

# Managing a museum resource in Zambia: A daunting task

By

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## INTRODUCTION

It is rare to find a museum that boasts of being self-sustaining. Most museums in Africa and elsewhere depend on Local Municipality or Central Government for funding. This means museums share the resources with other service institutions that equally rely on government funding. This is where the question of legitimacy and public support come in. To get public support museums should be viewed as legitimate and necessary institutions. It is very expensive to maintain a museum. Some of the pertinent questions those who fund museums always ask are: Is it worthy for any government to spend colossal sums of the taxpayers' money on Museums? What are Museums for? Whose interests do they serve? These are the questions museologists have to deal with to justify their existence and for them to win public support as their survival depends on how they deal with these issues. It is important to make people know the role museums play in society.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has defined a museum as "*a non profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purpose of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.*" (ICOM Code of Conduct, 1996) It is obvious from this definition that museums are established to serve society. The National Museums Board's mission statement echoes this aspect. It states "To establish, manage and develop National Museums on a sustainable basis for the Preservation and Interpretation of movable heritage *for the benefit of the present and future generations*" (Italics my emphasis) (National Museums Board Strategic Plan, 1996). The main beneficiaries of museum services should be the community in their vicinity. In multicultural societies like Zambia, museums should facilitate the forging of national unity in diversity. This is one role they assumed soon after the demise of colonialism. As Peters and others pointed out "The fundamental political and social changes in the first years after independence led to a fresh role for Museums in the new nations. It reflected the growing sense of cultural identity on the part of Africa's people and their desire to assemble and reconstruct a testimony of their indigenous civilization." (Peters, 1990 p.7)

For most people in Africa who do not regularly visit museums, they view museums as institutions that merely collect and keep ancient things (i.e. dead things or things that seemingly have no relevancy to peoples' life). Some people have no idea what goes on in a museum. They see people with certificates, diplomas, and degrees always reporting for work at their museums. When the Zambian economy was healthier than it is today they used to see people resigning from Government jobs to join museums. This prompted them to ask museum workers "what do you do in museums?" It is not easy for me to answer this question. The difficulty arises not because I do not know what I do but to find an answer that will make the questioner understand and appreciate the role museums play in national development. Some of them liken productivity of an institution to that of a factory where they are able to physically measure the output. However, others fully understand what museums stand for. These have supported museums either materially or morally.

I believe an officer entrusted with the responsibility of managing a museum should endeavour to make members of the public understand what museum workers do on daily basis and why public funds should be spent to develop and sustain museum operations. What makes the task difficult is that museums address various audiences and to address those adequately, museums should be able to identify those audiences in the first place. One way this can be done is to identify the various functions of museums.

## Museum Functions

Whenever I am asked what a museum is, I say it is a total sum of these functions: -

1. Research institution where new knowledge is being created and shared with fellow researchers and ultimately for the benefit of society.
2. An exhibition centre where fascinating but educative permanent and temporary displays are mounted for the public to (a) know who they culturally are; (b) make them realise their potential in the various aspects of their life; (c) decide what

course (direction) to take in determining their destiny.

3. A sanctuary for objects and specimens that have historical, scientific, ethnological, artistic, aesthetic value .
4. A preservation centre, where scientific methods are devised, tested and applied, to ensure that objects and specimens, which would normally rapidly disintegrate, have their life expectancy made longer.
5. An interpretation centre where heritage, ancient and contemporary, is interpreted so that it is made relevant to people's daily life and a sense of belonging is evoked among the owners of that heritage and their visitors (foreign tourists) grasp the basic cultural fabric of their hosts.
6. An information centre where members of the public go to gather information from the museum experts on various subjects.
7. A recreation resort where people who want to relax and pass time and at the same time learn something in an informal way go.

To satisfactorily perform these functions museums require a lot of investment in human, **and** material resources. The results of these functions should be seen on regular basis. This is where museum managers face challenges as indicated below. Museums in Zambia have not been able to satisfy these functions because of limited resources. Even if museums attempt to cultivate public confidence, it has not been easy to sustain it because there is little activity going on in museums. There are a number of factors responsible for this.

## **Museum Resources**

### **Human resources**

A museum that provides quality service needs qualified manpower at all levels. It takes many years to develop human resources to perform the functions outlined above. Worse still, there are not many training institutions that train high calibre personnel. In Zambia, Universities do not develop human resources in heritage related disciplines. So Zambian museums rely on institutions abroad for training. To acquire financial resources to send personnel for training and to retain the qualified personnel is an uphill battle. The decline in Government public expenditure arising from economic stagnation over the years implied reduction in government disbursement to the Ministry of Tourism in general and to National Museums in particular. Museum income through entrance fees and commercial ventures generated by remotely located museums like the Moto Moto Museum has been negligible partly because of poor infrastructure such as accessible tourist roads which have remained virtually undeveloped for many years; irregular air transport, poor accommodation provision and so on.

### **Transport**

Curators (Keepers) need reliable transport to enable them undertake fieldwork to acquire objects and specimen and associated information. As the situation prevails now, procurement of vehicles and their maintenance is an almost insurmountable task for a museum manager. Museums last procured vehicles in 1991.

