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STUDIE/ARTICLES

MUSEUMS IN THE ERA OF DECOLONISATION:
THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE<https://doi.org/10.5817/MuB2022-1-2>

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ABSTRACT/ABSTRAKT:

Museums are spaces designed to preserve and disseminate knowledge about peoples and cultures. It is a place that keeps items that serve as evidence of history and identity frozen in time for knowledge purposes. Museums were a direct result of elites exhibiting their collections and cabinets of curiosity to the amazement of visitors in their homes. Over time, private collections became museum institutions of knowledge and repositories that have become pride of nation-states. As learning spaces, museums enhance education and enjoyment of visitors, through varied cultures displayed from their collections. However, museums are not to be perceived as entirely western supporting colonial ideology but they should substantiate national history from varied cultural perspectives that fosters identity formation and communal history.

The paper focuses on how the persistent call for decolonisation within museums has been perceived and adopted in Nigeria. Using mixed methodology, that included archival and historic research, data collection was through surveys, personal observation, interviews to ascertain museum types within Nigeria. The paper describes museum concept as a cultural construct that aligns to African ideology. Finally, the paper concludes that the low visitors number to museums in Nigeria

is due to a disconnect between institution and the citizenry due to its colonial foundation. Consequently, emphasising the urgent need for decolonisation that adopt local model and further influences the design of new museums in Nigerian.

Muzea v éře dekolonizace na příkladu Nigérie

Muzea jsou instituce určené k zachování a šíření vědomostí o lidských společnostech a kulturách. V prostorech muzeí jsou uchovávány materiální doklady historie a identity, které mohou být kdykoliv využity pro účely výzkumu a poznání. Muzea se vyvinula jako přímý následovník dřívějších forem prezentace, kdy elity vystavovaly své sbírky a kabinetů kuriozit ve svých domovech k ohromení návštěvníků. Postupem času se soukromé sbírky přetrafovaly v muzejní instituce vědění a uchovávání, které se staly chloubou národních států. Prostřednictvím vystavování sbírek předmětů pocházejících z různých kultur poskytují muzea svým návštěvníkům možnost rozšířit si své vědomosti a získat nové zážitky. Muzea však nemají být vnímána jako výhradně západní instituce podporující koloniální ideologii, ale měla by prezentovat dějiny jednotlivých národů z pohledu různých kultur a podporovat tak formování identity a kolektivní historie. Článek se zaměřuje na to, jakým způsobem bylo toto vytrvalé volání po dekolonizaci v muzeích vnímáno v Nigérii a jak se jeho

výsledky projevují v praxi. Sběr dat probíhal za využití kombinace metod archivního a historického výzkumu, tedy prostřednictvím průzkumů, osobního pozorování a rozhovorů, které měly za cíl zjistit, jaké typy muzeí se vyskytují v Nigérii. V článku je koncept muzea popsána jako kulturní konstrukt, který se přizpůsobuje africké ideologii. Studie nakonec dochází k závěru, že nízký počet návštěvníků muzeí v Nigérii je způsoben odmítavým postojem občanů k těmto institucím kvůli jejich dřívějšímu založení představiteli koloniální moci. Naléhavá potřeba dekolonizace, která dá prostor lokálním zvyklostem a bude mít další vliv na vznik a charakter nových muzeí v Nigérii, je proto stále aktuální.

KEYWORDS/KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA:

antiquities – ancestral collections – colonial museum – decolonisation historické památky – sbírky předků – koloniální museum – dekolonizace

Introduction

Museums have continued to be active in shaping world knowledge since 600 years ago. Over time, there have been persistent and significant changes in its academic and intellectual frameworks since the 19th century. However, the direction and the speed of change in its administrative environment over the last two decades have been unprecedented. It has continued to influence how the institution is

perceived and defined. A definition of a museum provides an explanatory guide to the concepts and ideology surrounding its establishment and understanding. Such concepts, however, are guided by a combination of philosophies often dependent on cultural underpinnings, context and content. As a result, museums are no longer simply exhibition spaces that represent the knowledge and truth of the histories they represent; instead, they have become sites where people participate, interpret and buy, rather than visit and become educated.¹ However, in this case, people are categorised as visitors, consumers or stakeholders.

Museums are also identified or defined by the types and focus of their collections. Nonetheless, they do not exist in a vacuum but highlight the thoughts and materiality of a society or people. Because collections or objects represented serve a specific cultural or utilitarian purpose for the people, thus, museum collections are an attestation to everyday life and how man has fashioned specific tools by way of their technology to survive their environment. These collections are categorised by the institutional taxonomy but not by the people who own and use them daily. According to Willet,² museum collections were objects made by the people, of the people for the people. Hence, they serve a distinctive role those specific people can use as identifiers. Subsequently, defining a museum will require understanding the culture and setting that the institution seeks to serve. As such, there seems to be no straightforward definition that fits all-region and cultures. Due to the unsatisfactory definition

for museums, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) through four consultations at varied levels decided to review the 2007 definition of museum that states that, “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for education, study and enjoyment”.³

The above quoted definition was adopted in 2015 by all UNESCO 195 member states.⁴ However, the ICOM definition interrogated several critical questions in museology, including the museum’s economic role, social function, and the necessity of carrying out research to arrive at a workable definition that will be inclusive.⁵ Inclusivity of the definition accounts for diverse cultures and their understanding of museums’ past, present and future. To this end, the ICOM formed the *International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM)* for different regions. The committee further accounted for the multi-lingual nature of the world and different notions of what a museum stands for. However, the definition is not static but problematic as it will likely change with a continued shift in ideology, culture and cultural perspectives. As such, present

parameters for defining museums are not the same as in the past and are likely to change. Hence the new definition that highlights all that museum is with consideration of region and varied context.

