

Living Museums in the Service of Contemporary Society

Speech at the Commonwealth Association of Museums Conference

– Dr. Frank Anthony

The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport bid you warm welcome to our beautiful country. We are pleased that the Commonwealth Association of Museums has selected Guyana to host this very important Museums and Diversity conference. I hope that over the next few days that you would have very **fruitful and enlighten discussions** that would **chart new directions** for museums in the Commonwealth.

Our concept of museums is strongly rooted in our national cultural policy, which includes among others the commitment:

- To safeguard freedom of expression and create genuine opportunities for everyone to make use of that freedom;
- To take action to enable everyone to participate in cultural life, **to experience culture** and to engage in creative activities of their own;
- To promote cultural diversity, artistic renewal and quality, thereby counteracting the negative effects of commercialism;
- To enable culture to act as a dynamic, challenging and independent force in society;
- To preserve and make use of cultural heritage;
- To promote cultural education;
- To promote international cultural exchange and meetings between different cultures.

It is within this context that we must view the role and function of the Guyana National Museum. Conceived in the 1844ⁱ, it **has evolved** from the historic shortcomings of our colonial past to the embodiment of our cultural policy vision.

Some have argued that museums within commonwealth societies, especially during the colonial period have pander to the colonial ethos. This is evidence by the many ethnographic museums that grew from the traditions of unequal power relationship, from a history of colonial depredation, and from an evolutionary perspective of European supremacy relative to all other cultures. This fundamental inequality made the collecting and extraction of enormous cultural riches from one end of the earth to the other possible, still so in some regions of the world. Confronting and dismantling this rather painful history is for us a precondition of institutional credibility.

In the case of Guyana, much of the diversity, in terms of values, language, customs and heritage of the Amerindians and the transplanted peoples from Africa, Portugal, China and India to this region were treated with scant regard. And much of the tangible and intangible heritage of that period has been, sadly erased.

Today, in recognition of these errant ways, contemporary societies have developed a more enlighten approach. Instead of assimilating or obliterating minority culture, this diversity is now harness, to showcase our cultural richness.

The Guyana National Museum subscribes to the belief that ‘it is diversity itself that should be saved, not the historical content that each period has produced.’ The diversity of cultures is forever with us, around us and ahead of us.

The Guyana National Museum is interested in areas where cultures meet, merge, overlap, hybridise, and in contemporary global cultures defined through shared interests, lifestyles and political positions, as much as in traditional parameters of geographic areas, nationality or ethnicity, age, and gender.

We believe that the diversity of our cultures must not be used to wall us into ethnic enclaves, but to be the bridges to cross for new knowledge and experiences. Given the built-in contradictions of its beginning with a European ethnographic collection, the Guyana National Museum has sought to ensure the participation of people who today reflect and represent primary ownership to both its themes and its collection.

This is the beauty of plural societies; these are the lessons and learning opportunities that must be grasped by our cultural institutions, especially our commonwealth museums.

Museums must facilitate cross cultural understanding, promote social cohesion and foster a sense of identity and belonging. Museums must be the sinew from which the citizens of a nation can draw inspiration, as they chart new directions in this complex world.

The role of the museums in a plural society is not just a repository of artifacts, but a bridge from the past to the present, the glue that binds us together with our common tangible and intangible heritage.

To solicit this richness, museums must be prepared to work with the surrounding communities, to explore, discover and share in the culture. Failure to do so would undermine the tenets of our cultural democracy.

As leaders in the field of museums in the commonwealth, we must champion this fresh, vibrant, people centered approach. We must not underestimate the Commonwealth's clout; we directly impact on the lives of 30% of the world population and indirectly on the rest of the world.

We must not be timid to advocate the restructuring of our museums, to make them more responsive and compatible to the citizens, whom they serve and inspire.

It is that thrust to be responsive, that we in the commonwealth must help the world make another paradigm shift. Our traditional concept of museums has been to confine it to a man made architectural space with exhibits on display. Attempts have been made to bring museums alive, by integrating the architectural space with the surrounding landscape, and this has sufficed for a while.

But the intricate and delicate ecosystems that exist in nature are difficult and costly to replicate in a dead architectural space. That is why we must now conceptualize nature, as living museums that requires care and protection.

Man-made interference into these systems, such as tropical deforestation contributes 18% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The increase in these gases has accelerated the warming of the planet.

In an articleⁱⁱ in the Harvard Business Review published in 2007, it stated that "according to NASA, 2005 was the warmest year in over a century, and the ten warmest years has occurred since the 1980. The ice in the Arctic, the Antarctic, and Greenland is melting, and virtually all the world glaciers are shrinking. The consequences can be seen in droughts, epidemics, famine, floods, wildfires, windstorms, mudslides and insect infestations. All of this is happening and the planet has only warmed by one degree Fahrenheit. Several climate models have predicted a 3 to 8 degree rise in global average temperatures if atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases reach twice preindustrial levels, something that can happen by 2050 if current trends continue."

Can you imagine the dire consequences for the planet and its peoples? Some of the mitigating measures to slow the trend can be found in the preservation of our rainforests. Yet the effort to preserve these pristine forests, with its rich flora and fauna, and the eco-services that it provides to the world has largely been undervalued, and unappreciated. The current global schemes reward those who deforest and disrupt ecosystems, with reforestation schemes, but pays little or nothing for the standing forests.

Our president, His Excellency Bharat Jagdeo's has been championing the cause for countries with standing forest globally, his initiative of putting our rainforest, "in the long term service of the world's

battle against climate change”ⁱⁱⁱ demonstrates our commitment to protection of our biodiversity, to promotion of conservation and to climate stabilization.

We are therefore please that you have chosen Guyana to initiate your program, World Watch One.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you ponder these weighty matters over the next few days, please take some time to enjoy our cultural richness, and our eco friendly spaces.

If you don’t get enough during this short stay, you are always welcome to join us for the 10th Caribbean Festival of the Arts from the 22nd to 31st August, 2008.

ⁱ The British Guiana Museum, Centenary History and Guide – Vincent Roth OBE. JP Curator. July 1953. Published by the Daily Chronicle Ltd.

ⁱⁱ Competitive Advantage on a warming planet, Jonathan Lash & Fred Wellington, Harvard Business Review, March 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ President Bharat Jagdeo speech at the Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting in 2007, Georgetown, Guyana.