

DEMOCRATIZATION OF MUSEUMS IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF THREE MUSEUMS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Biography

Luvuyo Mthimkhulu Dondolo is currently a PhD candidate in Museums and Heritage Studies and Social Transformation at the Fort Hare University, East London campus. His dissertation examines the nature and scope of intangible heritage, production of the post-apartheid memorial landscapes and construction of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in the Eastern Cape (South Africa). He has a Masters in Public and Visual History from the University of the Western Cape. Dondolo is the Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship holder and as such he spent one academic year at the Centre for the Study of Public Scholarship, Emory University (USA). He did his summer internship at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, particularly the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama, USA. Dondolo worked at District Six Museum, Human Sciences Research Council, South African Heritage Resources Agency and in many community-based heritage and tourism initiatives in Cape Town and Amathole region (Eastern Cape).

His field of specialization is public history with specific focus on heritage resources management, museum management, exhibition development and cultural tourism. Dondolo has also published a number of academic articles and co-authored a book entitled “Legal and Financial Instrument for Safeguarding Intangible Heritage.” He developed and presented numerous academic papers at various international and national conferences.

From 2003 to 2004, he was a Board Member for Post Graduate Diploma on Museums and Heritage Studies offered jointly by University of the Western Cape, University of Cape Town and Robben Island Museum. Dondolo is currently a Nelson Mandela National Museum Council Member and chairperson of Nelson Mandela National Museum Heritage Resources Management Committee.

Abstract

In a country like South Africa where places of cultural interest and institutions have been used by the previous regimes for their political agenda, and consequently, the oppressed and marginalized people disassociated themselves with such institutions because of various reasons, it is important in a fully democratic society to redefine, reconfigure and reconstruct their practices, approaches and methodologies. In this vein, they ought to also endorse the values and principles underpinning democracy, including cultural democracy, social cohesion, nation building, South African-ness, nationhood, unity in diversity, and forging national identity, history and heritage; sense of pride and patriotism; and national consciousness.

Thus, this paper explores the complexity of knowledge production in museums, politics and poetics of display, and presentation and identity that manifest in many museum exhibitions and education programmes. In examining this discourse and

dichotomy, community involvement becomes an important ingredient. Hence, pedagogy plays an important role, along with need to democratize museums and thereby reflect the histories and heritages of all communities in proper contexts. Museums and heritage resources are systems of knowledge for present and future generations; therefore, issues of multiculturalism and diversity become imperative for the “thinkable future” and for the comprehensive production of knowledge in museums. Democratization of museums in the post-apartheid era is an inevitable necessity.

Travelling exhibitions (exchange), education programmes and public cultural scholarship modes are vehicles and important tools that can be utilized to assist in redefining the museum and in broadening its audience. This approach is qualified and contextualized through the Early Modern Africa Intellectual Heritage Exhibition and cultural institutions that have housed it at different periods. The aforementioned exhibition is an integral part of the Early Modern Africa Intellectual Heritage Trail Project initiated by Amathole District Municipality and implemented in association with the National Heritage Council.

Another important ingredient that adds impetus in the democratization of museums, which is underpinned by cultural relativism and cultural diversity, is the manner and approach employed in exhibiting heritage objects. The problematic approach decontextualizes and dehumanizes the exhibited heritage objects with no cultural value, meaning and significance at all. There are three approaches that can be use in exhibiting heritage objects and a number of the museums use the first two approaches, which are not appropriate in this context.