The proposed was voted upon on the 24th August 2022 during the Extraordinary General Assembly, in Prague. The definition states that “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing”.⁶

It is also startling that the definition of a museum is considered an English construct. Thus, presents the concept of museums as anglophone. Remarkably, International Commission for Museum (ICOFOM) considers the multi-lingual nature of the various region to arrive at a working definition. In doing this however, the International Commission for Museum (ICOFOM) methodology considered academic languages such as French, Brazilian Portuguese, Latin American Spanish, and English-speaking regions.⁷ The definition, however, seems to alienate African or African languages. With Africa divided into either Anglophone or Francophone highlighting the scramble for Africa, neo-colonialism is presently and persistently subtly

³ Museums, International Council of Museums. 2007. In *ICOM International Council of Museums* [online]. 24 August 2007 [accessed 2021-12-21]. Available from [www: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>](https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/).

⁴ Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections. In *United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization* [online]. 2015 [accessed 2022-08-17]. Available from [www: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/museums/recommendation-on-the-protection-and-promotion-of-museums-and-collections/>](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/museums/recommendation-on-the-protection-and-promotion-of-museums-and-collections/).

⁵ BROWN, Karen and Françoise MAIRESSE. The definition of the museum through its social role. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 2018, vol. 61, no. 4, pp. 525–539.

⁶ Museum Definition. In *ICOM International Council of Museums* [online]. 2022 [accessed 2022-08-26]. Available from [www: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>](https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/).

⁷ BROWN, Karen and Françoise MAIRESSE. The definition of the museum through its social role. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 2018, vol. 61, no. 4, pp. 525–539.

¹ EDSON, Gary and David DEAN. *The handbook for museums*. London: Routledge, 1994.

² WILLETT, Frank. Museums and the Image of Africa. *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 1991, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 43–54.

reinforced in African museums. Such colonial languages negate the idea that museums are spaces that highlight people's ideology and connectedness to their past and future. The exclusion of African indigenous language presents the museums as foreign institutions that seeks to preserve and present specific one-sided story. To this end, the paper seeks to examine the concept of decolonisation within museums and how it is perceived in Nigeria. Understanding the concept of decolonising museum can further contribute to improving museum services in the region, such as increasing visitor number and engagement and encouraging inclusivity.

Methodology

The mixed methodology approach includes archival and historical research that examines how museums were established, understood and the need for decolonisation in the region. Through personal observation, interviews, roundtable discussions with curators and directors' primary data were collected. Roundtable discussion was conducted with 10 museums in attendance representing the six geopolitical zones (North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South and South West) of Nigeria. The selected representing institutions were chosen to have a representative of 90 public and private museums within Nigeria. The museums invited included the only public/private institution with contemporary art collections and the only Natural history museum in the country. Aside type of ownership, focus of museum collection was also considered as a selection criterion. As result, diverse museum types, focus, size, location and ownership were in attendance for the discussion. Participants were purposely selected rather than from

a statistically representative sample of a broader population.

Secondary data was collected from relevant literatures on museum decolonisation and reports from institutions such as International Council of Museums, International Commission for Museum (ICOFOM) and *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations* (UNESCO). The literature and reports were to examine the definition of museum and the need for decolonisation of museums in Nigeria. Survey to determine number of museums in Nigeria was carried out between June 2019 to September 2019. Data gathered from the survey was used in determine participants for the discussion. There was no existing directory that provided the necessary details about Nigerian museums until early 2020. Presently, 52 museums are listed on the *National Commission for Museums and Monuments* (NCMM) website.⁸ However, data about their sizes, collection focus, types of ownership, location and contact persons were neither available nor accessible online. Thus, making it challenging to determine museums numbers in Nigeria. The lack of data presented the need for a survey to be carried out.⁹ The survey to document the number of museums, collection focus and type started in June 2019. The research data revealed 64 public museums, 52 being directly overseen by National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) whilst 26 private museums of varied focus. 21 of the 90 museums were visited to conduct personal observation. Due to security challenges within the country COVID pandemic

⁸ List of national museums in Nigeria. In *National Commission for Museums and Monuments* [online]. [accessed 2022-06-22]. Available from www.museum.ng/museums/national-museums-list.

⁹ The survey was commissioned and sponsored by *European Union Institute for Culture* (Nigeria Cluster) as part of work carried out towards making *Nigerian Museum houses of Identity*.

followed by contact with selected curators was carried out virtually.

Defining Museums

What is a museum? Defining a museum could be seen as an easy task by interrogating the history of museums but often not necessarily so. This is due to the simple fact that the idea of collecting and deciding what to preserve to produce knowledge is not static but dynamic. The structure of knowledge has continued to change from the renaissance, the classical down, to the modern age based on the prevailing epistemological context. As a result, content and context were guided by rules and structure of a particular time in history. The concept of a museum began in the 13th century initially through the accumulations of materials (natural and artificial things) in cabinets of curiosity.¹⁰ Elites show off accumulated wealth and expanded knowledge through collections from their explorative travels to emphasise enlightenment and a deep understanding of a subject matter.¹¹ With time these private collections and repositories were geared towards reforming the citizenry.

