

## **Enhancing Effectiveness in Cultural Public Programming for Children and the Youth: A Case Study of the National Museums of Kenya.**

David Mbutia

Coordinator, Public Programmes, Nairobi National Museums

### **Introduction**

Museum Public programming has come a long way and continues to undergo a notable evolution. With this evolution, the museum has continually sought to make itself relevant to society, an issue it has grappled with for a long time. This situation traces its roots to the initial concept of the museum as a place accessible only to the privileged few. Luis Monreal has extensively discussed this initial museum concept in his paper “Museums for the 21st Century,”<sup>1</sup> a reflection on museums’ crises and successes. According to him the privileged few celebrated their identity as the minority clique who may enjoy the unique entertainment derived from admiration of the best collections of natural and cultural objects and works of art. The identity and pride of the communities whose heritage the objects depicted formed no part of this celebration.

After experiencing much criticism about its role in society, the museum has gradually come to perceive itself as an institution made by people, about and for people. In its 11th General Assembly held in Copenhagen in 1974, ICOM adopted a definition for the museum which puts people and their welfare at the centre of the reason for the museum’s existence. This paradigm shift has brought the realization that a museum is defined not just by the type and quality of its collections but also by its activities in the service of society, a fact that George Abungu elaborates very well in his paper “Museums: Arenas for Dialogue or Confrontation.”<sup>2</sup> According to Abungu, a museum could have the best cultural or natural history collections but be defined as dormant if its level of public engagement is not commensurate with the high quality of its collections.

The change from viewing museum interpretation as a reserve and monopoly of the curators to rather as an activity that should involve the public, where the public is put into different target groups, has formed a big breakthrough in museum public programming. This is thanks to the revolutionary efforts of young museum professionals who engaged in systematic visitor studies during the early 1970s, yielding a credible body of information and understanding of museum visitors that has continued to grow. Stephen Weil, in his treatise “Transformed From Cemetery Bric-a Brac,”<sup>3</sup> speaks very vividly of the growth of this body of knowledge.

### **Public Programming for Youth and Children**

Success of any museum programming is determined by the ability to recognize and pay particular attention to the dynamic needs, aspirations and sensitivities of its different target groups. Children and youth no doubt form a significant part of the audiences visiting the museums. For this target group, education, space for free self-expression, freedom, spiritual retreat, dialogue, identity and memory, all form aspirations and motivations for coming to the museum. In his paper “An Agenda for American Museums,”<sup>4</sup> Harold Skramstad points at the dwindling loyalty to school, church and community as part of defiant reaction to the perceived limitations on individual rights by

these institutions. He further observes that that “those institutions that are able to recognize this contradiction and can help us find the required balance between our need for freedom and our need for authority will be most successful in the next century.” Museums have a good chance to utilize this opportunity by offering a neutral space for dialogue as well as the link between the aspirations and livelihoods of community, especially the youth. This is consistent with Weil’s<sup>5</sup> emphasis on the need for museum activities to focus more on impacting the lives of their audiences.

Presenting the museum as a vibrant and dynamic social dialogue venue for the youth requires subtle balance of museum skills and understanding, and integration and involvement of the youth’s culture and local conditions. This balance greatly enhances acceptance and success of any development activities aimed at the youth. This fact is consistent with Stan Carbarone’s observation in “The Dialogic Museum.”<sup>6</sup> Carbarone comprehensively argues against leaving knowledge to experts who know what is good for the public.

Several museums in Africa have used this approach to become recognized platforms for recreation, cultural performances and creativity. Abungu<sup>7</sup> has given several examples where museums have used creative cultural ventures to provide dialogue space and improve livelihoods. Involvement in such ventures also reduces possibility of youth involvement in socially counterproductive engagements. Indeed, these ventures present unique opportunities with infinite creative potential for the youth.

### **National Museums of Kenya**

The origin of National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is very typical of the initial elitist museums discussed in the introduction above. Having started about 100 years ago, it began with a small natural history collection from a few colonial settlers. From this initial collection in a small building in what is now Nairobi city centre, NMK has expanded its mandate over the years. It now has more than 25 regional museums as well as many sites and monuments throughout the country. Its role with the public has likewise expanded over the years from being a source of entertainment for a clique of elite colonialists to being a public institution at the centre of service to society.

NMK has collections, exhibits and education programmes dealing with the themes of nature, culture, history, art and contemporary issues of the society in all its different regional stations. It serves a diversity of audiences with different backgrounds, abilities and disabilities. Like many other museums and heritage institutions, NMK’s single most significant challenge is to constantly engage its diverse audiences in captivating ways to give them lifelong memorable and enriching experiences.

More than 65% of visitors to the NMK consist of students. This in addition to the number of children and youth visiting the museum as part of family and other groups forms a very significant proportion of the museum visitors. As a way of involving this target group, NMK has been developing programmes ranging from specialized lectures to the current highly diversified and more interactive thematic target specific programmes. This paper highlights some of these programmes developed in the recent past.

