

HOW CARIBBEAN MUSEUMS ARE DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

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Biography

Hazel Brookes was born in St. Kitts. She holds B.M. Ed. and B.A. (Mus) degrees from Acadia University in Nova Scotia and a M.Mus. degree from University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. Before moving into the heritage field, she taught music from 1979 to 1999 in St. Kitts and British Virgin Islands. She has worked in two local museums in St. Kitts. She was a consultant at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool in 2006, and she gave workshops to primary and secondary school children in Chepstow and Bristol about the Caribbean in general and slavery in 2007. She served on the Council of the St. Christopher Heritage Society from 2002–2007 and is currently on the Board of the Museums Association of the Caribbean (MAC). Hazel completed the CAM Long Distance Course in Museums Studies in 2003, and recently served as a consultant to an intern from CAM.

Abstract

Attempts to present an inclusive national historical narrative have proven problematic for St. Kitts and Nevis. The paper briefly looks at the challenges that museums in St. Kitts and Nevis face, describes the exhibitions of the museums of the Federation, and suggests reasons for this marginalization. In addition, it identifies some of the challenges of the Museums Association of the Caribbean (MAC), itself a diverse organization, and gives reasons for them.

Introduction

It is a recognized and accepted fact that every culture is a combination of different cultures, is continuously impacted by other cultures, and is always evolving. Exhibits in our museums should reflect these ongoing changes as well. However, in many societies, there is a huge disparity between diversity in communities and the people who visit, work in and lead cultural institutions. Governments in the Caribbean attempt to promote diversity as well and there are very few institutions today that do not “preach” about diversity. How many of them are merely giving lip service is something we must consider. Perhaps recognizing and admitting this fact are challenges for museums and cultural institutions worldwide.

The Caribbean

The role of museums in reinforcing collective identities has long been established. Museums are public sites for mediating and authenticating heritage knowledge. What is presented and what is not presented can have a major impact on how a society sees itself. Ethnic, social or religious diversity is often subsumed under dominant national narratives that ignore differences and continue the myth of “the others.” This perpetuates old and introduces new prejudices and marginalizes groups of people. We experts know that there are no “others” but have not been able to illustrate that fact in our museums clearly enough so that our visitors realize it too. Rex Nettleford referred to it as “the challenge of the dilemma of difference which characterizes human existence, the need to come to terms with this and forge the Unum out of the pluribus.”¹ Museums should be authorities of public recognition and share that authority with stakeholders or at the very least consult

them as to desired content. This however, is not an easy task, so many of us choose to disregard consultation as an option.

Who owns history? What is the role of the museum in interpreting history? What should the relationship between the museum and the public be? Who really has the right to interpret our history? These are questions that we should continuously ask ourselves and should strive to find ways to deal with the answers.

Small museums in the Caribbean face many of the same challenges that large international museums do, funding being the biggest of these challenges. Many of them have very specific challenges as well. Quite a few are operated by non-professionals, include private collections that do not relate to the present society, and are autonomous. The people who actually design the exhibits in these museums often resist any new ideas, thus presenting a story that is exclusive and often repeated, and then question why visitor numbers are low. Many of the museums are small, fairly new, and are still “teething.” Few are fully staffed and often rely on untrained volunteers to remain open. Artifacts are almost non-existent in some. Resources are practically nil. All of these factors impact the content of the exhibitions.

Besides those challenges, being inclusive is a major challenge and although it may be acknowledged that change should occur, and attempts are constantly being made to address this, not much headway is being made. Why is this so? Allow me to use St. Kitts and Nevis as an example to make it clearer.

St. Kitts and Nevis

St. Kitts is sixty-eight square miles, with 36,000 people and three museums. Nevis is thirty-eight square miles, with 11,000 people and three museums.

Our population comprises of Kittitians and Nevisians of the following origins: African, Portuguese, Lebanese, Indians, and Europeans. Typical Caribbean people.

