

Case Report

Documenting and Presenting Contentious Narratives and Objects—Experiences from Museums in Uganda

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Abstract: Uganda is currently witnessing a new era, in as far as the safeguarding of cultural heritage is concerned. The preservation and presentation of cultural heritage objects is no longer a preserve of the state. National and community museums, totaling about 25, and spread across the country, are now preserving and presenting important aspects of Uganda’s diverse and multi-layered history as well as cultural heritage. Former leaders and political personalities are rarely documented. Even when documented by non-museum workers, their narratives are insufficiently presented in museums. Certain aspects of Uganda’s cultural heritage and history are silently being contested through museum spaces. The silent contestations are generally influenced by ethnicity, politics, and religion. Through this article, I intend to present the predicament of documenting contested histories and cultural heritage by Ugandan museums and provide examples of museum objects or aspects of Uganda’s cultural heritage, such as the narrative of “Walumbe” (death), that are subject to contestations.

Keywords: contested narratives; community museum; cultural heritage; ethnicity and politics

1. Introduction

Just like mass communication channels—such as television, radio, newspapers, books, and internet websites—museums function as institutions of social memory, with a potential public role in constituting what members of any given society understand as their cultural heritage. With this responsibility, museums frequently offer examples of aesthetic, social, and scientific achievements, whose purpose is to inspire and mobilize consistent societal commitments based on the dynamics of recognition, identification, affirmation, and judgment. Given the increasingly diverse and conflict-ridden character of contemporary societies, museums have begun to realize that civic life requires more than a notion of cultural heritage defined on such terms.

Issues of controversial and difficult objects have also recently emerged in museum discourses. Bonnell and Simon [1] (p. 66) stress that the ‘difficult’ exhibition needs to be distinguished from one that has been deemed controversial. They argue that much ink has been devoted to the phenomenon of the controversial exhibition, one that provokes serious public disagreements about the adequacy and accuracy of an exhibit’s narrative strategies and interpretative frame.

For the last 10 years, Uganda has witnessed a new era in respect to the safeguarding of cultural heritage. The preservation of cultural heritage objects is no longer a preserve of the state through the national museums. However, about 25 community museums spread across the country are now preserving and presenting important aspects of Uganda’s diverse history and cultural heritage.

Despite this, there is insufficient documentation and presentation of some controversial personalities in government and community museums, and this deprives local and international visitors—most importantly Uganda’s young generation—of the opportunity to learn from their stories and experiences. Such underrepresented personalities include former presidents of Uganda, such as

Sir Edward Muteesa II¹, Apollo Milton Obote and Idi Amin Dada. Secondly, some aspects of Uganda's cultural heritage and history are deemed 'contentious' or 'difficult', largely due to ethnic, political, and religious undertones. In some cases, political and cultural groups have tried to: appropriate their political history or cultures; erase other people's history and cultures as a means of asserting and defending their own or as a means of denying critical claims to visibility, power and legitimacy to other cultures or history.

In this paper, I intend to present briefly: The political history of Uganda after independence, which provides background to what is considered 'difficult' history; the efforts to document this history by some museums and the dilemma of documenting contentious histories and cultural heritage by Ugandan museums. I will summarize some examples of the contentious historical narratives and cultural heritage objects. I will conclude by highlighting the ways to present the different layers of history and heritage, bad or good, in a fair and balanced manner.

2. Materials and Methods

The author of this article did not use scientific methods of collecting information. The information in this article was mainly obtained by interacting with different museum managers, both at community and government levels. Physical visits to selected museums were also conducted. The review of selected and relevant literature, particularly newspaper articles, publications about museums in Uganda as well as publications on conflicts in northern Uganda were conducted. The author's rich experience in the museums and heritage field played a significant role in shaping the contents of this article.

3. Results

From the different interactions with museums curators or managers and from the review of relevant literature, ideas and opinions in regard to the challenges of documenting and presenting museum objects in the political, social, economic and cultural contexts of Uganda are summarized in the following sub-sections. Efforts by community museums to document and promote Uganda's diverse cultural heritage have also been highlighted.

3.1. Uganda's Political History after Independence

Uganda got her independence on 9 October 1962, when the Uganda flag was hoisted as the Union Jack was lowered, with Dr. Apollo Milton Obote as Prime Minister and Sir Edward Muteesa II as President. The Uganda Independence Act of 1963 transformed the Uganda Protectorate (as it was referred to during British occupation) into an independent country named Uganda with Queen Elizabeth II as Head of State and Milton Obote as Prime Minister until 4 October 1963, when Sir Edward Muteesa II was formally elected the ceremonial Head of State, following an alliance between Uganda People's Congress and Kabaka Yekka political parties of the time. According to the Observer Newspaper [2] (9 October 2017), from 1966, Uganda went through political turmoil, which led to mass deaths of civilians and change of military regimes by force and civil strife.

