

# Commonwealth museums: relics of the past or tools for the future?

By **Lois Irvine**, the Commonwealth Association of Museums



Institutions of society must continually redefine themselves if they are to remain relevant to the needs of their countries and communities. Museums as public institutions are no exception. They are accountable for all public funding and most funding from private or business sources whatever their structures and ethically responsible for financial and programmatic actions in accordance with missions, mandates and specific project guidelines. What impact can and should museums have on individuals, communities and civil society as a whole? This article argues that museums must not remain bystanders to the main stream of humanity but must participate in the process of development of healthy and sustainable societies.

**W**ithin the 53 member nations of the Commonwealth the number of museums (defined in the broadest sense) in each country varies from hundreds in the more developed states to a few or virtually none in smaller and lesser developed states. In all there is usually some organised body which functions to preserve heritage and tradition.

Museums as public institutions – whether within a government structure, supported by different levels of governments or funded by the private sector and other donors – are publicly accountable and responsible for adding value to their society. Many museums in Commonwealth countries exist as an arm of government supported primarily by public funds. Others exist as non-profit organisations for the public benefit and therefore legally bound by specific sets of rules. The resources of the community, country or international bodies support these museums and require various forms of accountability. Not least is the requirement to operate for the benefit of constituents and stakeholders, including individuals and groups within the community.

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Museums must take into account the increasingly complex natural, social and cultural environment in which we exist. Not least of this complexity are the multiplicity of ethnic, cultural, religious and economic variations within our larger societies and the task of contributing to vigorous communities, inclusive societies and a healthy world.

Nations and institutions can no longer function by looking inward, but in this interdependent world must increasingly take into account the greatest needs and expectations of others. Therefore the task for Commonwealth museums involves the values of the Commonwealth, often expressed in the declarations from the Heads of Government meetings, especially the Harare Declaration of 1991 and other documents: democracy, the rule of law, human rights, a free press, education for all, and gender equity; as well as the encouragement of young people in all spheres. Many of these are also found in the Millennium Development Goals and echoed in the concerns and policies of UNESCO. UNESCO strongly emphasises the link between culture and development. How do museums fit into culture?

## Culture and museums

Culture can be seen as the totality of world views, values, beliefs, customs, and visual and sensory expressions of these both permanent and ephemeral. All are profoundly linked to the physical world and our experiences of it. Culture can be viewed from global, national, religious, economic, family and individual perspectives; and in fact the heritage of each of us consists of all those aspects that influence our life and thinking at any given time. Culture can thus be very broad or limited to more cohesive and homogenous groups. Culture can also be viewed as those activities normally considered within the phrase 'arts and culture' – literature, theatre, dance, music, visual arts, crafts and so on. These are creative expressions of our deeper cultural influences and experiences.

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Most of us use the word culture in several different ways depending on the context. Museums as considered by the International Council of Museums cover virtually all aspects of culture and the physical world and range from aquaria to zoos, art to history to sciences and technology and including community cultural centres. Museums, along with libraries and archives, are perhaps the most comprehensive and permanent sources of culture. For those many who believe that culture is integral to development, museums are thus essential resources. Sir Seretse Khama, First President of Botswana, noted that 'a nation without a culture is a nation without a soul'. Not preserving community memory and heritage is akin to amnesia – not knowing who we are.

## A central role for museums

It is no accident that museums, monuments and libraries are often destroyed during violent conflict in an effort to kill the roots of particular cultures. Nor is it an accident that the African National Congress and the new government of South Africa under President Mandela devoted significant time and effort and conducted massive consultations in developing policies and





strategies to redress the suppressed history and culture of the majority of the people. Papers presented at both the Commonwealth Association of Museums seminars on 'Museums and the National Identity' and 'Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance' highlighted the role of museums in national life and identity. Museums are able to tell us who we are if we are willing to listen.