At inception, museums, like other amenities, served the purpose of developing citizens' mental and moral health. As a result, museums were not perceived as spaces for leisure or education but as a reformatory tool where the elite remoulded the commoner.¹² Consequently, personal collections

¹⁰ HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1992.

¹¹ BUCKINGHAM, James Silk. *National Evils and Practical Remedies: With a Plan for a Model Town*. London: Peter Jackson, Lae Fisher, Son and Co, 1849; GOODE, G. Brown. *The principles of museum administration*. [s.l.]: Coultas & Volans, 1895; BENNET, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1995.

¹² BENNET, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1995.

of individuals like Sir Hans Sloan, Sir Robbert Cotton and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, formed the foundation of the British Museum.¹³ According to Hooper-Greenhill,¹⁴ museums are not pre-constituted entities produced in the same way at all times; hence, their definition will continue to evolve. Before they became public institutions open to all, museums existed as private entities, previously property of kings and elites. Such private establishment was that of Sir Hans Sloane, whose private museum was one of London's sights and located on No 3. Bloomsbury Place. Sir Hans Sloane was a physician, naturalist, traveller, and collector of many objects; his botanical collection was considered the "*finest natural history collection in the world*".¹⁵

Through such assemblage, museums became disciplinary apparatus to understand varied concepts and ideas. When there was a need to emerge new facts about earlier accepted concepts, museums also became the fundamental mechanism that enabled the construction and dissemination of a new set of standards that were unpopular with ancient ideology.¹⁶ Such new values have continued to emerge and define how museum collections and the situation surrounding their accumulation, storage and display are perceived and openly discussed. Museums are opportunities for a nation's cultural and natural resources to be harnessed and organised toward

13 SOGBESAN, Oluwatoyin Z. *The potential of digital representation: The changing meaning of the life 'bronzes' from pre-colonial life to the post-colonial digital British Museum*. London: University of London, 2015. Doctoral dissertation.

14 HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1992.

15 CROOK, Joseph Mordaunt. *The British Museum*. London: Allen Lane, 1972, p. 42.

16 HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1992.

the construction of national identity. In situations where diverse ideologies and concepts define national identity, for example, in the case of Nigeria, the museum becomes that space that encourages the inclusive construction of history and distinctiveness against all odds. As a result, national museums of unity across the country were established to highlight differences and similarities whilst facilitating unified identity and knowledge of various ethnic groups that made up different regions of the country.

Over time, museums have taken centre stage in societal and communal developments to inspire a better understanding of the history and identity of people. Further classification of museums is by their collection of impressive visual proponents, representational strategies and modes of expression. Through tangible and intangible collections representing cultures, the museum seeks to highlight the critical achievement of man. Such collections are of pivotal significance in understanding the concept of a museum as a place where objects are exhibited for education, enlightenment and enjoyment. Being socially and historically located, museums tend to "*bear the imprint of social relations beyond their walls and the present. Hence, they are never just spaces to play out wider social relationships but exist to create a cultural context within them*".¹⁷

Museums have evolved from static spaces to become more dynamic and inclusive. By introducing new technology into museum and museum practices, new values, functions, and a new perspective on the varied subject matter have

17 MACDONALD, Sharon. Introduction. In MACDONALD, Sharon and Gordon FYFE (eds.), *Theorizing museums: representing identity and diversity in a changing world*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 4.

emerged. In line with Foucault's,¹⁸ museums have become part of the network of multiple relations between population, territory and wealth. Though considered a colonial construct, the definition has continued to emphasise their global universality and influence. Ironically, museums have always been part of African livelihood, where they are present in simple living concept as a three-tier hierarchy. Despite having an indigenous model, the European concept of institutional collection and static exhibition space has become the mainstay of understanding culture and identity within Nigeria.

Nigerian Perspective of Museum

Nigerian art came to recognition and limelight in the early 20th century due to studies of African art by the West under the general term "Negro Art". At the time, Nigeria not only produced the finest specimen of ancient art but also produced works and varied crafts that developed far beyond what was termed primitive.¹⁹ Murray²⁰ argued that African published works of art in the 1930's included the bronzes and Ivories from Benin Kingdom in present Nigeria. Nigeria, a construct of the colonial administration, has no unified history as the people are of diverse ethnicity and distinctive languages. Some of the spoken languages and indigenous artefacts are similar with a bit of variation that allowed them to be grouped together despite distinctive features. The diversity is presently being exhibited in national museums of unity established across the country since 1989 with National Museum of Unity, Abeokuta and constitute part of the 52 public

18 FOUCAULT, Michel. *Governmentality. Ideology and Consciousness*, 1979, vol. 6, pp. 5-21.

19 MURRAY, Kenneth C. Art in Nigeria: the need for a museum. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1942, vol. 41, no. 165, pp. 241-249.

