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Ecomuseum and Community Empowerment: A Reflection Cum Museum Definition

Austine Emifoniye

Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: **Austine Emifoniye**

Abstract

Recently, a common denominator within cultural postulations is that, museums being people and community centric institutions be deconstructed to engage communities within an inclusive spectrum. Whereas this may be a 'tall task' with many traditional and institutionalized museums, new museology advocate workable principles of engaging with communities to create robust people and community centered museum practice. Ecomuseum is a community-centered initiative that epitomizes the concept. This paper reflects on ecomuseum in this light as a community empowerment module. Following from that, it examines the definition debate within the museum space, and concludes with propounding a definition that, in the author's opinion accommodates diverse variables within museum practice as a possible universal one.

Objective

To articulate the relevance of ecomuseum as people centered initiative, highlighting its potentials for diversity, inclusiveness and community empowerment. To propound a definition of museum that encapsulates the concept of ecomuseums within the later framework of new-museology in the museum definition debate.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature, utilizing conversational methods, focus groups and existing documents. Literary sources were consulted for historical depth. Data were obtained from guest lectures on new-museology and museum practice given at Syracuse University, NY in 2021. Other sources include distillations from paper presentations and interactions with museum practitioners during the Museum Association of New York (MANY) 2022 conference in Corning, NY and the New England Museum Association (NEMA) 2021 conference held online. The 'Whova' Platform, used for 'NEMA 2021' conference was invaluable for exchange of opinions, interaction and of information dissemination from a wider and diverse audience on the concept and practice of new museology. The data collected from these sources was analyzed into the narrative of this study. The inference from this is the premise for the proposition of the museum definition as a summation.

Conceptual Frame

The frame for this study is hinged on the concept of inclusivity. Inclusivity is derived from *inclusion,* which has an implication for been accessible and encompassing to all irrespective of difference within a given space. The concept of inclusivity or inclusiveness became associated with museology debates following the re-thinking of museums as cultural institutions and people centric spaces. Kreps, C (2008) [12]; De Varine, H (1996) [6]; and Dogan, M (2014) [7], all propound inclusiveness as central and essential to museum practice and cultural institutions in the discourse of new museology. Thus, inclusivity as a re-engineering tool in new museology aptly fit as the conceptual frame of this study.

Introduction

Ecomuseums has being a subject of scholarly discuss within the cultural space for a while now. The concept of ecomuseum is an offshoot of the ideals of new museology that began in the 1960's. The era was characterized by political and cultural awakening, which resulted in the birth of several nation states. There were agitations from both politically and culturally oppressed people in the developing world and amongst indigenous people of the first world countries. Not surprisingly, the scenario ignited new thinking among culture-centric scholars who saw the opportunity for re-engineering in the cultural space as critical to political and economic advancement of communities and peoples around the world. According to De Varine

(1996:21) [6], this was the foundation for a new approach to museology with a strong link to the politics of development. The social and cultural struggles on the part of minorities, oppressed groups and peoples everywhere, was a caveat, that prompted a search for solutions outside the established standards of practice in museology (ibid).

The role of the museum in the social and political liberation of the community was now increasing been discussed and interrogated in a number of meetings and conferences, which followed this period. The crescendo was the International Council of Museum (ICOM) General Conference held in 1971 in France, where the word 'Ecomuseum' was coined. It was presented as an ideal relevant to the discuss of cultural liberation, of people and community empowerment, which largely characterize new museology.

Although, the outcome of the conference was regarded as controversial, it did set the tone for further investigation and interrogation of the concept of new museology. A process that has persisted with increasing inputs on the ideal and acceptable definition of museum and standards of museum practice championed by ICOM until date. Thus, Museologists and other culture enthusiasts around the world together with ICOM, are at the fore of propounding a new definition of museum which is in synchrony with the evolving socio-cultural and political consciousness. An umbrella definition, where ecomuseum and other forms of museology may find anchor, and where lofty ideals such as decolonization, inclusion, democratization, empowerment, diversity and accessibility for instance, may be fully realized as cardinal tenets.

Why Ecomuseum
Central to the concept of ecomuseum, is the recognition of the cultural heritages of a people or within the community, as vital to their socio-cultural and political empowerment if properly harnessed. Ecomuseums has enormous potential for transforming and empowering rural and indigenous communities. It awakens responsiveness and responsibility, a sense of ownership and identity, an affinity with the mission and objectives of the project as personal. It can signal a birth or revival of entrepreneurship and industry within the community.