From 1962 to 1986 there were eight changes of government in Uganda, and four of them were carried out by military force. As in other African countries, politics in Uganda often follows ethno-regional lines, and much of it is a legacy of colonialism. In the case of Uganda, the country is roughly divided between two major peoples, the Nilotic in the north and the Bantu in the south. Under British rule, much of the security force was recruited from the north, which resulted in military dominance by the north over the south. This dominance was in place until President Yoweri Museveni entered the picture in 1986.

¹ Muteesa was the first President of Uganda after independence in 1962, while Obote was the first Prime Minister.

According to Nyström [3], on 26 January 1986, Yoweri Museveni entered the capital city Kampala and dissolved the then Military Council. Instead, a National Resistance Council (NRC) was put in place and Museveni was sworn in as President. A period of relative prosperity and security ensued in Uganda, but it was a period under a no-party rule. A new constitution was promulgated in September 1995 and implemented one month later. The first presidential election was held in May 1996 and the election to the legislature took place one month later, in June 1996. At that time, parliament constituted 276 members: 214 elected and 62 nominated members².

Until today, the entire country is experiencing relative peace, and a significant number of people's concerns are shifting from daily survival needs to self-actualization, promoting cultural identity and expression, and going beyond the focus on mainstream human rights to cultural rights. This partly explains the proliferation of both government and community museums across the country. However, key questions regarding the philosophical orientation, practices and principles applying to these museums still remain to be answered: What has been collected? By who? And why? Many of the museums are rather exclusive and put both political and cultural considerations at the back of their minds when collecting objects. This will be discussed in details in the subsequent sections.

3.2. Community Museums' Efforts to Document Uganda's History and Culture

Museums in Uganda exist mainly within two categories. There are government museums, one at the national level (Uganda Museum) and three at the regional level (Moroto Museum, Soroti regional museum and Kabale Museum). In addition to government museums, there are about 25 community museums³ spread in different parts of Uganda, and some of these are members of the Uganda Community Museums Association⁴. Many of these museums have tried to document and present Uganda's past history and diverse cultures in different ways. Some museums collect and showcase cultural artifacts, history and other elements of the local culture. The museums have made an effort to link the past and future through their collections, which are accessible to schools, researchers, local residents and foreign tourists. They provide spaces for appreciating the different cultures and historical narratives of Uganda.

3.3. Dissecting the Dilemma of Documenting Contentious Histories and Cultural Heritage Objects by Ugandan Museums

The theme for the 2017 World Museums Day was "Museums and contested histories: Saying the unspeakable in museums". During the celebrations to mark the day in Uganda, the Director for Tourism in the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities pointed out that the theme highlighted the need to accept a contested history as the first step towards envisioning a shared future under the banner of reconciliation. The Minister's statement confirmed that there is a contested history and implied that probably many museums—including the Uganda Museum—are shying away from documenting and presenting some aspects of history, the way it unfolded. This creates an impression that at one point, our history as a country was frozen or altered to omit elements considered unfit for the purpose at the time. In many of the existing museums, both government and community, the period between 1964 and 1986 is inadequately represented. There are several reasons for this dilemma.

3.3.1. Deliberate State Policy to Suffocate Divergent Political Ideologies

After capturing power in 1986, Yoweri Museveni, the current President, banned all political parties. There was only one political organization allowed to operate, the Movement System of Government.

² Uganda, the Party System from 1963 to 2000, Europa Publications Limited, 1999: 3564.

³ Detailed information about community museums can be accessed through <http://crossculturalfoundation.or.ug/community-museums/>.

⁴ <http://ucoma.or.ug/index.php/our-members/>.

Previous regimes, despite their visible and tangible contribution to infrastructure development and high-quality education, have been demonized and blamed for the 'dark decades' that the country went through. In June 2000, the no-party system was subjected to a national referendum to decide whether Uganda should continue under the one-party system or return to a multi-party democracy. Despite accusations of vote rigging and manipulation by the political opposition parties, Ugandans approved a multi-party system. They also re-elected President Museveni to a second five-year term in March 2001. Many of the museums, particularly community museums, whose existence came to the fore in 2007–2008, seem to be hesitant to document and display politically flavored objects, due to fears of being reprimanded. The National Museum has also been a major culprit of political history exclusion. On 5 October 2017, The Observer newspaper ran a story with the headline: Uganda museum: country's past thin on political history. The guide, Shamil Birigwawo, who was taking the author of the story around the museum stressed that "The museum does not display former presidents for political reasons". While it would be obvious that one cannot display a country's history minus its political journey, this is exactly what has happened at the Uganda Museum.