More recently there have been regional nationals who work at the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB) whose headquarters are in St. Kitts. There are about seven hundred citizens of the United States of America who are fairly transient. There are medical students who attend the Ross Veterinary and Medical Schools. There are new resident homeowners from England, other European Countries and Canada. Very recently there have been smaller numbers of Venezuelans, Cubans and Santo Domingans or as they are known Dominicanos, Guyanese, Taiwanese, Germans, Russians and Japanese.

The Hispanic arrivals have given rise to the addition of a second language (Spanish), albeit practiced by a small part of the society. All the new *arrivants* have created the need for inclusion of different foods and spices, which the supermarkets have added to their shelves, thus adding to the diversity of their products, and being inclusive in a clever marketing strategy. In addition, there are now alternative ways of cooking, different lifestyles, cultural practices and religions. Our society is now the most diverse it has ever been. Of course there is also the development of interpersonal conflicts arising out of this ever-growing mass of people, which does not help with the challenge of inclusiveness in our societies or our museums.

Museums in the Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis

Although the six museums in the federation viewed as a group may be considered diverse in their separate concepts and focus, individually, their content is very much the same. And few members of our society can recognize themselves, or want to recognize

themselves or their contributions, in those exhibitions. In almost each case the museum was opened and developed by interested amateurs who had the vision but not the training to do so.

The National Museum in St. Kitts

The motto of this museum is “Our Museums, Our Vision, Our Future.” However the word “Our” does not appear to be inclusive of the whole population in their exhibits.

At the opening of the National Museum in St. Kitts in May 2002, the feature address included this idealistic paragraph:

In the past, museums have been exclusive, and can still be, particularly where there is little identification among a people with their monuments and sites or objects of their past. Today, however museums are no longer the prerogative of an elite, but accessible, understood, appreciated and enjoyed by all. If the approval of the educated viewing public is precious, that of the less educated is indispensable. We must now provide for the “new public.” This new public is a product of political, economic, social and psychological development of the past 20, 30, 40 years. The needs and demands of this public have played a decisive role in the general policy to publicize, popularize and integrate more fully into everyday life by means of education and culture, activities which are changing the museum image from that of a quiet, musty place to that of a hive of activity.² Six years later the National Museum in St. Kitts is still attempting to deal with the challenge of changing the museum from a quiet, musty place to that of a hive of activity. Why is this so?

The main exhibit focuses on our historical links to the Amerindians, idealized and enigmatic first inhabitants, the English and French, small but for many years the dominant group in the economy, politics and society in general, and the Africans, the numerical majority, usually presented in that order in one gallery in an attempt to be chronological. If mentioned at all, other ethnic groups are dealt with in a cursory manner in one or two sentences and with one or two pictorial illustrations. The storyline therefore focuses on the links with these four dominant ethnic groups, rather than what we have become as a society because of these links or how society has changed because of the inclusion of newer ethnic groups. I am aware that this museum is mandated to target nationals and as such the exhibit depicting our history focuses on the national story, but those same nationals very rarely visit the museum. Although new exhibits are mounted, there rarely is anything new to attract them. When asked, the response of the man on the street is often that he already knows what is there. This may mean that he has already seen the exhibit, he anticipates what is there, or it does not interest him.

Challenges at the National Museum, St. Kitts

Besides the ever-looming challenge of funding, attracting and keeping a professional who might be more creative in preparing new exhibits is impossible. The Caribbean does not have many such professionals, museums do not have the funds to attract them, and our students do not pursue museum studies and are not even aware that this is an option. This is a reflection of what our society perceives as important. Ironically, the same museums that would benefit from our young people choosing such a course of studies do not present exhibits that would inspire them to do so. Operating funds are from a small government subsidy as well as from entrance fees. The St. Christopher Heritage Society, which manages the museum, holds an annual fundraising event that assists with the financial burden of creating new exhibits. This income however, is not enough to deal

with the previously mentioned challenges. It barely covers staff salaries, which are very low, and some operational costs.

