

Museums and Good Governance: The Case of the Mobile Museum Service in Botswana

Nakiso Kubanji

National Museum, Monuments and Art Gallery, Botswana

Societies have always found ways of keeping in custody memories, objects and valuables that explain their existence, that is, their history, social structure, economic status, cultural beliefs, along with traditional institutions and their functions, and developments thereof. From time immemorial culture has brought a sense of belonging to every individual within a community. Hence the need to preserve and conserve culture in formalised institutions such as museums, in addition to involving communities in recognising their traditional institutions. Traditional institutions have played an important role in unifying the community. It is through such institutions that some economic, political, social and cultural development processes have been discussed. With the advent of independence, in many African countries these institutions have been given little recognition. However, some countries have and still promote such institutions for purposes of democracy, peace and good governance. Museums have also played a positive role in promoting and giving recognition to these traditional institutions. It is therefore very relevant for museums to discuss ways through which they (as more formal recent organizations) can also get involved with the promotion of democracy, sustainable peace and good governance. In so doing issues pertaining to resources and power will be discussed. Some museums lie in war torn regions such as in Southern Africa, the Great Lakes, West Africa and some other parts of the world. What then can museums in peaceful countries do to promote democracy, sustainable peace and good governance?

To address the theme of the conference, *Museums, Democracy, Peace and Governance in the 21st Century*, maybe one should make an attempt to define the term democracy, a term which supposedly entails peace, which of course is not always the case. Governance implies some form of rule in both democratic and undemocratic settings. Good governance and peace are components of democracy. However, it has been evident in some of the so-called democratic states, especially in Africa, that democracy does not necessarily embrace peace and good governance. A good example is the escalation of wars in some parts of Southern Africa, the Great Lakes and West Africa, the result of which could also be attributed to authoritarian rule and lack of consultation with and involvement of all stakeholders.

In their attempt to define democracy different scholars have attached the concepts of development processes, such as economic development, and development of political and social structures. Of late democracy and culture have been geared towards the promotion of sustainable peace and good governance. Can that be said today? Can democracy be established in Africa as a unifying factor to turn the diverse populations into a nation for purposes of economic, political, social and cultural development? Various factors should be considered. For example, political structures after independence in many African states have failed to maintain public order. Other factors are dictatorship and militaristic tendencies, which have proven to be ineffective in the

promotion of democracy for cultural, political and economic development. Non-transparent and unaccountable governments have led to wars, into which substantial resources have been ploughed. According to research by Stockholm International Research Institute it is estimated that there are four to five million refugees in Africa. The situation could be worse given war situations in the Great Lakes, carnage in Algeria, military coups in Sierra Leone, civil wars in Sudan, Uganda, Senegal and secessionist moves in the Comoros and Madagascar.¹

Democracy as defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990) means “a system of government by the whole population, usually through elected representatives...a classless and tolerant form of society.”² In Greek the word democracy is derived from *demos* meaning a mob or the many and *kracia* meaning rule.³ Plato defines it as the rule of many irrespective of status or opinion. Aristotle defines democracy as “a lesser evil than the rule by the rich (plutocracy).”⁴ To him, democracy is a necessary element in a just and stable government.⁵ According to Bernard Crick, a democratic purpose is one that “sees everyone as having a right to belong and make his will felt irrespective of class or education.”⁶ An American definition of democracy is that “it must respect the liberty of one’s choices to do what he will so long as the action does not clearly and directly hurt the equal opportunities for choice of his fellows.”⁷ To try and define democracy, one would say that it is maximum communication and openness for good government, and maximum participation at all levels by all sectors (churches, unions, tribal allegiances, etc.). In all the various definitions, democracy involves governance or rule, majority voice, respect for both majority and minority. People are given a chance to make a choice for peace and good governance. In Botswana effectiveness and accountability are supposed to represent qualitative indicators of democratic governance. “Free and fair elections, availability of reports on institutional performances, referenda on major issues of national concern, public inquiry, open criticism, strong political opposition are also such indicators.”⁸

Democracy in Botswana as supported by Tswana political traditions

Botswana is a multi-party state as well as a multi-ethnic country. There are more than fifteen ethnic groupings in Botswana. Each ethnic group is defined according to its culture, history, and how it relates to the environment.

The government of Botswana constitutes the president and members of parliament, that is, the cabinet and councils represented by councillors. There is the House of Chiefs which represents the community at grassroots level. The *dikgosi* (chiefs) work with *dikgosana* (headman) for co-ordination at village level. *Dikgosana* in turn work closely with Village Development Committees for development processes. All the office bearers in government must have been democratically elected by the community. The constitution of Botswana is approved at parliament after consultation with the community through chiefs. Therefore chiefs play a major role in the democratic development of the country, that is, economically, socially, politically and culturally.