The story in the newspaper continues "Don't expect to find any history about Uganda's former presidents such as Apollo Milton Obote, Idi Amin, Godfrey Binaisa and the rest. The display of vehicles used by Museveni and former presidents is the closest the museum gets to tell our political story".

3.3.2. Traumatizing Past

According to Otunne [4] (2002), Northern Uganda experienced a traumatizing 20-year period of civil war. The roots of the war between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Acholiland⁵ were entwined with the history of conflicts in Uganda and the rise to power of the National Resistance Movement/National Resistance Army (NRM/A). The conflict persisted because of fragmented and divisive national politics, strategies and tactics adopted by the armed protagonists, and regional and international interests. The war claimed many innocent civilian lives, forcefully displaced over 400,000 people and destroyed social amenities including schools and health centres. In addition, the war was characterised by widespread and systematic violations of human rights, including rapes, abductions of men, women and children, torture, increased economic degeneration, and national and regional insecurity.

With the traumas still fresh in the minds of the people of northern Uganda, some of the community museums there are careful not to display objects or narratives related to the 20-year insurgency. Although some museums, such as the Museum of Acholi Art and Culture and Human Rights Focus Peace Museum, have tried to display objects related to the war as a warning that conflict is always bad, they have received several questions as to why they should remind the population of what they went through. The Refugee Law Project's National War Memorial and Peace Documentation Centre, situated in the same region, sets out to document a lot of Uganda's history, but more specifically, the peace and reconciliation processes during and after the war.

3.3.3. Ethnic Tensions and the Desire to Forge Unity in Society

According to the Uganda Human Rights Commission⁶, regions such as the Rwenzori region in western Uganda have experienced ethnic divisions for the biggest part of the post-independence period, and such regions are at the moment fractured along ethnic lines. The Rwenzori region is composed of four districts, the Kasese, Kabarole, Bundibugyo and Ntoroko districts. These districts comprise about 10 ethnic groups, the Babwisi, Baamba, Bavanoma, Batwa, Batuku, Bakonzo, Batooro, Banyabindi, Basongora and Bakingwe, with each having different cultural practices. With this cultural diversity

⁵ Land occupied by the Acholi of northern Uganda.

⁶ Uganda Human Rights Commission (UHRC) is a body established under the 1995 Constitution Article 51 under the Bill of Rights found in Chapter four of the Constitution. The Commission serves to monitor and advance human rights in Uganda.

and each group claiming its cultural space and identity, tensions have been rife, in some cases resulting in bloodshed. In 2016, the Bulemba community museum, which belonged to the Bakonzo community, was demolished by government forces, partly because it was deemed to promote cultures of a single community rather than being all-embracing. In the Bundibugyo district, the Baamba, Babwisi and Bavanoma established a community museum, referred to as the Obudhingiya Bwa Baamba (OBB) Cultural Museum. However, the current collection is not representative of the cultural resources and identities of the three communities. The museum is seen to favour Baamba who are the majority against the Babwisi and Bavanoma. In the Kabarole district (for Batooro), the Koogere Foundation community museum preserves milk pots, which belong to the Batuku community previously under the subjugation of the Batooro. At the museum, the pots are presented as Batooro milk pots. Therefore, documenting information concerning museum/cultural objects in places like the Rwenzori region is challenging. Sometimes, the same object might have different uses and meanings to different communities, and the museums have to be careful not to misrepresent or underrepresent information about the objects, that are common to the different communities.

3.4. Selected Contentious Historical Narratives and Objects

3.4.1. Narratives of Former Leaders

Uganda was ruled by the British from 1894 to 1962 when it gained independence. Between 1962 and 1986, Uganda had 8 presidents, including Sir Edward Muteesa (1963–1966), Apollo Milton Obote (1966–1971; 1980–1985), Idi Amin (1971–1979), Yusuf Lule (1979), Godfrey Binaisa (1979–1980), Paul Muwanga (1980), Bazilio Olara Okello (1985) and Tito Okello (1985–1968). Whereas many historians have written about the history of Uganda, and the information about Uganda's past heads of state is available in the public domain, the Uganda Museum has made little effort to have information about Uganda's past political history—particularly for the period between 1962 and 1986—in a centralized place for easy access by both local and foreign visitors. As quoted earlier on from *The Observer* newspaper, the Uganda museum does not display the narratives of the former presidents for political reasons.