In addition, there are limitations in research materials, and much of the documentation is either elsewhere, wanting, or has never been compiled. The present museum staff does not consult communities as to what is important to them and thus they regurgitate the same old story with perhaps a facelift. Nationals and the new arrivals to the Federation do not visit the museums even though the location of the museum is ideal for walk-ins. It is housed in the Old Treasury Building, itself a heritage site, right in the heart of Basseterre. The Old Treasury Building is known as the “Gateway to Basseterre,” the capital city on St. Kitts. In fact, tourists are the main museums attendees.

So what is wrong? It is time we as museum experts and consultants take a long, hard look inwards, acknowledge the truth, consult our communities, advise the relevant parties, and begin to be inclusive of input by these other groups in the re-interpretation of our history. And we must do something about it now. We need to encourage our people to take an interest in, or at least to visit, our museums. Perhaps the knowledge that the story in the museum includes them may encourage them to visit the museum. But I know this is no easy task.

The Fort George Museum on Brimstone Hill (www.brimstonehill.org)

The Fort George museum on Brimstone Hill focuses mainly on the military history of the island and particularly the military history of Brimstone Hill itself, but it originally had displays based on the English, French and American contributions to the island. Of course those who originally designed the exhibits were mainly of those ethnic backgrounds themselves. As a first attempt at a museum in St. Kitts this was commendable, but management soon realized that changes had to be made if they were to attract the local people and that an African component was absolutely necessary to do so.

A second developmental phase of that museum included mounted displays in four galleries housed in the uppermost barracks of the fortress: the first described the geographical makeup of the hill; one gave a brief history of the island focusing on the Amerindians, the English, French and Africans (mirroring the information in the National Museum); one gallery was dedicated to the tools of the indigenous people; and another pictorial display highlighted special occasions of ceremonies held at Brimstone Hill, which included a small display of children’s artistic interpretations of the hill. For several years this created new interest for locals and visitors, but soon management again realized that further development was needed to be more inclusive of the military history of the hill.

At present there is an additional gallery to be officially opened on 23 April 2008, which depicts everyday life of the soldiers at Brimstone Hill, including the 4th West India Regiment that served there, the majority of whom were ex-slaves and other blacks, and another showing details of a room used for powder storage. I am certain in a few years this too will be evaluated as needing further development and changes.

The museum at Brimstone Hill has been able to develop much more successfully than the other museums in the Federation partly because funding was not as big a problem for it as for the other museums. A few benevolent grants by external agencies like the Caribbean Conservation Association (CCA) and local businesses as well as in-kind contributions from the government and some wise investment by management gave it a strong financial base. As a matter of fact, the Society that manages the hill often donates time, personnel and funds to other museums, heritage organizations and cultural activities.

In addition it has been able to consult and pay experts from the UK to research the military history of the island and the hill.

Even without its galleries, Brimstone Hill is interesting and enjoys a high attendance record by locals and tourists. The fortress itself is an incredible architectural feat and can be considered a museum in its own right. The location is ideal and offers amazing views of six neighbouring islands. It is a World Heritage Site. However, the primary reason for its progress has been good management. Brimstone Hill is recognized internationally as a model in management and it is often consulted in this regard.

International House Museum

Two years ago another museum was opened on St. Kitts, which in the true sense is not a museum but rather a display of the eclectic collection of one man in the rooms of the house in which he lived for most of the last part of his life. After his death, his caretaker, a local cultural artist, opened the house to the public. It features a wide assortment of artifacts that speak to the lifestyle of the peoples of St. Kitts and Nevis and the Caribbean on the whole. It is more of a collection of folk items. Operating funds are generally obtained by entrance fees and by donations.

The exhibits are displayed in an extremely “loose” manner with little regard for security, preservation or conservation, but they attract a large number of locals and visitors who are interested in seeing how life used to be in St. Kitts and Nevis. The reason for the high visitor numbers might be the fact that this type of layout is more “people friendly” and is not perceived as musty, and the “curator” is a man of the people. Visitors feel a connection with the items housed there. There are things they understand and remember in the same way that looking at old photographs creates a connection with the past.