Communities are led by *dikgosi* who belong to the House of Chiefs, which discusses bills before being debated in parliament and passed as law. The House of Chiefs is a traditional

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institution recognised by the constitution. The constitution has empowered it in decision making; as a result *dkgosi* assist in co-ordinating programmes at community level, thus creating an environment conducive for culture to be preserved at a larger and broader scope, that is, not only by museums. The traditional institutions of chieftancy and council of elders are not a new concept in African states. In this modern time, however, they have to compete with modern institutions of local government, central bureaucracy, political parties and parliament.⁹ These modern institutions have threatened the existence of chiefs. But when it came to election times, parties won because political identities followed ethnic lines. Dr. P. Molutsi, Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Botswana, argues that “it has become clear that in most instances, the act of subordinating and even abolishing traditional local institutions, as was the case in Tanzania, threw out the baby with the bath water. The recent recognition of the role of the traditional institutions in countries like Mozambique and South Africa suggest that there may be some good aspects of traditional institutions which could be articulated into modern ones, to create stronger and more deeply rooted institutions of governance. In Botswana, the *kgotla* has become highly indispensable to democratic governance....”¹⁰

The contribution of museums to democracy, peace and good governance

The question is: how much have museums in this modern society contributed to the promotion of democracy, sustainable peace and good governance? To address this question one has to consider the role and functions of museums both in urban and rural settings. Museums are advocates for societies, but what models should they have for the communities? Dr. Molutsi writes, “Museums have never been considered dynamic development tools in Africa, yet recently this has changed especially looking at museum roles in cultural pluralism, national development, democracy and public education. They should have relevant, positive impacts on national life...be involved in their communities’ lives, and communicate effectively with their different publics.”¹¹ Museums, just like national flags, must be considered obligatory in their functions and must be perceived as dynamic tools in development. They can no longer afford to be isolated foreign institutions but rather have a more global approach to culture, peace and democracy. Pertinent and contemporary issues must be addressed by museums. New ways of communication must be sought; there should be a reorientation of attitudes and diversified methods should be put into practice.

In Africa, as a result of political disturbances, all the means necessary in the interest of culture have not been mobilised. People have not been given enough chance to feel the need to create museums themselves. Museums act as unifying factors, therefore participation of museums in development is vital for improved lives now and in the future. Questions such as what resources are available and how do we mobilise them must be pondered by museums today. Museums – as permanent links between different people, the way they live, their histories, as well as political evolution – must be concerned with the status of those people in terms of the economy, political structures, as well as social and cultural structures. Democracy can be the answer, but it is not a ready-made solution because everyone in a democratic setting can air their views and opinions, can accept or reject winds of change; hence museums should be involved in

offering solutions rather than evading responsibilities. Our museums cannot function as “things” for foreigners, but rather must reach a broader scope in developmental processes.

The question of resources and power must also be considered. The museums should be energised enough to participate in peace, democracy and good governance. However, very few museums have the resources and power. This is evident in that most African museums continue to rely on foreign donors for survival. As a result there is a lack of trained personnel. Outreach programmes are far from being a reality with such limited resources. This, therefore, means that there is need for decentralisation within museums to be run by local inhabitants. “The museum must reflect on identities, preserve cultural heritage, but first it must present a means of opening...a means of exchange of experiences between civilisations, a link with contemporary and future society.”¹²

The mobile museum in Botswana

When the National Museum was established it served Gaborone only. But as years went by, the need to extend museum education within a wider radius could not be avoided. This led to the establishment of a mobile museum service to the remote parts of Botswana in 1980. Firstly, this service covered an eighty-kilometre radius from Gaborone, but later the service extended its horizon to reach the furthest town in Botswana from Gaborone to Shakawe. This was aimed at embracing as large a population as possible. Regional museums were established in other parts of the country but still these failed to address the needs of the remote villages that could not benefit due to vast distances that separate them from major rural population centres. The mobile museum therefore was established to bring the whole of Botswana within the umbrella of the museum.

During museum visits to schools, lectures, films, and displays are presented. An array of artefacts is displayed. Parents visit the mini-museum. This has prompted the schools and the community to set up their own mini-museums to display their culture during the mobile museum visits. When the idea of establishing a museum in Gaborone in 1966 was germinated, very few Batswana understood the concept of a museum, let alone its value to the then young and poor Batswana. However, right from inception the founding members from the National Monuments and Art Gallery desired an active museum aimed at studying the existence of Batswana and their environment. So whatever programmes the museum would embark on would be based on this notion. Because of the vastness of the country, the museum in Gaborone could not fully serve the expectations of Batswana, hence the need to embark on the vigorous extension programme that would ensure that Batswana benefited from the collections stored in the urban centre. The Mobile Museum, The Zebras Voice and a weekly radio programme were started. These extensions contributed to the slogan *Museum wa rona o a tshela* – Our museum is a “Living Museum.” With the idea of a living museum, visitors to the museum experience a totally new world through the displays, and they imagine they are in the Kgalagadi or the Okavango Delta and experience feelings which will leave them amazed at human creative ability. The museum wants visitors to feel not only that their lives have been enriched with new knowledge about our people and our land, but that they will want to return again to see what is new.

