

**A common wealth of culture:
Reflections on the fourth Group for Children in African Museums workshop**

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Chief Albert Luthuli, longest serving president of the African National Congress party and Africa's first Nobel Peace Prize winner, would have taken delight in welcoming delegates from across the Commonwealth to his former KwaZulu-Natal home, now the Luthuli Museum, for the fourth Group for Children in African Museums (GCAM) workshop. The workshop theme for 2009, "The Creative Museum: African Museums Using Culture for the Development of Children and Youth," addressed issues of education and youth development, both of which Chief Albert Luthuli valued dearly.

Three previous workshops held by GCAM, which is an initiative of the Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM), a not for profit organisation working towards the betterment of museums and their society both within the Commonwealth and globally, also considered the positive benefits museums might bring to the lives of children in Africa. This fourth workshop built upon the outcomes of these earlier meetings in Kenya and Malawi by focusing specifically on a museum's ability to work *creatively* to build innovative programmes that tackle contemporary issues effectively, based on its knowledge of local conditions and culture. Culture, in this instance, is understood as a worldview and means of expression.

In spite of grey skies on the opening day, the workshop commenced with vibrant welcome and key note speeches delivered by prominent individuals, including Ms Sibongile Van Damme (Chairperson, Luthuli Museum Council), Professor Martin Segger (President, Commonwealth Association of Museums) and Ms Vivienne Carelse (Deputy Director General, Department of Basic Education, South Africa). Ms Van Damme reiterated the significant role culture plays in providing us with a sense of identity. She lamented that museums in Africa are too often tourist hubs that lack understanding of their more immediate communities. Reintegrating museums into communities would, she argued, allow them to assume a pivotal position in terms of encouraging an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, which might subsequently engender a positive, tolerant and morally based culture.

Professor Segger also spoke about how museums profoundly affect the promotion of peace, respect and diversity, while Ms Carelse emphasised that museums are vital parts of society but are currently underutilised by the youth who would benefit most directly from them. Interspersed with these addresses were performances of poetry and *isicathamiya* by young locals, which ensured that the youth visibly remained at the forefront of the workshop's attention.

Enthusiasm among delegates was high as they moved into the discussion sessions. Paul Tichmann and Thulani Thusi, respectively curator and heritage officer at the Luthuli Museum, presented a compelling case study of the Museum's educational programmes for children, youth and community, which confirmed why the Luthuli Museum was an inspired setting for this particular GCAM workshop. As a values and ideas based museum concerned with promoting the spirit and legacy of Luthuli, which is interpreted as excellence in leadership, democracy, non-violence, non-racialism and equality for women, education programmes that challenge illiteracy, prejudice and xenophobia through creative writing, sharing stories and diverse music and dance, remain key priorities for the Luthuli Museum.

Subsequent sessions that day explored mobile museums (Laura Gibson, CAM Intern at Luthuli Museum) and radio (Arthanitius Henry Muloongo, Rhodes University, South Africa and Curator at Livingstone Museum, Zambia) as outreach mediums that might effectively reach wider, more diverse museum audiences. As well, delegates looked at further developing burgeoning relationships between museums and the formal education system, particularly schools, (Stanley Dlamini, Swaziland, and Thatayamodimo Sparks Rammapudi, Botswana).

Hassoum Ceesay (The Gambian National Museum, Gambia) shared details about an art competition repeatedly hosted by the Gambian National Museum and Taiwanese Embassy, which has encouraged students to pursue careers in art after finding inspiration for their competition pieces in the museum exhibitions. In the same session, Mike Gondwe (Museums of Malawi) spoke about his museum's determination to raise the prestige of the expressive arts as a way of equipping children with alternative career skills that will help them overcome the burden of poverty. Louisa Nnenna Onuoha (National Commission for Museums & Monuments, Nigeria) rounded off the day with her case study of the Lagos Museum and the YETI initiative.

Still contemplating the many ideas espoused during the opening discussions, delegates reconvened the following day, which commenced with a particularly interesting case study of Nigeria's National Museum of Unity, presented by Margaret Okonkwo. Curating creative exhibitions using artifacts from diverse ethnic groups is one way of representing peaceful historical coexistence in Nigeria that makes building a contemporary culture of peace and tolerance seem a real possibility. Given that 85% of visitors to the museum are children, Okonkwo has high hopes that the younger generation will take on board these ideas and carry them forward.

Peter Okwaro (Centre for Heritage Development in Africa, Kenya) similarly spoke about the significance of involving young people in heritage programmes, which he perceives as a real alternative to the unhealthy pastimes of Mombasa's streets. Catherine Snel (Die Afrikaanse Taalmuseum en –monument, South Africa) concluded this panel with her description of the ways traditional games assist Afrikaans speaking children to negotiate their history and identity.

Gloria Chuma-Ibe (Centre For Black and African Arts and Civilization, Nigeria), Yvonne Ruwe Mulala (Lusaka National Museum, Zambia), and David Mbutia (National Museums of Kenya) comprised the final paper presentation session and by drawing on their experiences, provoked discussions about community values based programmes and contemporary development.

That afternoon we were fortunate to be joined by Andrew Firmin, programme manager of culture at the Commonwealth Foundation and editor of the document *Putting Culture First*. After teaming up with Segger to provide an overview of the document, which essentially argues that culture should no longer be treated as a peripheral luxury but rather as a key component in development strategies, Firmin divided delegates into smaller focus groups. Of the seven key connections between culture and development proposed in *Putting Culture First*, each group conducted a more thorough analysis of a particular one. The exercise proved very rewarding in eliciting ideas about ways museums are already realising these connections and in proposing possible strategies

for the future. (The document and these subsequent findings are discussed further in a separate article in this publication.)

With the workshop now nearing its end, the Luthuli Museum invited fifteen local school children and young people to attend a youth panel. The panel was invited to share thoughts and ideas about what culture meant to them and what they thought museums should be doing to benefit young people. As well as being a thoroughly enjoyable session, the morning was particularly valuable since it opened a direct dialogue between museum professionals and the youth to whom their programmes are directed. These insights were extremely beneficial for all delegates involved in drawing up the GCAM Stanger declaration the following day.

In addition to the more formal aspects of the workshop, one final afternoon was set aside to visit the oNdini Museum in uLundi, Zululand. This was a unique opportunity for all delegates to experience cultural expressions of the Zulu people, both present and historical, set against the very landscape in which King Cetshwayo planted his homestead. Informal conversations about creative museums and the development of young people could be heard on the buses travelling to and from uLundi, and later at the final celebration dinner, proving that these ideas now had deep roots. I believe I speak on behalf of all attending when I say that I look forward to seeing the innovative programmes that will emerge out of this workshop as delegates harness both their enthusiasm and ideas and transport them to museums across Commonwealth Africa.

All papers presented at the fourth GCAM workshop and discussed above will be made available on the Commonwealth Association of Museums website, <http://www.maltwood.uvic.ca/cam/>