Our task is the preservation of cultural and natural heritage according to our mandates, and it is important for us to remember that each part of our inheritance, whether it be in a science centre or technology museum, ethnology, history or art museum, zoo or aquarium, involves different cultural perspectives and a larger context of beliefs, ideas and encompassing heritage. Our method is through material evidence and sensory expressions of intangible traditions, and our ultimate aim is knowledge and understanding of ourselves and our environment as well as of the specific artefacts and manifestations of the past that are the focus of individual museums.

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### Museums and the future

Telling the stories and understanding the world around us can give all of us the sense of pride and identity that we must have – but it cannot stop there. It is no longer sufficient for museums to deal with only the traditional past through historical, archaeological, artistic objects and works of art in homogeneous contexts, or explaining how our world works. Room must be made for both tangible objects and intangible heritage from other cultures and societies relevant to our constituents, so that we can use our knowledge to face the future in a self-sufficient and self-confident way. We all need to learn about issues which have huge impact not only on organisations, systems and networks of society but on the continuance of life itself. And we all need to learn to solve the problems together starting from the place and the circumstances that determine our present state. We have a responsibility to build on the foundation of the past to meet the challenges of the future.

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### Museums as community-based and people-centred

No museum can be all things to all people; it is not practical to deal with many larger issues in ways that attract everyone. However, different types of museums can work together according to their focus and mission to address a number of more urgent needs for knowledge and information. Museums are institutions that can help to create and build knowledge and to educate – more informally, but also more actively and provocatively through real objects and living creatures, demonstrations and active participation from community members and visitors. Museums are more and more turning to a community-based focus, and opening up to allow greater participation of visitors and constituents in developing exhibitions and programmes to enhance knowledge and understanding.

James Maikweki and George O Abungu's paper, 'The Role of Museums in Building a Peaceful Society', described to the participants in the Barbados conference on 'Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance in the 21st Century' the change in approach to museums as 'cultural institutions with a social responsibility' and places that have come 'to serve as a common ground where dialogue and debate can take place'. They went on to focus on a programme developed for street children in Nairobi which involved museum visits, participation in art-making and drama exercises, and encouraged hands-on creative activities with the hope of generating income opportunities.

### Active contributions to development – the experience of the Commonwealth Association of Museums

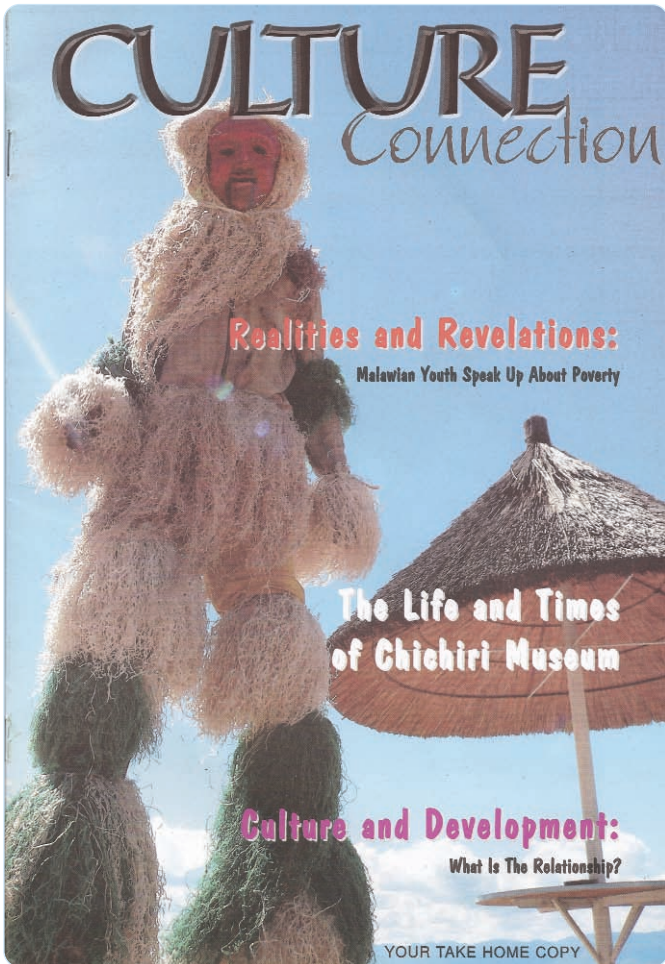
The question often remains whether museums actually do build the climate within which we can spread knowledge and stimulate creative thinking. The Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM) has worked towards raising awareness of global thinking and local achievements and stimulating action through a number of conferences and programmes. Papers have sought to share the practical experiences of individual museums that want to make a difference in facing the issues in their communities. Themed conferences have included:

