituals was one which prophesied that the end of the world was nigh and another which required all its members to come together for a week every April to celebrate Passover. Usually they erected temporary dwellings for the duration of their celebration.

However, in 1920, instead of doing this they began erecting permanent dwellings on the piece of commonage allotted to them. This was not in accordance with the local rules and regulations, and the authorities began to take steps to remove them. However, the Israelites took no notice, believing themselves to be God's chosen people.

By the end of 1920 between 1,200 and 1,400 Israelites were still firmly ensconced on the commonage, which led the government to decide that it had no option but to use force. In May 1921 the largest police force that had ever assembled in peacetime converged on the commonage. They opened fire and in the ensuing clash, 183 Israelites were killed and 100 wounded.

But what has all this to do with museums? In 1991 it was the seventieth anniversary of the Bulhoek Massacre, and the Israelites, who are as strong as ever today, approached the Historical Monuments Board and local museums to help them with their celebration. Among the projects embarked on were:

- an oral history project to get the Israelites' version of events;
- the researching and writing of a brief history of the affair;
- arranging a suitably worded plaque for the memorial wall round the graves of the Israelites killed on that fateful day;
- the updating and rearranging of the display relating to the Massacre in the Queenstown Museum;
- and, perhaps most interesting of all, a request by the Israelites to borrow a sword from the Kaffrarian Museum collection to be used in their anniversary celebrations. This was taken out of the museum, used in the ceremony and returned afterwards.

Although these may only seem like a small step, Bulhoek reflects a significant chapter in the nation's past and as such is one that is especially meaningful to formerly marginalized people. To those involved, the exercise has given them the confidence to embark on other projects and to build on this unique relationship that has begun to develop between them and their local community.

A similarly rewarding exercise took place in Natal between the KwaZulu Monuments Council, the museum and the Tribal Authorities on whose land the famous battlefield Isandlwana stands.

It was there that in 1879 the British Imperial army suffered one of its most humiliating defeats at the hands of an unconventional army. The shock waves that reverberated round the world after this defeat by the Zulu were considerable, and have put this great military disaster on a par with other similar disasters such as Colonel Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn.

For this reason the site has always been of great interest, but very largely to a narrowly defined group of Eurocentric military 'buffs' who have over the past 113 years held many commemorative events and erected many memorial stones to the fallen Imperial soldiers. In contrast to this, not one memorial exists to the Zulu fallen, yet this site recalls their nation at the zenith of its power. Until recently therefore the battlefield of Isandlwana had largely been a site of intense vandalism, grave robbing and general degradation on the part of the locals, who did not really have any idea of its importance.

About eight years ago, the Kwazulu National Monuments Council inherited this 'embarrassing mess' and, aware that they had a very saleable commodity in their hands in the guise of a historic site associated with the Anglo-Zulu War, decided to develop a master plan for heritage site development that would use as its guiding principle the direct benefit of the local communities on whose land the sites are located. Restoration of the historic integrity of Isandlwana involve the proclamation of a further 1,000 hectares as a heritage site, in addition to the already declared 2,8 hectares.

For the local Tribal Authorities this meant giving over agricultural land, the closure of a district road over the battlefield, and the demolition of a community school and a privately owned trading store. In return the Tribal authorities were offered an upgraded store in a new location, a new school capable of achieving high school status in the future, the building of a realigned all-weather access



road to their community and the establishment of a trust fund to which 25 per cent of the battlesite gate fees would accrue.

Although the negotiation was long and laborious and took nearly eight years to conclude, the Isandlwana heritage site was formally opened in 1991. Besides the direct benefits to the local community as mentioned above, there have also been other spin-offs:

- local labour was employed for the restructuring of the site, allowing some to learn new skills and others to hone existing ones;
- five permanent new posts of general assistant were created;
- a programme to train local school-goers as accredited tour guides has begun;
- and probably, most satisfying of all, there has been renewed interest in the site by teachers on the local school circuits, who now make a visit to this historic battlefield an important part of their school curriculum.