In 1997 the NMK launched a pilot project, Museum Interactive Project (MIP), with the goal “to promote analytical, critical, empirical independent and responsible thinking and acting.” Many programmes were developed under this project, including the

Young Researchers Club (YRC). This was a programme for 8 to 13 years olds. After subscribing to the club, a member received the *Young Researchers' Magazine* (YRM) three times a year. Each issue dealt with a particular theme, and included various fun-to-do experiments to explore the topic. Members were then invited to the museum for an interactive day with more fun activities to explore the magazine theme. The YRC celebrated its 10 years in 2007.

In 2003, NMK developed an exchange programme for secondary school students in conjunction with the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. Under this programme, called cultural dialogue, a group of 16 students, both boys and girls from Kenya and Belgium, were involved in a creative process constituting artworks, performances and video documentaries depicting various aspects of the lives of the youth in the two countries. The two groups exchanged their materials for a period of close to one year through which this cultural dialogue progressed, a process that relied heavily on the use of modern technology, whose use the participants happily learnt.

With time, each of the two groups was able to understand better what it was like to be a young person in their counterpart's country, including the issues one had to contend with. This programme culminated in a real exchange where the students groups alternately hosted each other in their respective homes and countries for a period of two weeks each. The programme seemed to significantly expand the participants' worldview and understanding of their counterparts' culture. For most of the participants, it was their first time to get out of their country. Recent contact with some of the participants indicated that the experience they gained in this programme has contributed significantly to their worldview and life aspirations.

In 2005, NMK developed a different programme for post-school/college youths and called it Artscool. Under this programme, a group of Kenyan youths created artworks, performances and video documentaries revolving around the theme of "Youth exclusion." The artworks, performances and documentaries depicted frustrations of the youth as a result of being left out in social and development matters of society. Nairobi National Museum hosted a series of presentations by the youths whose message to the society was clear: they needed more recognition, understanding and inclusion in the social and development issues.

After the post-election violence that happened in Kenya after the 2007 general election, NMK offered a space for collective memory by hosting a six-month exhibition entitled "Kenya Burning! Never forget, Never again." It presented photographs that captured various grievous moments of the post-election violence and the youths' involvement. Alongside the exhibition NMK, in conjunction with the GoDown Arts Centre – the initiator of this exhibition, conducted a series of discussions reflecting on the post-election violence. In the light of the common misuse of ethnic diversity by some leaders to incite the population, especially the youths, these discussions aimed at eliciting a resolve among Kenyans and especially the youth never to participate in this kind of violence again. This way the museum significantly contributed to making the youth proponents of peace and harmonious co-existence among Kenya's diverse communities. Through these sessions, the museum offered the much-needed space for mediation and healing by our society.

## **Challenges and Opportunities for Public Programming**

Despite many years of involving the local communities in interpreting their history and heritage, like many African museums NMK still faces the challenge of continually being relevant to current and potential visitors. Part of this challenge is related to financial limitations in realizing the full potential of programming diversification. In Kenya, like in most countries in Africa, institutional competition for meager resources leaves museums contending with a budgetary allocation from the government that is far from sufficient for its ambitious public programmes.

Disappearance of both tangible and intangible cultures is another challenge that NMK, like other African museums, contends with. Illicit trade in cultural objects and the demise of elders who are custodians of our intangible heritage have continued to be major challenges. Without such cultural capital preserved in some form or another for reference, it will become increasingly difficult to develop creative and diversified public programmes utilizing them. However, all is not lost; technology has offered a great opportunity for the codification of culture. NMK has embraced modern-day technology that has gained tremendous popularity and diverse use, especially among the youths, to codify various aspects of the diverse culture of the more than 42 ethnic groups in Kenya.

To enhance the experiences of its visitors, NMK cherishes the synergy in partnerships and networking with other museums in the continent and beyond. A good example is the Hazinna Exhibition that was a partnership between NMK and the British Museum. Held in 2006 at the Nairobi Gallery, the exhibition had East African cultural objects on short loan from the British Museum. It enabled the citizens of this region and beyond to enjoy and celebrate the cultural achievements and legacy of past generations from the region.

It is clear that museum public programming has unlimited potential for empowering children and youth to make positive changes in themselves and their communities. Following this realization, African museums such as NMK are bringing on board children and youth in developing public programmes attuned to their own practical needs, experiences and expectations. Such programmes are giving the children and youth a healthy sense of pride, accomplishment and responsibility, which they absolutely need as dynamic and progressive decision-makers of their own generation.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Luis Monreal, "Museums for the 21st Century: Between Crisis and Success," *ICOM News*, Special Issue (2001): 12–14.

<sup>2</sup> George H.O. Abungu, "Museums: Arenas for Dialogue or Confrontation," *ICOM News*, Special Issue (2001): 15–18.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen E. Weil, "Transformed from Cemetery Bric-a Brac," *Making Museums Matter*, Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002, 81–90.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Skramstad, "An Agenda for American Museums in the 21st Century," *Daedalus* (The MIT Press), vol.128, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 109–28.

<sup>5</sup> Weil, "Cemetery Bric-a Brac," 83.

<sup>6</sup> Stan Carbone, "The Dialogic Museum," *Muse*, vol. XXXI, no.1 (Winter 2003), 36–39.

<sup>7</sup> Abungu, "Arenas for Dialogue," 16.