- Museums and the National Identity: Ideas, Issues and Applications
- Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance in the 21st Century (see box above)
- Museums in the Commonwealth: Global Vision, Local Mission
- Museums and Diversity: Museums in Pluralistic Societies

Workshops have addressed the important subject of Children and Museums in Africa and the Caribbean. Three in Africa have all emphasised that the development of programmes and exhibitions for children, as well as children's corners or museums, should involve consultation with children themselves from the beginning. Not only should children be included but also parents, teachers, caregivers, and elders and holders of the traditions of culture and technology. Children, parents, teachers and others working with children have been included as part of the workshop programme. At the first practical workshop in the Caribbean, held in the Bahamas, similar emphasis was placed on consultation with these groups and here a significant number of educators attended. In addition, the workshop was built into a larger programme commemorating the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.



Nairobi, 1997: participants kneel to see from the children's viewpoint.



Professional training and development and an internship programme of the Canadian government (Young Canada Works) support these themes and activities. The last children's workshop in Malawi considered the development of an exhibition and programmes on poverty. The most interesting outcome of a subsequent internship was a project which consulted with children in several locations in Blantyre and southern Malawi about their ideas and feelings on poverty. Instead of an exhibition, a magazine linking culture and development through the eyes of children's views on poverty was produced and distributed widely. It was funded largely by the advertising in the publication thus promoting collaboration between the museums and the business sector (see cover above) and increasing awareness of the potential of museum programmes.

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### Making significant contributions

These very few examples illustrate how museums can join the mainstream and make significant contributions and there are many more such examples within the Commonwealth. No matter what the museum's subject focus, ways and means can be found to do this. There are in addition museums whose major interest is directly targeted on contemporary global issues. Examples are peace museums, museums commemorating and

### Northern Ireland

The philosophy and work of the Tower Museum, a civic institution of the Heritage and Museum Service of the Derry City Council, was described by Dermot Francis at the 'Museums, Peace, Democracy and Governance in the 21st Century' programme in Barbados. The museum is 'not only a museum of the Troubles but it is a museum born from the Troubles' and deals directly with the history of Derry and its central involvement in the Northern Ireland conflicts. The initial phase one exhibition depicted the 'Story of Derry' and Francis described the visionary development of the exhibits and the intense effort to be honest and fair in telling the stories. Extreme praise and extreme criticism often accompanied new exhibits and publications but the City Council purposefully continued to support objective interpretations of the past and remain open to the participation of the community, working with the notions of reconciliation, justice, peace, democracy and empowerment.

### Kenya

At the Museums and Diversity programme, Freda Nkirote of Kenya presented a thoughtful and thought-provoking paper describing the different areas of attack that the museum might use to help to remedy the causes and repair the damage of recent election violence. She noted the role the museum could play and the use of permanent exhibitions, temporary exhibitions, lectures, community participation (making their museums meaningful to the people), disaster management and mitigation, and mediation and recovery.

### Malawi

The Museums of Malawi have been active in addressing urgent issues and have engaged in programmes that help to create awareness and promote knowledge and understanding about HIV/AIDS, malaria prevention and intangible heritage – specifically about the growing and preparation methods for the traditional food of cassava, a resource less susceptible to drought and providing an alternate staple to maize. The issues are approached through the use of traditional media both to engage the audiences and promote community participation especially by children. The three case studies and the rationale are described by Michael Gondwe in his paper 'The Museums of Malawi: Singing, Dancing and Dramatizing the Message', given at the CAM programme 'Museums and Diversity: Museums in Pluralistic Societies', in April 2008 in Guyana.

