

Trading in Tradition: The Development of Cultural Villages in Namibia

Dr. Jeremy Silvester
Museums Association of Namibia

Museums in Namibia are spaces where visitors encounter objects and texts that highlight selected features of Namibia's history and environment. It has been noted that "the museum effect" adds value to individual objects, yet the museum environment in Namibian museums also clearly presents exhibitions that are predominantly object-oriented and that largely reflect the colonial legacy. However, the fact that many important aspects of the cultural heritage of the majority of communities in Namibia is living culture has led to the argument that it can best be presented and preserved in living museums or cultural villages, with the implication that existing models of "museum" have inadequately represented the intangible.

The paper will provide a brief overview of the development of museums and their collections in Namibia and will then describe examples of three different models of living museums that are emerging. The paper will consider each model within the context of debates that have been taking place in southern Africa concerning a number of key issues: concerns linked to the commodification of culture; the essentialisation of identity; the promotion of ethnicity within the nation state; and the relationship between host and guest within the tourist encounter. As all these developments are embedded within a policy commitment to expand cultural tourism there are concerns in Namibia as to the impact these new forms of museums will have. Will these museums contribute to preserving cultural diversity and meaning, or rather transform traditional artefacts, performances and practices into cultural commodities that have been drained of significance.

The concept that certain objects and sites have a special, often sacred, significance has a long history in Namibia. The proliferation of rock art at specific sites over thousands of years provides evidence of the meaning of those particular places, while objects such as the *Emanya lomundilo woshilongo* (Power Stone) of the Kingdom of Oukwanyama were safeguarded for generations. However, the concept of the museum as an exhibition complex based on collections that strived for comprehensiveness was part of the cultural baggage that arrived with early European travellers to Namibia. Many of the early European traders who visited the region were collectors, and Namibian artefacts filtered into the growing network of European and South African museums from the early nineteenth century. The most spectacular enduring example of this is the bird collection of the Swedish trader Axel Ericksson. Ericksson built up a collection of around a thousand birds while he was based in Namibia in the 1870s and 1880s. The entire collection was transported back to Sweden and donated to his local museum in the small town of Vänernborg, where it can still be seen as it was originally mounted. However, the creation of formal museums in Namibia dates from 1907 during the period of German colonial rule (1884–1915), with further museum development taking place during the period of South African colonial rule (1915–1990). As the building of museums and their collections reflected the power politics of the time, Namibia inherited a "dissonant heritage" which over-emphasised the culture and interests of the relatively small, settler community, with national monuments and museums dominated by "forts, churches and mission houses" (Kangumu, 1999).

Since independence, the Namibian heritage sector has started moving slowly along a path of heritage diversification to reflect the country's cultural diversity. The recognition of heritage significance during the colonial period showed admiration for enduring examples of the built environment and objects that demonstrated technical ingenuity. However, after 1990, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of intangible cultural heritage and the significance of indigenous knowledge and places in community memory. One symptom of this was the Heritage Hunt project initiated by the Museums Association of Namibia in partnership with the National Heritage Council in 2005. The project involved a media campaign to encourage local communities to identify the places that they felt were important. In 2007 Namibia also signed on to UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The consequence has been an increasing attempt to find practical ways to preserve and respect the domains of ICH as listed in Article 2 (2) of the Convention:

- (a) *oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;*

- (b) *performing arts;*
- (c) *social practices, rituals and festive events;*
- (d) *knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;*
- (e) *traditional craftsmanship.*

One strategy has been the annual hosting of cultural festivals at the local, regional and national level to create regular platforms for performances of traditional dance and music and to encourage mutual cultural respect. However, the current National Development Plan (NDP III) identified “cultural villages” as a vehicle for safeguarding ICH – interpreted particularly as “tradition”. The movement towards the establishment of cultural villages should not be viewed simply as a measure driven by heritage preservation concerns, but rather as a symptom of the attempt to develop cultural tourism in Namibia. While it was recently noted that South Africa had 27 cultural villages, Namibia, currently only has one site that labels itself as a cultural village (Helvi Mpingana Kondombolo Cultural Village). In South Africa visitors can travel to destinations such as Shakaland (a former film set) where they can experience a range of performances that are meant to represent Zulu cultural identity and such destinations are viewed as being commercially successful.