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From 1980, the outreach programme was foreign-aided until 1966 when the government of Botswana had to cater for its survival and operation. This outreach programme to schools and their communities provides participatory and interactive structures in which public culture is revealed and articulated. This has been a successful programme in reaching all the people of Botswana, especially in the rural areas. It has helped in bringing communities together, especially during its visits to schools. To further strengthen the mobile museum service, The Zebras Voice, which is a quarterly magazine, is produced. This covers cultural events taking place in Botswana. It also explains to the nation the functions and activities of the institution. Besides the Zebras Voice, there is a weekly radio programme – *Museum Wa Rona O A Tshela* – Our Museum is a Living Museum. This programme discusses various aspects of museum work and aspects of culture such as rituals and ceremonies among the various ethnic groups. In other words, the mobile museum service has seen to the birth of a number of educational programmes meant to reach all Botswana irrespective of where they are or where they live.

As mentioned earlier, the communities are led by *dikgosi*, and whatever decisions and activities take place in a community, chiefs are the core for success. To understand how this traditional institution operates, one has to consider the role of the *Kgotla*, (the central meeting place) in decision-making. This is mainly precipitated by decentralised governance, organised ward formations, and institutionalisation of various adviser roles in the decision-making processes associated with the chieftancy. The *Kgotla* allows for openness in decision-making, for consultations, and gives people a chance to participate in their own governance.

Policymaking starts from the *Kgotla*, where chiefs are heads of the whole administration, of course with consultation. Botswana has always recognised liberal democratic functions and this has helped to recognise the continued survival of the traditional *tswana* political system: chieftancy. Before any visit of the Mobile Museum to the schools and community, proper consultations and announcement of the arrival of the Mobile Museum are made at a *Kgotla* meeting where both parents and teachers are involved. Preparations then continue and in most instances the day is then turned into a cultural festival.

Objects communicate far beyond the walls of the museum in which they are housed. They also influence the appreciation of a society and enhance the level of respect and understanding for the personal and collective natural and cultural heritage of a people or nation. This is even represented in the outreach programme. The programme addresses cultures of the different ethnic groups as they are in the country through objects on display. The school and the community on that particular day will bring in objects from their local environment that represent their culture, history, and in some instances, economy. The outreach programme has helped develop new audiences, provide service information and cater for community perceptions. The wide representation of ethnic groups by objects displayed helps dispel many doubts and contributes to the survival of democracy and sustained peace. People are allowed to touch and feel objects and this brings a closer sense of belonging to a greater majority. Topics addressed about any particular ethnic group trace the lineage of chiefs, their role and function to the survival of the community.

Section 78 and 79 of the constitution of Botswana recognises eight main tribes in the country. This obviously supposes that there are minor tribes in the country. People belonging to the “minority” tribes have always questioned the justification of “majority” and “minority.” But because of consultation that part of the constitution ceases to exist. The National Museum Monuments and Art Gallery has played an impartial role and successfully dispelled any form of resentment of group by group. Rather, the Museum’s impartiality has precipitated an atmosphere of peace and good governance since it promotes the culture and the history of the people of Botswana.

In conclusion, how museums can contribute to promoting peace, democracy and good governance varies from region to region. African political structures, though supposedly democratic, have in some instances failed to sustain peace. Wars have continued to destroy the people’s heritage. Museums have not done much to address contemporary issues of democratic and economic development. Museums need to decentralise and involve the local communities. Dissemination of information and education play a vital role in recognising museums contributions towards peace, democracy and good governance. “Museums represent certainty in uncertain times.”¹³

¹ Dr. K. Ssemogerere, Forum on Democracy and Human Rights in Africa: What prospects? p. 14.

² Concise Oxford Dictionary, p. 308

³ Holm J. and P. Molutsi, eds., Democracy in Botswana - Proceedings of a Symposium organised by Botswana Society, 1989, p. 17.

⁴ Ibid, p. 17

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dr. P. Molutsi, Forum Digest - The Effectiveness and Accountability of Governance Institutions in Africa [n.d.], p. 18.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 19.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 19.

¹² What Museums for Africa: Heritage in the Future - Proceedings of ICOM Conference in Benin, Ghana and Togo, 1991.

¹³ Edson G. and Dean D., eds., The Handbook for Museums, 1994, p. 10.