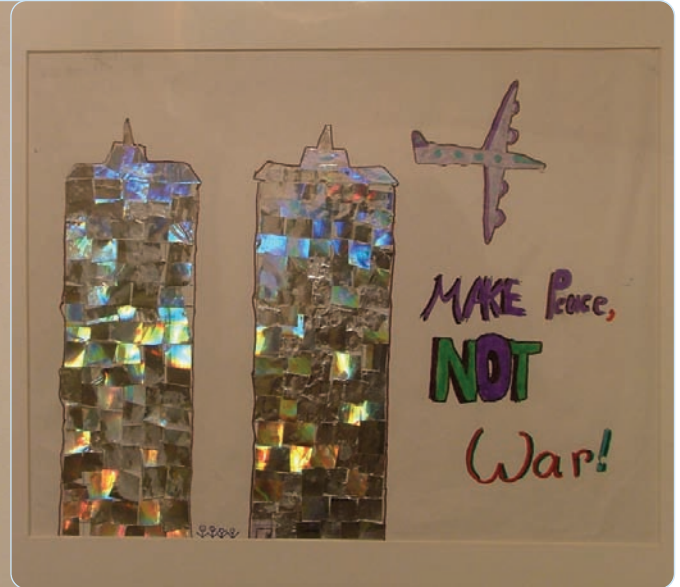
telling the story of slavery and other crimes against humanity, human rights museums, museums of unity and diversity and those celebrating the lives of individuals who have lived the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

Widely publicised and promoted through a series of 'Declarations', the Commonwealth Association of Museums calls for museums to contribute to the urgent human needs in their countries:

- Help to instil pride and self-confidence through tangible and intangible heritage of their countries and distinct cultures – a traditional role for museums but to do it adequately requires an inclusive and people-centred philosophy and community participation practices.
- Preserve the memory and soul of communities and societies as starting points for the future.



'What Peace Means To Me' – two entries from a children's art contest, Northern Ireland.



- Act as a forum and place of neutrality where community debate and discussion can take place.
- Provide activities, exhibitions and programmes that are inclusive and meaningful to individuals and groups – historically and particularly in colonial settings, museums have not included the stories of large numbers of marginalised groups in society.

Not only should children be included but also parents, teachers, caregivers, and elders and holders of the traditions of culture and technology.

- Promote the understanding of the vital link between culture and development so that methods and solutions are in synchronicity with the dynamics of grass-roots and more comprehensive cultural values and traditions.
- Concern themselves with the issues that have significance for their societies – museums need to reach out to the people and provide informal and life-long learning on contemporary challenges that will help people to understand the history, background and contributing factors in order to develop action and find solutions.
- Collaborate with others organisations and government to influence the climate of opinion and reinforce attitudes and actions which will lead to positive development.

It is hoped that all departments and levels of government as well as business and private donors appreciate the powerful tool for growth and development that museums can be. Many resources are needed to support these institutions that actively contribute to a better civil society – but the investment can be more than repaid by responsible and capable museums guided by wise and beneficial institutional and national policies.

Lois Irvine is Secretary General of the Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM). She joined CAM in 1980 and was elected an Executive Council member in 1986, President in 1989 and Secretary General in 1995. From 1970, she worked for the Glenbow Museum, one of Canada's largest museums, and subsequently became a museum consultant. A 'generalist' with specialisation in management, policy and human resources, she has been actively engaged in professional development in her private work and for the Association.

The Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM) is a Commonwealth professional association and an international NGO working towards the betterment of museums and their societies in the Commonwealth family of nations and worldwide. It is therefore concerned with the major issues and problems of the contemporary world. CAM wishes to work from the museum perspective, within the Commonwealth framework, and with Commonwealth governments and the people of our member states through their museums and Non-Governmental Organisations, to achieve our common goals. It aims to build on the values of the Commonwealth and work within the Commonwealth declarations and the priorities of the modern Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Foundation and other international bodies.

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