3.4.2. Objects Perceived to Violate Human Rights, Such as 'Walumbe' (Death) Object Preserved at the Uganda Museum

Walumbe is a character in the Baganda⁷ creation legend. According to this legend, Walumbe is the son of Gulu (the one in heaven) and the brother of Nambi. His name is translated as "disease" or "death" and he is responsible for death on Earth, according to Baganda mythology. Whereas it is important that the Uganda Museum brings out this important mythology for young people to appreciate their oral history, some people (especially from Christian churches) have questioned the rationale for displaying the images of Walumbe in the museum. According to them, the object exudes an inexplicable horror and reminds people of diseases and death all of the time. In the same way, displaying bark cloth in many of the museums attracts mixed reactions from museum-goers, especially Christians, who associate bark cloth with death (it is used as a shroud to bury the dead and is also used in shrines).

3.4.3. Cultural Objects Deemed to Re-Enforce Violence against Women

In the north-eastern districts of Uganda, female circumcision has been practiced for centuries, until recently, when the government of Uganda passed the Anti-Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Act in 2010. According to Uganda's national newspaper, the *New Vision* (14 April 2017), FGM—according

⁷ Baganda are the largest ethnic group in Uganda in central Uganda and they have a myth that 'Walumbe' is responsible for diseases and death.

to the community—is a form of cultural identity, a rite of passage, is required to suppress women’s sexual desire and enforce fidelity, promotes hygiene, prepares girls for marriage, and instills pride and value among young girls. According to this newspaper, it was revealed that uncircumcised women attracted ridicule and rebuke from their in-laws and co-wives, who consider them to be dirty. In the presence of the law, many community museums and cultural centres in the region would have loved to display objects that are used during the circumcision process. However, from observations during the visits to the museums, it is clear that they are hesitant to do so. On one hand, they fear to be seen as agents against the cultural identity of the community, and on the other hand, the museums fear to be seen as perpetrators of women’s rights violation.

3.4.4. Objects That Seem to Re-Enforce Ethnic Tensions

As mentioned earlier, Uganda obtained her independence in 1962 and 4 years later, a situation of political anarchy ensued, which saw a number of hitherto powerful kingdoms banned under the 1967 Republican Constitution. In 1993 however, in a bid to reconcile political differences that were created in the 1960s, the government restored the kingdoms, albeit without political powers. According to the 1995 Constitution of Uganda [5] (Article 246 (1)), the institution of traditional or cultural leaders, subject to the provisions of the Constitution, may exist in any area of Uganda in accordance with the culture, customs and traditions or wishes and aspirations of the people to whom it applies. However, certain cultural communities, such as the Banyankore community, have not been granted this constitutional right, despite numerous reminders to the government. Some community members, such as Mr. Katatumba from the Ankole Cultural Trust, are quoted to have said that “failure by the government to restore the kingdom of Ankole has negatively impacted on Banyankole cultural practices and language”, calling for concerted efforts to actively advocate a restoration of the kingdom.

“I am disappointed by the government’s refusal to restore our kingdom. We need to promote Ankole Culture like other Kingdoms in Uganda. However, this can best be done if the government returns the kingdom assets like the regalia which is a symbol of cultural heritage. One of the most important regalia government of Uganda has refused to return to the Kingdom are the royal drums, locally known as bagyendanwa. These are the Ankole royal drums which were used during the coronation of the King, in worship and divination by royal family members. The bagyendanwa was supposed to be sounded only by the King and it was always kept inside the Palace. The bagyendanwa was the main instrument of power and justice” (Mr. Katatumba). Currently, original drums are kept in the strong of the National Museum with limited accessibility. One of the community museums (Igongo Culture Centre and Museum) in Ankore region presents replicas of the drum on display for the benefit of the current generations.

4. Conclusions

I would like to reiterate the importance of presenting our political history and cultural objects by museums in a fair and balanced manner. Our history and our cultural heritage, contested or not, should objectively be documented and presented for the benefit of the young generation, and for the current generation to build on the positive aspects of our history or cultures and pick lessons from the ‘bad’ history. What adds value to any museum object is to have its information, including the controversies associated with it, documented and presented to museum visitors, either through literature, photographic displays or live narrations.

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