Museums in Nevis

Nelson Museum and the Alexander Hamilton Museum

In Nevis there are three museums as well. There is the Nelson museum, which is dedicated to Horatio Nelson with a few added small displays of local folklore and music, all in one room. The main Nelson collection displayed was once privately owned by Robert Abrahams and was donated by him to the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society, which manages and operates the museum.

The Alexander Hamilton Museum is also a one-room exhibit and focuses on the story of Hamilton. The mainly textual display was recently donated to the NHCS by the US State Department on the request of Ambassador Mary Ourisman, Ambassador to the Eastern Caribbean and Barbados.

This museum was formerly billed the Museum of Nevis History and gave a chronological history of the two islands, with the emphasis on Nevis but also included information on Hamilton. There are present plans to expand and further develop this museum with the purchase of another property nearby to reopen an exhibit dedicated to Nevisian history.

Both of these museums have been able to exhibit because of private collections and as such are exclusive, and for this reason they are limited in what they exhibit.

The Sports Museum in Nevis

This is an even smaller museum housed in one room that focuses on the contribution of local sports legends, mainly Nevisians, to the history and development of sports in the

island. The museum was funded by the government of Nevis through one of its departments.

All of these museums are exclusive in terms of content. Most of the exhibits have been realized by the same people over and over again with little regard for input by people with new creative ideas, mainly because of the limits previously mentioned.

None of the six museums have very strong public relation programmes. Surveys are rarely distributed to assess what it is potential visitors will come and see. The present staff in each is poorly paid and eventually leaves for greener pastures, so that the little training employees receive is lost and the organization has to start training new staff over again. Management of most of these museums, although passionate and committed to their poorly paid jobs, has been there for many years and seems to resist changes. These museums are visited mainly by tourists. So, they remain quiet musty places.

Unfortunately, I believe that there are many such museums in the Caribbean.

Museums in the Caribbean Region

There are now hundreds of museums and heritage institutions throughout the Caribbean, each with its particular focus and area of expertise. Viewed as a group they are incredibly diverse as to content. Examples of some of the types of museums include: military museums, naval museums, maritime museums, natural history museums, social history museums, children's museums (Puerto Rico), folk museums, art museums, archaeological museums, botanical gardens, agricultural museums, numismatic museums, sports museums, music museums, rum museums, banana museums, ecological museums and art galleries.

Of course there are specialized museums like the Bob Marley Museum in Jamaica, the Jewish Historical Museum in the Netherlands Antilles, and the Indigenous Archaeology Museum in Puerto Rico, but for the most part the majority are historical.

One way in which museums in the Caribbean are attempting to deal with diversity as a group is via the Museums Association of the Caribbean (MAC).

What is MAC? (www.caribbeanmuseums.com)

MAC is an organization of museums and heritage institutions, which convened their first meeting in November of 1989 in Dominica. At that first meeting there were forty attendees representing twenty-four institutions, including five French, thirty English, two Dutch, three Non-Caribbean USA and no Spanish.

MAC's History

In the nineteen years following the first meeting there have been annual general meetings, each held on a different Caribbean island or country so that different nationalities host the AGM and share the burden of expense.

For many years there was no representative from the Spanish speaking regions, but in 2002 when the AGM was held in Cuba this was changed. We are proud to include at present representatives on the Board from the UK, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe, USVI, Aruba, St. Lucia, Antigua, Guyana, and St. Kitts and Nevis. This means there is a representative from all the language bases in the Caribbean region.

Different languages have always been a challenge with which this association has had to deal. Communication is sometimes difficult, necessitating translators, and this has been an added financial burden on the island hosting the AGM or the Board meeting preceding the AGM.

Logistics too have been a problem over the years. Because we are so far apart, there are inherent problems in getting together for Board meetings or AGMs. However, the availability of digital connections has made communications much easier in recent years.

In addition, funding, the mainstay of any organization, has always been a problem. This stems from problems of language and logistics rather than from creativity and willpower.