The UNESCO definition of cultural heritage is "both a product and a process, which provides societies with a wealth of resources that are inherited from the past, created in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations". It explains further that it includes tangible, natural and intangible heritage. 'Tangible Cultural Heritage' refers to physical artefacts produced, maintained and transmitted inter-generationally in a society. It includes artistic creations, built heritage such as buildings and monuments, and other physical or tangible products of human creativity that are invested with cultural significance in a society. 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' indicates 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their Cultural Heritage' (UNESCO, 2003) [13]. Examples of intangible heritage are oral traditions, performing arts, local knowledge, and traditional skills. The convention acknowledged the relationship and interdependence of the tangible, intangible and natural heritages, particularly the role of intangible heritage as a source of cultural diversity and a stimulant for sustainable development.

Ecomuseum is a model that can incorporate the tangible, natural and intangible heritages of a community. They are community driven initiatives, divergent, inclusive and empowering to the community. It is a dynamic and mutually agreeable way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for sustainable development (European Network of Ecomuseums: 2004) [8]. Corsane G *et al* (2008:4) [2] quoting Rivard (1988:123-4), observed that ecomuseums was originally defined by comparing it with traditional museums. He stated that the traditional museums comprise the building, collections, expert staff and public visitors, while the ecomuseum is composed of the territory, heritage, memory and population.

The traditional museums are generally, institutions established to foster narratives, which may be far removed from the community of objects origin. As highly organized and sometimes politicized institutions, traditional museums operate with enormous ability to foster narratives that may be prejudiced or untrue in very subtle ways. In his blog, Puawai Cairns (2018) [1] published an interview with Kaihāpai Mātauranga Māori (Head of Mātauranga Māori), where he shared thoughts from a meeting with noted Māori scholar, Dr. Moana Jackson. In it, Mona asserted that 'museums are dangerous because "they are the namers of names", that museums have the power to define and confine knowledge, and for indigenous people, this can amount to historical erasure of their own narratives or even complete silencing'. Commenting further, Cairus (ibid), quoted from a regular indigenous writer in his blog, Nathan "Mudyi" (Wiradjuri man from Mowgee Clan):

"I had a discussion with someone once about if memory institutions, like museums, libraries, and archives, should modify past classification and description of First Nations material that use antiquated and potentially offensive terminology, they said we could not because that would be whitewashing history and we need to remain objective and just present the facts. While part of me partially agrees, my retort was memory institutions have predominantly presented a colonial history as fact and have excluded the voices of marginalized people and by doing so have demonstrated an ingrained bias"

In a related commentary, Angela Davis (2017) [3] wrote in 'Artstuffmatters' blog,

"I have always known that museums are not neutral. They have never have been neutral. I would hope that our colleagues know that museums originate from colonialist endeavors. They are about power. As I have shared on social media networks, if anyone comes as me with that neutrality mess, I will take them down. I have had it with that narrow-minded perspective that ignores history and enables museums to operate as racist, sexist, and classist spaces".

Kassim, S (2017) [11], opens a discuss on the challenges of trying to bring context to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery with a quotation from Audre Lorde (1978), **"***The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but*

they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." As part of the summation, Kassim (ibid) asserts that:

"Museums are not neutral in their preservation of history. In fact, arguably, they are sites of forgetfulness and fantasy. The way exhibitions are constructed usually assumes a white audience and privileges the white gaze. The white walls signified the choices of white people, their agency, their museum collections, and the endeavours of colonialists. To many white people, the collections are an enjoyable diversion, a nostalgic visit which conjures up a romanticized version of Empire. For many people of colour, collections symbolize historic and ongoing trauma and theft. Behind every beautiful object and historically important building or monument is trauma"

Ecomuseums on the other hand, are decolonized and unique to their environment offering tremendous opportunities for authentic narratives. Ecomuseums can be practiced in various ways by different countries. Each responding to a range of factors within the locality, which may be physical features, economic considerations, socio-cultural factors, political clime and the heritage resources of the community. Where ecomuseum principles are utilized, there is often emphasis on self-representation; full community participation in, and ownership of heritage resources and the management processes; rural or urban regeneration; sustainable development; and, responsible tourism (Corsane *et al*., Ibid) [2].

Structure
Ecomuseum demonstrate remarkable diversity, yet, despite these variations, Davis (1999:228) [4] suggested that the following list of attributes can be applied to most of them:
- The adoption of a territory that is not necessarily defined by conventional boundaries.
- The adoption of a 'fragmented site' policy that is linked to in-situ conservation and interpretation.
- Conventional views of site ownership are abandoned; conservation and interpretation of sites is carried out via liaison, co-operation and the development of partnerships.
- The empowerment of local communities; the involvement of local people in ecomuseum activities and in the creation of their cultural identity.
- The potential for inter-disciplinarity and for holistic interpretation.