20 Ibidem.



Fig. 1: Main vehicular entrance into Museum of Unity, Ibadan Oyo State established in 2002. Source: Oluwatoyin Sogbesan Collection, 2021.

museums (figure 1). Although the establishment of public museums devoted to collections and conservation came to Nigeria much later than many other African countries, preserving works with high spiritual significance was not a new idea.²¹

Nigerian art consists of music, dance and sculptures with intrinsic and extrinsic value with their knowledge and meaning embedded in their oral history.²² The art overlap in its uses and forms. For instance, carved sculptures are utilised in dances during communal or religious festivals with appropriate music. Considering that these objects were not produced as art but as utilitarian or sacred objects, they highlight traditional material culture before the establishment of the colonial institution called “museum”. There were no earlier writings though many have continued to emerge

21 FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 148–124.

22 MURRAY, Kenneth C. Art in Nigeria: the need for a museum. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1942, vol. 41, no. 165, pp. 241–249.

about Nigerian art forms; the antiquities assist in communicating the heritage and history of the people. Artworks from Nigeria during colonial administration were treated with disdain and seen as decadence.²³ Such perception is likely due to a lack of understanding of the culture of the people. For example, the Benin works were not created for display in a western museum but in a local court, thus having a significant value within their original context.²⁴ Wood art, on the other hand, was and still is of importance due to communal demands ranging from religious recreation to showing many signs of vitality and wealth during festivals. Such utilitarian demands tend to drive production than the need for art.²⁵

The end of colonial rule in Nigeria in 1960 resulted in reconsidering late nineteenth-

23 Ibidem.

24 PHILLIPS, Barnaby. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021.

25 MURRAY, Kenneth C. Art in Nigeria: the need for a museum. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1942, vol. 41, no. 165, pp. 241–249.

century cultural and imperial political paradigms. Colonialism has also subsequently generated substantial changes across many disciplines in the postcolonial era, including anthropology and museology. The changes across the discipline also affected museum practices with the call for decolonisation. Thus, museums need to be perceived and defined from an inclusive understanding of the indigenous people they tend to showcase as part of the history and identity of Nigeria. To this end, defining museums from a Nigerian perspective is paramount to understanding how the institution is taking centre stage in constructing societal and communal history and identity. Such definition will provide the framework for decolonisation and shift from imperial models of seeing.

Furthermore, museum definition from a Nigerian perspective has the potential to offer insight into other African states. As defined by various scholars, museums indicate multiple overlapping functions that make them spaces of contestable identities. Definitions discussed earlier in this paper argues that a museum is a space for education, enlightenment and enjoyment. However, over time, museum definition has continued to evolve and strayed from their original missions to preserve and educate, with critics suggesting that they may become arenas for pleasure rather than education.²⁶ Defining museum in Nigeria will require understanding the culture as it regards material objects, value, preservation and principles guiding exhibitions. Hence a definitive definition, like everywhere else, can be problematic as it varies from one region to another and

26 MCPHERSON, Gayle. Public memories and private tastes: The shifting definitions of museums and their visitors in the UK. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 2006, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 44–57.

from one culture to another. However, museum definition presently depends mainly on their collections, mission, and whom they intend to attract and not tilted towards the communities they present. As a result, museums in Nigeria are classified according to their collections as laid out by colonial paradigms, such as ethnographic, archaeological, natural history, slave history, traditional architecture, war, science and contemporary art. According to Harrison,²⁷ museums could be seen as several things – “as leisurely entertainment, as passively educational experiences, as necessary, if little contemplated, repositories of history and objects of value, or as symbols of community cultural maturity”. From Harrison’s²⁸ perspective, museums can be defined from varied concept and context dependent on culture. But how are symbols of community cultural maturity determined? What external benchmark are used for such measurement? Labadi²⁹ argued that the definition of culture over time has impacted on understandings of developments and vice versa. It is such development that are likely to impact on tangible and intangible elements that constitute cultural maturity. However, the definitions of culture have ranged from constricted humanistic understanding that refer to culture as artistic activities, literature, and heritage to the anthropological standpoint where culture is seen as a whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterises a society or group, including mode of life, value

27 HARRISON, Julia. Museums as agencies of neocolonialism in a postmodern world. *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies*, 1997, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 42.

28 Ibidem, pp. 41–65.

29 LABADI, Sophia. *Rethinking Heritage for Sustainable Development*. London: UCL Press, 2022.

systems, traditions and beliefs.³⁰ Culture is simply the way of life of a particular people.³¹ These definitions and understandings indicate that culture is diverse and varies between social groups. Consequently, no culture is superior to another because they all have varied codes of references and regime of value.³² Therefore, only a cultural parameter within a culture can be used as a benchmark and terms of reference. Cultural maturity should thus be based on specific community value regime, not external factors. Hence, Okpoko³³ argues that the idea of a museum predates the colonial era as the idea is found in shrines, temples and palaces of kings. To this end, there is a need for decolonisation to allow local cultural perspective to emerge. For decolonisation to take place, it is imperative that museums are understood from the local standpoint.