Namibia has recently embarked on a major programme to promote cultural tourism to help achieve the Millenium Development Goal of poverty alleviation. However, it is clear that tensions exist between the heritage and tourism agendas. Will the primary focus rest on preservation or performance? In what ways will these new sites fulfil the museum mandate? Four different models of “cultural village” have already emerged in Namibia.

The first model is rooted in the belief that tourists want “authenticity”, rather than a cultural theme park. In urban areas of Namibia and South Africa, township tours seek to provide tourists with a “real” experience of contemporary urban culture, while in rural areas tour operators make arrangements with local headmen for visits to “real” villages. However, a survey of brochures suggests that these visits predominantly involve the villages of two minority ethnic groups – the Himba and the San communities. Critics fear that the interaction is leading to a very negative commercialisation of culture, with topless Himba women charging for photographs and the poor residents of the village being pressured to sell precious historical cultural artefacts.

The second model of cultural village is based on the concept of “staged authenticity” and adopts Dean MacCannell’s idea that the “front stage” of the cultural village is where performances of traditional culture are presented to tourists. However, the performers do not live in this cultural village, but rather in a separate space that is hidden, a “back stage”. In this way the privacy of the residents is protected and tourists are also made aware that there is a difference between the historical traditions that are displayed in the cultural village and the contemporary lifestyles of the performers. Such cultural villages might be seen to have more similarities with the Skansen open-air museum model of Scandinavia. In Namibia an example of this format would be The Living Museum of the Ju/’Hoansi San, situated on a farm on the road to Tsumkwe.

Visitors can pay to be shown skills such as “hunting, tracking, collecting bush food, starting a fire”. Interestingly, the museum clearly states that visitors can learn a lot about the “original way of living of the San”, but can also pay to go back stage and experience Grashoek, “the village where the Ju/’Hoansi live today”.¹ When visitors arrive, residents change into their traditional attire and can present a range of skills or performances. One of the positive features of the living museum is that it is run by a committee elected by the residents and is promoted as a model of sustainable development. A community of around 200 people living at Grashoek is supported by the income from the cultural village, with different groups taking it in turns to give performances with the elders, stating that the performances help pass on traditional skills to the next generation. Critics have argued that the excessive focus of such cultural villages on minority groups such as the Himba and San panders to “The Tourist Gaze” and affirms a particular vision of Africa which is promoted in advertisements aimed at tourists in terms such as “timeless” and “primitive”, and fails to accurately represent the full diversity and dynamism of Namibian cultural heritage.

¹ The Living Culture Foundation, Namibia, “The Living Museum of the Ju/’Hoansi San”, brochure, c. 2010.

The Helvi Mpingana Kondombolo Cultural Village at Tsumeb aims to be national and representative. It contains a set of homesteads showing the different traditional building styles of eleven ethnic groups found in Namibia, including the Hei//om, Himba, Afrikaner, Herero and Ovambo. The project recognises the political sensitivity of presenting ethnically exclusive cultural villages in the context of a recent history of apartheid, which sought to create ethnically defined Homelands. The cultural village actually contains little culture, as cultural performances are only arranged if pre-booked by large tour companies. However, guides explain the use of artefacts that are situated in the different homesteads during the walking tour and a crafts shop sells a wide range of cultural artefacts. However, critics argue that the cultural village lacks culture and actually repeats the failure of Namibian museums that reduce cultural artefacts to static objects, rather than exhibiting them as tools, instruments or clothing that are still actively used (rather than viewed) in society.

A final model that is emerging and that is the model being developed in the Munyondo gwaKapande Cultural Village, which the Museums Association of Namibia is involved with, seeks to develop a more interactive space. The vision is to recognise that intangible cultural heritage presents an opportunity for hosts and guests to find common ground. Cultural globalisation is creating increased appreciation of diverse musical forms, while concerns about environmental problems are shared by people all over the world, leading to increased respect for indigenous knowledge about plants and land use. The idea, therefore, is that the cultural village should become a space that encourages cultural dialogue, and does not simply seek to feed information to “culture vultures”. The Museums Association of Namibia has been involved for a number of years with stakeholders and community groups involved in the planning and development of the Munyondo gwaKapande Cultural Village in the Kavango Region of Namibia (famous for its wood-carvers). The project was a community-based initiative led by a youth group that sought to preserve the culture and traditions of the Mbunza community, to support economic development and to encourage good ecological practices. The project is still in its design stage, but the plan is to centre the cultural village around a tree that is central to an oral tradition that is well known throughout the region (see Appendix 1). The concept of the village is to provide a space where visitors may attend workshops to learn about traditional skills such as drumming, wood-carving and the use of local plants.