Past Achievements

There have been continuous annual general meetings. The Secretariat was housed in Barbados until 2003. The Secretariat of recent times has been non-existent per se and has moved along with the newly elected President as Presidents changed. The by-laws have been recently revised.

The directory of museums published in 1994 included twenty-eight countries with one hundred and thirty-five separate entrees. This directory is presently being updated and will hopefully be inclusive of all heritage organizations and museums in the Caribbean region. One major initiative in the past in which MAC played an integral role has been the UNESCO Slave Route Project. Twenty-one islands/regions participated in this project through two phases of research work. MAC was very pleased with the quality and the amount of work carried out by the Caribbean partners and the successful outputs from this work.

The project aroused growing interest in the topic, whether negatively or positively, in particular in those places that were affected by the slave trade and slavery. It gave the issue of slave trade and slavery a universal dimension. The development of research, the publication of works, and the production of audio-visual and teaching materials were the highly visible outcomes of the project. It must also be stated that involvement in the project encouraged new research and has led to much new information being uncovered and has inspired new research projects, uncovering hidden histories and legacies of the slave trade.

One main success of the project was its contribution to the recognition of the slave trade and slavery as “a crime against humanity” at the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban South Africa in 2001. Out of that came the travelling exhibition “Lest We Forget; The Triumph over Slavery” and the award of the UNESCO Toussaint L’Ouverture prize to Aime Cesaire and Abdias do Nascimento.

Although the project looked backwards for historical facts, it looks forwards to improve understanding of the present and to add to the debate of multi-ethnic societies and multi-cultural societies.

Stalwartly On

MAC is providing a voice for Caribbean museums and is trying to develop a culture of inter-museum support and assistance. Although this has always been our mandate, recently this has been easier and has been achieved through the development of a website, which will include a virtual exhibition and an updated museum directory, but mainly through the annual general meeting and conference, which will hopefully lead to training sessions and publications. At the same time MAC is trying to raise the profile of Caribbean museums in regional and national organizations such as CARICOM and ICOM.

At present MAC has a five-year plan, which unfortunately has faltered due to lack of funds and lack of a Secretariat. The present Board is working on that challenge at the moment.

Success of MAC has been dependant on the Board members and their enthusiasm and personal time, which has meant that MAC's successes have been cyclical. The present Board, following on from the last Board, is trying to build the foundations so that MAC can grow stronger and glide from one success to another, which unfortunately does mean that a lot of the present work is behind the scenes and low profile but is essential for the long term success of the organization.

Conclusion

Credit must be given to the attempts made to mount exhibitions and open museums, especially in the smaller islands like St. Kitts and Nevis. However, we have arrived at a point in time when we must all become more creative in including every ethnic group or as many as possible in our historical stories, with the focus not on the links of the past but on how these links have impacted our societies today and how they have changed us and are continuing to change us. We are very busy recognizing our blackness or our Africanness – which ironically we are not, since we all are “made up” from many ethnicities – and forgetting others who have contributed to and are still contributing to our societies.

Perhaps our museums need to radically express this diversity. By doing so we may challenge long-held museum beliefs, but this may be what we need to do.

Besides identifying our limitations we should also attempt to deal with these limitations. There is absolutely no point in reiterating what our challenges are if we do nothing about them. We have that annoying habit in the Caribbean.

All museum personnel must step up to the plate and take a long, hard, realistic look at who we are, where we want to go, and how we will get there. Then and only then will we be able to deal with the challenge of diversity and other challenges that occur. So I ask you all here today, where do we go from here? And how do we get there? If we do not learn from each other here, then we are wasting our time.

Notes

¹ Rex Nettleford, Opening Address, CAM General Programme and Meeting, Georgetown, Guyana, 2008: “Respect and Understanding: Engaging Creative Diversity, The Caribbean Experience” (<http://www.maltwood.uvic.ca/cam/>).

² Hazel Brookes, Opening Address at the National Museum, St. Kitts, 2002: “Our Museum, Our Vision, Our Future.”