Museums in Nigeria will be described on three levels: home, shrine and palace (family, religion and government). Understanding these three levels that depict the private, private/public, and public museum will provide a glimpse into how the people perceive and represent their culture which is not aligned with the colonial concept. Museums are not an unfamiliar phenomenon in African culture to which Nigeria belong, as their concept addresses different levels of representational, interpretation and educational spaces. All that represents identity, family history, culture and a sense of place and belonging in Africa

30 Ibidem.

31 GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Book Inc Publishers, 2000.

32 APPADURAI, Arjun. *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

33 OKPOKO, Alex Ikechukwu. *Fundamentals of Museum Practice*. Nsukka: Afro Orbis, 2006.



Fig. 2: Inside a family living space with objects that can attest to cultural history. Source: Oluwatoyin Sogbesan Collection, 2019.

starts with a private collection in the family home/compound. The home, irrespective of ethnicity, is a foothold for all that constitutes an individual’s identity. Nigeria’s family home or compound is constructed with spirituality and materiality as the primary reference with a unique spatial identity. Each architectural element, such as carved doors panels, wooden posts, windows, and roof members, all bear designs and inscriptions that inform a visitor about the family’s identity, belief, occupation, clan and financial status. The homestead or traditional designs and spatial requirements vary in shape and size from region to region with decorative elements, forms and colours that serve as identity markers as well as historical records of events (figure 2). Within this level of the museum (private museum) is wood art for domestic use, indicating a good understanding of proportion and form, such as cups, bowls,



Fig. 3: Some collections in storage in public museum. Source: Oluwatoyin Sogbesan Collection, 2020.

spoons, mortar, pestles, combs and stools.³⁴

Like a colonial museum, the home becomes the educational space where a visitor learns about the host/ owner through exhibited tangible and intangible collections of cultural values. In a household, inherited carvings from one generation have become part of the paraphernalia of the family god or deity. This religious relic, however, is replaceable as the need arises; hence old works considered as works of art are likely to degenerate, decay and be discarded.³⁵ Nevertheless, discarding some types of carvings is respectful and unavoidable such

³⁴ MURRAY, Kenneth C. Art in Nigeria: the need for a museum. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1942, vol. 41, no. 165, pp. 241–249; OKPOKO, Alex Ikechukwu. *Fundamentals of Museum Practice*. Nsukka: Afro Orbis, 2006.

³⁵ PHILLIPS, Barnaby. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021.

as the *Ikenga* from south-eastern Nigeria considered to enshrine a man's soul.³⁶

The *Ikenga* is a wooden figure with some resemblance to the human body exclusive to Igbo men and some women of high reputation in the society.³⁷ There are diverse variations depending on region and status. The most notable part of an *Ikenga* is the pair of horn, display objects such as knife or tusk and body markings. It is believed to be an embodiment of spirituality that houses the *Chi* (personal god), *Ndichie* (ancestors), *Ike* (power), or *Aka Ikenga* (right hand).³⁸ The

³⁶ ANIAKOR, Chike. Structuralism in Ikenga: an ethno-aesthetic approach. *IKENGA: Journal of African Studies*, 1973, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 6–28.

³⁷ BENTOR, Eli. Life as an artistic process: Igbo Ikenga and Ofo. *African arts*, 1988, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 66–71.

³⁸ ODOITA, Okechukwu E. Universal cults and intra-diffusion: Igbo Ikenga in cultural retrospection. *African Studies Review*, 1973, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 73–82.

indigenous definition or value ascribed to the *Ikenga* is based on the significance attached to the object. As a consecrated carving, an *Ikenga* serves as a connection between the owner and the spiritual realm. Offerings are made to an *Ikenga* to ensure success in any life venture.³⁹ The importance of the *Ikenga* to the Igbo man cannot be overemphasised hence it is appreciated active as the owner. In the case where an *Ikenga* becomes inactive due to death of the owner, an Igbo proverb supports total destructio – *Ikenga adigi ile, avwaa ya nku* (*Ikenga* that is inactive, cut it for firewood).⁴⁰ Consequently, an *Ikenga* is left to decay, symbolising death and the process of the body decomposing rather than being sold. Such decay of artworks and their replacement symbolises the natural process of growth, death, decay and rebirth that should not be taken for granted.

The next level of the museum is the shrines (religious buildings) of the traditional deity, which can also be considered a private/ public museum. It is a structure that accommodates members except by special invitation or open ceremonial festivals. The shrines of various deities are structures built using earth or other local, sustainable building materials, an open courtyard bounded by sacred trees, or no physical boundary in case of sacred grooves. The open structure highlights the existence of a museum without walls, a concept by Malraux (1965) and Friman (2006).⁴¹

³⁹ BENTOR, Eli. Life as an artistic process: Igbo Ikenga and Ofo. *African arts*, 1988, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 66–71.

⁴⁰ AGBOGU, Herbert Tagbo. *The Art of Nri: A Heritage of the Philosophy*. Nsukka: University of Nigeria, 1974. BA Thesis. Mimeographed.

⁴¹ MALRAUX, André. *Museum Without Walls*. London: Martin Seckler & Warburg, 1967. Translated From the French by Stuart Gilbert and Francis Price; FRIMAN, Helena. A museum

The structure usually houses cultural effigy like the *ibeji* dolls (figure 3) masks and carved wooden relics of various styles, shapes and sizes representing ancestors or deities or placed as decorations to honour the divinity.⁴² Like the residential structures, the walls of the shrines bear murals associated with specific deities. Specific colours and zoomorphic signs associated with the deity can also be instantly identified with the worshipers through body art. These elements serve as visual messages that speak volumes. Drums, wood carvings of fine bowls and platters for religious purposes and divination are also found in shrines.⁴³ In this case, carvings and relics are communally owned by members of the same religious cult or society and kept in baskets, boxes or tied to rafters.

The final level of the African museum is within the institutional building – the king's palace. The palace is the home to unique collections that belong to the court and represents the whole village or town.⁴⁴ The king is regarded as the highest custodian of culture and serves as the primary gatekeeper; hence the best of the society's creativity is stored within the palace like the case of the Benin plaques, Queen *Idia* ivory mask, *Obalufon* bronze head, Ife bronzes to mention a few.⁴⁵ The palace is a space of authority speaking on behalf of the communal identity and history.

without walls. *Museum International*, 2006, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 55–59.