The Museums Association of Namibia and the Management Committee have discussed several issues relating to the potential impact of tourism on the site. The first was a concern about the almost sacred nature of the tree and the appropriateness of building at the site. However, the community argued that the development of the site would help give recognition and therefore protection to the tree and that the spirit associated with the tree had left during the liberation struggle in the 1980s. A second concern which is being discussed is what might be termed the “scope of the collection”. While the site is strongly associated with an oral tradition of the vaMbunza, it will be the first museum to open to the public in the whole of the Kavango Region and there are arguments that the cultural village should reflect all the communities of the region. However, many argue that this should exclude Angolan immigrants who arrived in the region from the 1970s and include many of the skilled wood-carvers now living in the Kavango Region.

Each of the different cultural village models developed in Namibia to date presents challenges. Will the tourism-centred motivation behind the creation of cultural villages result in the “Disneyfication” of Namibia, with damaging consequences for the authenticity of cultural heritage and identity or will these villages play an important role in “stimulating cultural diversity and preserving indigenous culture”. Namibian examples suggest that crucial determining factors will be the extent to which the management of cultural villages is community-based and the extent to which cultural villages are able to bridge the gap between Host and Guest and to create a sense of community and common concerns which rest at the heart of all villages.

Appendix 1:

The Story of Munyondo gwaKapande as told by Laurence Haupindi, Senior Headman of the vaMbunza

“So let me begin with the story. On one side of the place where the Munyondo tree stands a large traditional dance was taking place. It was the style of dance that is known as *Epera*. People liked to do the dance after the rainy season when people have harvested. The *Epera* dance is very exciting, everybody would dance together, both young and old. People could even have an ‘illness’ for dancing *Epera*. Whenever a dance was about to take place a message would be sent out to all the surrounding villages. All the best drumbeaters and the best singers would be invited to come. Alcohol would be brewed for the feast and a cow would be slaughtered.

When the alcohol was ready the event would begin. The dance would take place in the evening once the drummers and singers had arrived. The most famous drummer, Kapande, was so good that when he started beating his drum you would have to jump up – even if you were sleeping. The beat of his drum seemed so loud that you could even feel it pounding in your heart. He lived near Sigori Village, that was where the house of the drummer was.

So, the event started and just as the sun was about to set the drummer arrived with a group of children carrying his drum. The people were very excited and those who had felt like sleeping woke up. Women started to ululate. At first they were excited because they had just seen him arrive. He went into the homestead to receive some food as this was the tradition. When he started to beat his drum everybody was excited. His drum was so powerful that they did not even notice when the night was broken by the sunrise.

Kapande went into the crowd beating his drum, but then he turned and started to head towards the Munyondo tree. People did not realize at first where he was heading, but then they saw that he was going into the tree and saw the last part of his drum about to disappear into the tree. They tried to grab it and to pull him back, but the force was so great that they would also have been sucked into the tree and so they had to let go. So that is how the story of Kapande happened.

Although he had disappeared the people could still hear the drum beating and those who had been dancing continued to dance to the beat. It was as if the drumbeat could be heard shaking all the branches of the tree. Some people ran home to fetch axes to try and get Kapande out of the tree, but it did not work. Even whilst they were trying to chop the tree they could see that even the leaves were dancing to the beat of the drum. Eventually the people started to disperse, even though the sounds of the drum could still be heard. For months afterwards the beats of a drum could be heard every night during the early morning hours. As time passed the people became afraid of the tree and refused to walk past it at night. Those people who did not know the story of the tree would hear the sound of drums when they walked past and would be very afraid. The people started to call the tree ‘The Munyondo Tree of Kapande’”.