

Creating Peace Through the Promotion of Intercultural Understanding and Tolerance: The Role of Museums

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By way of an introduction

Zambia was a colony of Britain up until 1964 when our struggle for independence yielded political freedom. Multiparty political governance was practised from then until the early seventies when one party rule was introduced with the justification that pluralistic politics was tearing the nation apart along ethnic lines.

In 1989, agitation for plural politics gained momentum in Zambia, culminating in the 1991 multiparty parliamentary and presidential elections that ushered in a new government.

Zambia has two government funded statutory bodies that are responsible for the preservation of the nation's heritage: the National Museums Board, responsible for movable heritage, and the National Heritage Conservation Commission for immovable heritage.

There are four national museums in Zambia with the unenviable task of preserving the movable heritage of the peoples of Zambia, currently comprising 73 ethnic groups. Given the fact that these museums are spread apart and that government allocation of resources to heritage preservation continues to dwindle, there is no way this task can, in present circumstances, be done satisfactorily.

The Livingstone museum, established by the colonial government in the early 1930s to preserve what they called tribal crafts, is the oldest museum in Zambia. It has, over the years grown into a multidisciplinary museum and is currently the biggest in terms of physical infrastructure and collection size.

Culture and peace

I wish, in this contribution, to argue that whereas governments can and do make peace treaties, lasting peace can only be created by people themselves, that the creation of intercultural understanding and tolerance is one of the key factors in the peace creation process, and that museums can play a major role in this process.

Culture is generally defined as behaviour patterns, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought, especially as expressed in a particular community at a particular time.

A people have the right and duty to defend and preserve its cultural heritage, since societies recognise themselves through the values in which they find a source of creative inspiration. What, indeed, will the future generations be without their own identity? What will they be like, without their own cultural customs, traditions and material heritage? Culture does, indeed, make a people different and unique.

Through the process of socialisation, societies learn what to them is wrong and right and what to them is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; as a result what constitutes right and wrong and what constitutes acceptable behaviour differs from culture to culture. People, therefore, tend to judge others using their own cultural values as a yardstick. Their own culture and society is placed in a central position of priority and importance leading to a subjective evaluation of how people of another culture behave and conduct their business. Ethnocentrism, as this phenomenon is referred to, is generally greater among societies that are fairly limited in their contacts with other societies.

Conflicts, at micro and macro levels, arising from ethnocentrism are well documented throughout human history on all continents. Recent and current examples of ethnic conflicts are many.

The world, however, is comprised of many peoples with diverse cultures. All share one world and have to find ways to live on it peacefully. As the world opens up, however, we need to opt for an open society that makes room for diversity, in which different cultures mix freely in mutual respect. Tolerance and respect for each other's culturally influenced behaviour should be encouraged and developed. This would form a strong base for lasting peace.

Tolerance and respect for each other's cultures, though a powerful force for peace, can only survive if societies meet their basic needs of life. In the presence of economic want and the consequent fight for daily survival, tolerance and respect for other people's culture can be abandoned as the struggle for basic needs (food, medical care, education, etc.) easily takes ethnic lines, at times, with the manipulative encouragement of insecure politicians. Intolerance and conflict is often the result.

Democracy and good governance

Democracy is generally understood to be a system of government in which people actively participate in governance through elected representatives. In a democracy such representatives are required to answer to their electorate on the disposal of their powers and duties, act on criticisms or requirements made of them, and accept responsibility for failure, incompetence and shortfalls.

Good governance is generally understood to be the allocation and management of resources to respond to collective problems. It is a process that should be characterised by participation, transparency, accountability, rule of law, effectiveness and equity. Democracy and

good governance are indeed essential for equitable development and for the creation and maintenance of peace in a nation.

From the perspective of Africa and the Third World, these issues became popular language in West–Third World relations only after the end of the Cold War. Now debt relief and development aid is always tied to the observance of democracy and good governance. Before the end of the Cold War, however, examples are many of massive aid poured into dictatorial regimes, without demand for accountability on democracy and good governance issues from such regimes. A consistent position by the West on this issue of democracy and governance must be made if progress in the institutionalisation of these processes is to be made.

Museums and the creation of cultural tolerance

As we have seen internal conflicts, instead of decreasing with the end of the Cold War, have on the contrary increased. The majority of these conflicts are ethnic in nature.

Museums can and should play a greater role in the creation of cultural understanding and tolerance among peoples and in healing the wounds of conflict. Being cultural institutions, they are better placed to do this.

Museums have the potential to do this through, among many other options:

- a) Carrying out representative research and production of publications on the history and culture of different ethnic groups within a country.
- b) Ensuring reasonable representation of the country's different peoples in terms of museum collections
- c) Educating different ethnic groups within a country about each other's ways of life through in-house exhibitions
- d) Educating different ethnic groups within a country about each other's ways of life through outreach educational programmes and displays
- e) The special targeting of b) in-house displays and c) outreach programmes and displays to children
- f) The inclusion of intercultural education in the school curriculum
- g) The deliberate production of exhibitions and educational programmes to reconcile people that are in conflict or have emerged from it.

In – house museum limitations

Museum professionals are people who may have different ideas and biases. In Africa a museum's professional staff would more likely than not come from different ethnic groups. A study of the choice of research and exhibition topics by individual professionals in an African museum would, I am sure, show the professionals' biases. A bias towards the professional's ethnic group would most likely be one of them.

Research findings as we know can be subjective; the example of archaeological research in Nazi Germany comes to mind. A study of research conclusions among museum professionals may also suggest biases among museum professionals, possibly towards their own ethnic groups. Government wholly funds many museums in Africa. The independent and professional execution of museum work can be inhibited by this dependence.

For museums to contribute effectively to the creation of peace through the promotion of intercultural understanding and tolerance as suggested in a) to g), the issues of professional bias raised above need to be addressed.

Creating cultural understanding: an example

International museum training and co-operation programmes can also contribute to the creation of peace. The example of ICCROM's PREMA Programme comes to mind here.

ICCROM's PREMA 1990-2000 Programme which was launched in 1996 with the aim of ensuring the conservation of sub-Saharan African museum collections and establishing a network of African museum professionals who will be responsible for conservation and future training, has, through the implementation of its programme, apart from its contribution to capacity and institutional building in museums of sub-Saharan Africa, contributed greatly to the building of cultural tolerance and respect among Africans with different cultures through increased contacts and cultural programmes attached to each PREMA activity.

After 8 international university courses, 8 national/sub-regional courses, 8 directors' seminars, 10 teacher training and special workshops and six review meetings, each of which was held in a different location in Sub-Saharan Africa, a network of over 400 museum people from 46 French and English speaking Sub-Saharan Africa has emerged.

Due to a deliberate policy by ICCROM – PREMA to include intercultural communication and cultural understanding as part of each PREMA activity's objective, the over 400 participants that now constitute the PREMA network have not only gained professional knowledge but also an understanding of the way of life of other peoples in Africa. This is a commendable step towards the creation of peace through cultural understanding and tolerance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to state as I stated earlier that whereas governments can and do make peace treaties, lasting peace can only be created by people themselves. The creation of intercultural understanding and tolerance is key to this process and museums as well as international programmes can, in a major way, contribute to it.