42 MURRAY, Kenneth C. Art in Nigeria: the need for a museum. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1942, vol. 41, no. 165, pp. 241–249.

43 Ibidem.

44 OKPOKO, Alex Ikechukwu. *Fundamentals of Museum Practice*. Nsukka: Afro Orbis, 2006.

45 SOGBESAN, Oluwatoyin Z. *The potential of digital representation: The changing meaning of the Ife 'bronzes' from pre-colonial Ife to the post-colonial digital British Museum*. London: University of London, 2015. Doctoral dissertation; PHILLIPS, Barnaby. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021.

Further serves as a trusted layer to an individual or religious identity presented by the home or the shrine. Exquisite creations by the community always found their way to the palace in honour of the king. These collections are passed from generation to generation, attesting to the existence of the people, culture and validating oral histories. Some revered sacred collections are only seen in the public domain during major festivals. An inclusive concept where a common language of representation understood by all is used – depicting histories and identities of the people without western academic taxonomy. An example is the palace of the *Alaafin*, with over 20 courtyards dedicated to various functions. The courtyards are utilised for varied festivals and celebrations involving tangible and intangible cultural artefacts. Over time this palace has become a repository and educational space for artefacts and traditional architectural elements attesting to Yoruba culture.

Colonial Perspective of Museum for Nigeria

The Department of Antiquities was set up in Nigeria by colonial administration after a precedent set by the British antiquities policies and practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁶ The department in Nigeria was headed by Kenneth Murray, the first ever surveyor of antiquities in west Africa as inspector of ancient monuments. He was saddled with establishing and maintaining museums in the colonial era to the early part of the postcolonial.⁴⁷ Kenneth Murray's role consequently

46 HELLMAN, Amanda H. The Grounds for Museological Experiments: Developing the Colonial Museum Project in British Nigeria. *Journal of curatorial studies*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 74–96.

47 MURRAY, Kenneth C. Art in Nigeria: the need for a museum. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1942, vol. 41, no. 165, pp. 241–249.

mirrored that of Pitt Rivers in Britain by surveying antiquities for the colonial government. Hence, lofty projects were carried out towards setting out museums within Nigeria. Murray was to carry out acquisitions and purchases whilst he surveyed the country, and he expected that the establishment of a museum will follow collection practices.⁴⁸ Seven museums were established before independence, comprising two national museums in Jos and Lagos, whilst the remaining five were regional museums with various focuses.⁴⁹ With the assistance of archaeologist Bernard Fagg, proper archaeological practice for systematic and responsible excavation established antiquities legislation to regulate the export of objects deemed significant to Nigerian heritage.⁵⁰ An essential move to saving Nigeria from the scramble for Africa and her heritage. In this case, the museum was established to conserve and protect essential artefacts deemed national treasures.

Aside from setting up museums, the Department of Antiquities, her few professionals were responsible for discovering, preserving and studying the traditional material culture.⁵¹ The study was to cover the present and piece together the past without any

48 HELLMAN, Amanda H. The Grounds for Museological Experiments: Developing the Colonial Museum Project in British Nigeria. *Journal of curatorial studies*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 74–96.

49 FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, 1963, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 148–124.

50 FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, 1963, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 148–124; HELLMAN, Amanda H. The Grounds for Museological Experiments: Developing the Colonial Museum Project in British Nigeria. *Journal of curatorial studies*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 74–96; PHILLIPS, Barnaby. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021.

51 FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, 1963, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 148–124.

form of discrimination. However, Murray's intention differed from that of the colonial government, which envisaged setting up museums in Nigeria to educate and civilise the citizenry in line with the British ideology. Setting up the museums was therefore not to the benefit of the Nigerian community but for the enjoyment of the national artistry of the empire by expatriates. Museums further became a platform to spread European perspectives of the world at the disadvantage of Nigerian indigenous cultures and peoples.⁵²

Though the concept of museology was practised in Nigeria in the form of small local museum and stores, the first National Museum built for the Nigerian Antiquity Service. in Jos opened to the public in 1952. The colonial establishment disregarded the local ideology of exhibiting.⁵³ But Kenneth Murray's, (the first director of antiquities), idea was not to alienate the people and their ways of exhibiting nonetheless, concentrated on collecting, conserving, preserving and exhibiting the finest antiquities considered necessary.⁵⁴ As a result, collecting took precedence over how the local people will want to be presented. However, collecting artefacts from different cultures to be kept in single storage controlled by the government was indeed a foreign ideology and practice. Of importance to Murray were artefacts made before 1918 and those produced specifically for religious purposes. These artefacts emphasise the position of religion and shrines as revered spaces. Murray, nonetheless, was tin-eared to the spiritual beliefs

52 MACKENZIE, John M. *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2009.

53 FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, 1963, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 148–124.

54 PHILLIPS, Barnaby. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021.

of the people who felt offended by the suggestion that their ancestral objects be entrusted to the colonial government and displayed as exhibits.⁵⁵ An idea that seemed not only insulting but alienated the artefacts from their original purpose and place within communities. Coupled with a lack of trust in the colonial government, Murray had to enter into negotiations.⁵⁶ To this end, the people protested as their artefacts were collected for keepsake.⁵⁷ Thus, setting the tone and perception of the museum as a colonial construct designed to relegate or destroy cultural practices and belief systems that allowed objects to exist and die naturally.