In bringing this project to fruition, the developers tried to 'ensure that all interested and affected parties [were] consulted and provided with a forum for open negotiations'. In this way 'a new ethic of heritage conservation that has applicability and relevance to a broader spectrum of South Africans [has been sought]' (Van Schalkwyk 1992: 7).

My third example is the International Library of African Music (ILAM) which was founded by the late Hugh Tracey in 1954, and is devoted to the collection and study of music, musical instruments and the oral arts in Africa. In its brochure, Andrew Tracey, Hugh Tracey's son and now director of the library, points out that African music is an endangered heritage, because 'although music is the most widespread and universally practised of all the arts in Africa, it is also the most neglected'.

He goes on to offer a few thoughts which highlight the urgent need for collections of this kind:

- Ethnomusicology, a long-established discipline in all western countries, is still in its infancy in South Africa. There is no department of African music at any South African university, and few courses that deal with it.
- South Africa, probably alone among countries of its stature, still has no published collection of its indigenous folk music.
- The music taught in most black schools and black universities owes little to Africa, leaving most blacks knowing little about their own traditional music.
- There has recently been a worldwide resurgence of interest in South African indigenous popular music, yet the music recorded and broadcast on most South African radio and TV stations retains a heavy emphasis on overseas commercial music.
- Yet despite all this, traditional music still manages to continue in corners of the country, unrecognized, unsupported and largely unknown to all except its makers.

With its unique collection ILAM is truly a 'living' museum offering among other things:

- familiarization with and appreciation of the music of Africa, access to books, articles, records, tapes, films and a unique collection of authentic African instruments;
- instructions in the making and repairing of African musical instruments;
- performance on a variety of musical instruments from South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and other African countries;
- performances in Steel Band and other Afro-American music.

(International Library of African Music 1991)

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje grew up in the Kimberley area of South Africa. Although he only had six years of formal education Sol Plaatje mastered eight languages and believed passionately in the power of the written word. He became a noted author and was the first black person to write a novel in English; he also translated at least four of Shakespeare's plays into Setswana.

When the ANC was founded in 1912 he became their first general secretary, and twice went abroad to petition against the 1913 Native Land Act, one of the most far-reaching pieces of legislation in South African history.

In 1921 he founded the Brotherhood Society which strove for co-operation and harmony among all races.

Author, journalist, political spokesman and leader of his people, Sol Plaatje was one of the most gifted and versatile men of his generation who devoted his many talents to one overriding cause – the struggle of black people against injustice and dispossession.

(MacGregor Museum 1991: 1)

Towards the end of his life, to show their appreciation for his kindness and devotion to his fellow men the black citizens of Kimberley bought him a house in which he lived until he died in 1932.

In 1991 the need to honour the achievements of this man was recognized and through generous sponsorship his home was bought and presented to the MacGregor Museum in Kimberley. The two front rooms in the house have been restored and will be a museum dedicated to his life, while the rest of the house is being used as a 'living' monument to this far-sighted man. A 'bridge school' has been established here which will enable black children to cross the gap between their education system and that of their white counterparts. It involves a computer-based literacy programme designed to increase fluency in English and teach basic mathematical concepts. This has been such a success that within a few months the school had outgrown its premises and has had to flow into museum space as well. There are also plans for a library of African writers.

This museum is the first in South Africa to be dedicated to the memory of a black person, and as such is a triumph for all those involved in its realization.

These are by no means the only museums in South Africa that have actively sought to bond with their local communities, but it seems that we have finally reached a point where the wounds inflicted by a racist ideology are at last

showing small signs of healing as we begin the slow process of transforming ourselves into a nation. We at museums should never forget that we are not above our community but are of it and the leadership of those mentioned above serves as an inspiration and shows that

museums have the potential to nurture an enlightened humane citizenry that appreciates the value of knowing about its past, is resourcefully and sensitively engaged in the present, and is determined to shape a future in which many experiences and many points of view are given voice.

(American Association of Museums 1992: 7)

## Note

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