This along with other characteristics have been developed as indices that assess how far ecomuseums have complied with the philosophy of its creation.

Opportunities, Benefits and Challenges
The opportunities and benefits of the eco-museums to their immediate communities are enormous. Some are discussed below:
Sense of Ownership: Community ownership, partnership or stake holding is the first benefit of ecomuseum. A sense of ownership puts the community stakeholders at the future of the project. They are able to contribute to decisions that will ensure the survival, sanctity and continuity of the ecomuseum. Stakeholders should generally be residents of the community housing the ecomuseum. This allows for close observation and direct participation in the activities of the ecomuseum.

Financial Empowerment: The community benefits financially from the ecomuseum through remuneration from jobs created, services and other financially empowering means. Ecomuseum could easily become a vast network of cottage industry, hospitality services, food vendors, transportation and haulage, communication, arts and crafts business. The extent depends on the type of ecomuseum and how the stakeholders are able to propel their heritage properties into a wider financially rewarding framework.

Authentic Object Narrative: In ecomuseums, the community has the opportunity to own the narrative of their tangible and intangible heritage, and to present it in a way that truly reflect their identity and world-view. Docents in the ecomuseum for instance, would not just be hired guides, but persons with cultural affinity and a sense of place.

Sense of Place: Ecomuseums fosters a sense of place. There is a deeper connection between the members of the community and the ecomuseum. Sense of place is an attachment to the community. A sense of belonging that place one as part of or an extension of the system, which the ecomuseum represents. It fosters deeper commitment and community identity, which is crucial to the concept of ecomuseum.

Diversity and Inclusion: As part of the principles of ecomuseum, there is greater diversity and inclusiveness in the management. Management cuts across various social strata in the community, each bringing in their expertise in areas of community knowledge and practice. Management and stakeholders should be fluid and representative of the various groups, which make up the community.

Tourism Potentials: Ecomuseum could attract huge flow of tourists that will in turn enhance the recognition of the community and boost the inflow of revenue. This is tied however, to proper management and organization of the ecomuseum in a way that it becomes attractive to tourism, and an online presence that helps to direct potential tourists to the possible benefits of visiting their ecomuseum.

The challenges of creating ecomuseum is dwarfed by the benefits to the community. However, Davis (2011:265) warned that ecomuseums with too much structure would become another traditional museum. In his words,

"The ecomuseum today is a very flexible concept, yet the processes involved in creation usually lead them to becoming permanent institutions. In this sense, ecomuseums have become like any other museum: a permanent organization, often housed in a suitable building, whether it be a chateau, a former public bath or an old farmhouse. This is totally contrary to the original idea of the ecomuseum when it was perceived as a means of facilitating change"

Davis concerns are hinged on the nature of structure, as it tends to become rigid over time. These can however be mitigated by wide, periodic and revolving community consultation, replacement of work groups in the community,

and allowing for external audit and evaluation of its successes as an ecomuseum. Leadership must be revolving and constructive ideas welcomed at each circle of evaluation.

Museum Definition Debate
The museum definition debate is perhaps the most controversial discuss arising from the outcome of the 25th International Council of Museums (ICOM) meeting in Kyoto. In his article, 'A Discomforting Definition of Museums', Fraser (2019:501) [9], made an intellectual swipe at the 2019 ICOM's definition of museum, while tracing its trajectory from the 2007 version. The 2007 definition of museum by ICOM, states that:

A museum as a "non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment".

Fraser argued that while there are two clauses - "non-profit" and "open to the public"- that are out of place; the 2019 two paragraphs version generates more controversy. It states that:

Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.
Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing. (ICOM 2019).

The writer believes in tandem with Fraser, the inadequacies of the 2019 definition. Ecomuseum for instance, may be established for other reasons, which may be economic and socio-political empowerment of communities. Secondly, intangible heritages are not aptly captured in the 2019 definition, which is vital to ecomuseum practice. This places the definition as inconclusive and inadequate as a universal one.

Conclusion
Ecomuseum expands the concept of museology and museum practice. The notion of traditional and institution-based museums as presently practiced is froth with issues, which ICOM and culture enthusiasts seek to address with the ongoing discourse of museum practice. Ecomuseums presents a wider perception of what is possible for museum practice as professionals, and how consultation and community participation within the museum and other cultural spaces can become essential and beneficial components of the new museology. With this thinking, the writer presents the definition below as a possible new definition of museum:

"A collection of tangibles and/or intangible heritages organized by individuals, communities, institutions or government for continuous showcasing, projection of ideas and/or for people education and empowerment".

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