Another aspect that founded the colonial museum in Nigeria was the need for repatriation. Repatriation has always been part of the dialogue that instituted museums and has now become an essential topic within museums locally and internationally. Issues regarding the repatriation of cultural artefacts to original owners affect Nigeria today as they did at the beginning with her artefacts scattered all over the West. Kenneth Murray advocated for repatriation more for the benefit of the Nigerian citizen to develop an understanding of their diverse culture and possibly grow an international audience.⁵⁸ However, his collection reflected

55 HELLMAN, Amanda H. The Grounds for Museological Experiments: Developing the Colonial Museum Project in British Nigeria. *Journal of curatorial studies*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 74–96; PHILLIPS, Barnaby. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021.

56 MURRAY, Kenneth C. Art in Nigeria: the need for a museum. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1942, vol. 41, no. 165, pp. 241–249.

57 PHILLIPS, Barnaby. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021.

58 FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, 1963, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 148–124; HELLMAN, Amanda H. The Grounds for Museological Experiments: Developing the Colonial Museum Project in British Nigeria. *Journal of curatorial studies*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 74–96.

the country's diversity but was displayed for the enjoyment of European audiences.⁵⁹

Furthermore, establishing and running a museum in colonial Nigeria also required staffing, and Murray ensured that indigenous people were included as part of the workforce.⁶⁰ To a large extent, the inclusion of local people and the ability to experience some of the artefacts they have no access to without barriers possibly accounted for the throng of visitors to the museum in the early days of its establishment.⁶¹ To this end, Bernard Fagg⁶² reported that the public was able to “*satisfy the natural desire to touch specimen*, and none suffered any damage, nor were there cases of vandalism. Thus, fulfilling the objectives of the founding fathers (Kenneth Murray and Bernard Fagg) that museums in Nigeria should be a place with consideration first for Nigerians.⁶³

Moreover, the museum was a place for social and educational benefit where Nigeria could be free from economic dependence on Britain over time. Kenneth Murray considered the economic prosperity associated with culture and advocated that industrialisation must occur with culture in mind.⁶⁴ An idea he adopted from *West African Arts Industries and Social*

59 HELLMAN, Amanda H. The Grounds for Museological Experiments: Developing the Colonial Museum Project in British Nigeria. *Journal of curatorial studies*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 74–96.

60 Ibidem.

61 PHILLIPS, Barnaby. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. London: Oneworld Publications, 2021.

62 FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, 1963, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 127.

63 HELLMAN, Amanda H. The Grounds for Museological Experiments: Developing the Colonial Museum Project in British Nigeria. *Journal of curatorial studies*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 74–96.

64 MURRAY, Kenneth C. Art in Nigeria: the need for a museum. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 1942, vol. 41, no. 165, pp. 241–249.

Sciences (IWAAISS) because they supported the production and preservation of art. Murray and Fagg, to the best of their knowledge, employed local ideology in creating building typology that fits every region for their museum and sourced ways of keeping the institutions afloat despite meagre funding. Traditional building elements like courtyard was also utilised in Lagos Museum which was a modern construction. Though only viewed from the inside, it provided a similar feeling to the compound housing typology associated to many ethnic groups within Nigeria.

Nigerian Museums and Decolonisation

Decolonisation in recent times have become an ever-present part of museum debates and an increasing aspect of museum action plan.⁶⁵ As a result, museums internationally have committed to engage in a reflection on their role and responsibility as they pertain to colonialism.⁶⁶ Their role in how cultures were represented from the perspective of the west in favour of the colonial ideology has continued to be questioned. Consequently, cultures and people being represented want to be identified by their own histories that contributes to the formation of a collective identity. Thus, encouraging answers about ownership, power and control to emerge. Further addressing diversity between cultures as against a homogenous perspective of the world.⁶⁷ The need to decolonise Nigerian museums cannot be over emphasised to

65 GIBLIN, John, Imma RAMOS and Nikky GROUT. Dismantling the master's house: thoughts on representing empire and decolonising museums and public spaces in practice an introduction. *Third Text*, 2019, vol. 33, no. 4–5, pp. 471–486.

66 BERGERON, Yves and Michèle RIVET. Introduction. Decolonising museology or “re-formulating museology”. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 2021, vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 15–28.

67 Ibidem.



Fig. 4: Osun Osogbo groove as an example of a decolonised indigenous museum without wall. Source: Oluwatoyin Sogbesan Collection, 2022.

acknowledge and highlight the diverse indigenous cultures in existence before the arrival of Europeans. Such acknowledgement implies inclusion of indigenous guidelines regarding modes of representation of their material culture. With visitor numbers constantly decreasing to school groups, Nigerian museums need to find ways of encouraging inclusion that will likely kickstart the process of decolonisation. Potential visitors need to see themselves as stakeholders to contribute to the emancipation process.

The quest for decolonization has also become even more important with the call to return works of art to their original communities.⁶⁸ Artefacts such as the looted bronzes from Benin Kingdom in Nigeria have become part of the wider debate of items being returned to their country of origin. Their

68 SARR, Felwine and Bénédicte SAVOY. *The restitution of African cultural heritage. Toward a new relational ethics* [online]. November 2018 [accessed 2022-08-17]. Available from [www: <http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf>](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf). Report.

return questions what role Nigeria museum will play in adding breadth, depth and possibly new knowledge to the canon. How will they reinsert these collections back to the community? The call for restitution should however have a wider implication beyond just the return of the objects but to highlight the need for new indigenous museum where artefacts embrace local representational guidelines that encourage inclusion. Such inclusion will not only question colonial interpretation but contribute to how sacred objects are treated to respect the culture responsible for their production. Thus, moving away from seeing the world as a homogeneous society and encouraging indigenous language as communication tool within Nigerian museums. To this end, museums in Nigeria will do well to adopt indigenous familiar models (home/shrine/palace) recognisable to the people they seek to serve (figure 4).

Nigerian Museum in Postcolonial Era

Today, Nigerian museums are within the purview of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). This responsibility is vested in it by the Decree 77 of 1979, now an Act of the Parliament, CAP 242, of 1990. Continuing from the Federal Department of Antiquities, the Commission is responsible for establishing and approving museums. It can withdraw such approval for security reasons if such establishment ceases to be a suitable repository for the valuable specimen.⁶⁹ There are over 52 public museums and 38 state, privately owned and university museums that include historical and world heritage sites under the control of the Commission. The Commission's mission is to systematically collect, preserve, study, and interpret the material evidence (tangible and intangible) of the people of Nigeria and in the Diaspora.⁷⁰ To remain relevant in contemporary Nigeria, the Commission was actively involved in services to the community through inclusive educational programmes such as teaching arts and crafts and other skill acquisition programmes for prisons, schools and communities. Nevertheless, the museum commission still operates a museum in line with the initially instituted British colonial model. Colonial English language dominates the exhibitions instead of the country's indigenous languages. Sadly, museum visits and interactions has reduced drastically coupled with changes in opening times, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day of the year to 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

⁶⁹ FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, 1963, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 148–124.

⁷⁰ *National Commission for Museum and Monuments Annual Report 2012*. Abuja, Lagos: NCMM, 2012.

before the world pandemic of 2020.⁷¹

All of the museums in Nigeria were established under different conditions with their dilemma and support needs.⁷² Hence, aside from general funding needs, they all have specific needs and limitations. Each museum was set up around specific collections and locations but has yet to devise new models of education, engagement and inclusion. Hence, Nigerian museums are yet to understand their role in contemporary Africa and make the institution more inclusive and welcoming for the citizenry. Religiosity has become the order of the day in Nigeria, affecting the interpretative aspect of museums. As a result, the interpretation department will require retraining to unlearn the old methodology and learn new innovative techniques to engage the public about the implications and meanings of the artefacts within their collection. Thus, it serves as a way of initial measures to ameliorate the concerns of the indigenous people whose ancestral artefacts were collected for a colonial museum.

The deplorable state of some of these colonial institutions in Nigeria today highlights the dearth of value for culture and heritage. As a result, funds are not allocated for their maintenance, and day-to-day running becomes a challenge to curators and other museum management officials. Though the museums try encouraging inclusive social programming, they still seem far behind their counterparts

⁷¹ FAGG, Bernard. The museums of Nigeria. *Museum International*, 1963, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 124–148; CHOI, Byungjin and Junic KIM. Changes and challenges in museum management after the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 2021, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 148 et seq.

⁷² HELLMAN, Amanda H. The Grounds for Museological Experiments: Developing the Colonial Museum Project in British Nigeria. *Journal of curatorial studies*, 2014, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 74–96.

worldwide on decolonising as they face other day-to-day running essentials. For instance, public museums like the *Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture* (MOTNA) in Jos need attention. In line with the founding fathers Kenneth Murray and Bernard Fagg, inclusive participation of the indigenous people whose cultures are represented would be beneficial in restoring the building typologies on exhibition. Nevertheless, until Nigerian museums becomes decolonised, taking the centre stage and responsibility of becoming an inclusive space for the indigenous people will continue to be a challenge.

Conclusion

Museums are understood to be places that could facilitate citizens' understanding and stimulate development through public outreach. An ideology of museums that was successful in Britain and through institutions like the British Museum led to the establishment of museums in colonies like Nigeria. The British colonial administration established museums in Nigeria mainly to restrict a constant flow of artefacts from leaving the shores of Nigeria. As a colonial construct, it was also considered a space for collecting, preserving and exhibiting the diversity of Nigeria. However, such exhibitions were not to the benefit of Nigerians at the time but that of the colonial expatriates. Thus, it became a space for the exhibition of wealth, power, authority and interpretation of the colonies from a European perspective formed out of the collections of Kenneth Murray and Bernard Fagg.

The colonial ideology of museums was impertinent as it disregarded the culture of the people whose ancestral artefacts were collected in all sorts of

manners to populate the foreign institution. As Nigeria's diverse population grows and changes over time, modification within the museum setting and exhibition is also imperative. However, the colonial model, structure and language of representation are presently still in use. Thus, negating the indigenous ideology of museums within Nigeria and the three official languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). As museums internationally continue to call for decolonisation, Nigerian institutions are yet to readdress and retrace their steps to accommodate a new inclusive ideology. Consequently, for museums to be perceived as part of Nigerian construct and culture decolonisation on all levels need to take place. At present, Nigerian museums are a colonial construct that have evolved into neo-colonial institutions.

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