### **Conservation Equipment and Materials**

Once the museum collection is in storerooms, it needs various pieces of equipment and materials for the Conservators to execute the scientific conservation methods and to study and reduce the effects on the agents of deterioration in the collection. The collection needs shelves that are not only strong enough to withstand the weight of objects but those that are conservation friendly. Above all there is need for a big storeroom. This problem has been outstanding at most of our museums, Moto Moto Museum included. The 1998 survey of developmental needs and building conditions in the museums of Zambia found that all the museums needed new storage rooms. This problem is not yet addressed due to acute shortage of financial resources.

### **Information Technology**

A museum is expected to timely process information for public consumption. This requires modern information technology, which most Zambian museums cannot afford to procure from their meagre financial resources. Therefore, museums keep limping along in an effort to catch up with other museums racing to the global village. To give one practical example, in 2000 the Moto Moto Museum that has been an active member of the Swedish African Museum Programme (SAMP) since 1989 was threatened with expulsion from the network because it could not maintain its electronic mail service. SAMP assisted by donating fax modems. To date the museum is struggling to sustain this service though the high telephone bills (arising mainly from the expensive dial-up system) are still a big threat. Furthermore, for personnel to carry out their work they need computers. Presently all the twenty three members of staff at the Moto Moto Museum have to share three computers, all of which were bought from the financial assistance of co-operating partners such as the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (NORAD).

#### *Donor Funding at Moto Moto Museum*

1999		2000		2001	
ZMK	US\$	ZMK	US\$	ZMK	US\$

14,565,404	3,641	25,323,333	6,331	20,426,000	5,106
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This funding from the co-operating partners has helped museums to carry out some of the core functions.

### Financial Dilemma

Zambian museums are currently facing a financial dilemma since they are ninety percent funded by Government. Reduction in amounts allocated by Government to the Board over the years coupled with the cash budget system the Government introduced in 1993 which allocated financial resources to institutions on monthly basis exacerbated the already bad situation.

#### *Government Funding to Moto Moto Museum between 1999 and 2002*

	1999		2000		2001		2002	
	ZMK	US\$	ZMK	US\$	ZMK	US\$	ZMK	US\$
Budget Estimate	464,525,000	116,131	951,945,986	237,986	1,060,424,212	265,106	2,673,451,964	668,363
Budget Allocation	211,000,000	52,750	374,458,436	93,615	402,051,769	100,513	345,000,000	86,250
Amount Received	121,830,660	30,458	250,974,640	62,744	374,458,436	93,615	-	-

This decline in Government allocation to museums has had negative impact on museums. This has been reflected in the Board's inability to:

- Meet statutory obligations (Income Tax, Value Added Tax, Workers' Compensation)
- Contribute to employees' pension schemes
- Pay its creditors
- Carry out rehabilitation and maintenance work
- Effectively carry out its core functions (research, exhibitions, conservation, public programmes etc)
- Invest in real property
- Pay amounts it owes staff (allowances, salary arrears between 1999 to date, etc)
- Pay death, retirement and retrenchment gratuities

In recent years it has been observed that the Government is pre-occupied with the society's demands in the health, education, and economic sectors on the one hand and poverty alleviation on the other. Because of these demands on Government, museums are always found at the bottom of the Government priority list. Ideally, the private sector should have come to the museums' rescue but the sector has shrunk due to unfair trade arrangements in the liberalized global economy and Government mismanagement of the economy. Can museums embark on self-sustaining programmes? The experiment carried out in the last few years in Zambia and other countries in the region have yielded negative results. Efforts to expand the economic ventures in Zambian museums have not been successful because there are inadequate financial resources to capitalize them. To supplement the Government grants each museum operates souvenir shops and coffee shops. The museums' needs survey of 1998 revealed that these have great potential but they are undercapitalised. If properly capitalised, museums would institute effective management arrangements to enable them operate optimally.

#### *Income from Commercial Ventures and Entrance Fees at Moto Moto Museum*

1999		2000		2001	
ZMK	US\$	ZMK	US\$	ZMK	US\$
1,171,927	293	1,250,044	312	6,640,372	1,660

### CONCLUSION

Zambian Museum Managers have a complex problem to solve. The segment of the public that supports the work of museums

wants quality service but resources to sustain museums are dwindling. How do we balance the scale? To sustain this good will from their clientele, museums should remain relevant to the tax paying community that is presently keeping them in existence. The war for museum survival is not yet lost. Private initiatives should be stepped up to complement the tax paying community's museum sustainability effort. Furthermore, networking strategies with heritage friendly organisations should be explored.

Museum Managers are trying hard to fully explore every avenue leading to the attainment of museum sustainability. They have a duty to fulfil the public mandate assigned to them. The task of managing this public resource is difficult but the consolation is that there is good will backing up museum managers. This is enough force to propel the museum fraternity forward.

The Government should address the issue of funding as it has an obligation to look after people's heritage, which gives them cultural base. It is only people who have a strong cultural base who can forge strong patriotism, unity of purpose, national identity and pride. These national virtues make people engage in developmental strategies with unwavering resolve to reach a common destiny. This is now more urgent than ever before in the light of negative aspects of globalisation movement. The role of museums and other cultural institutions in Africa, is becoming more critical as we are entering the Era of African Reconnaissance as manifested by the proceedings of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance which ended on 8 September 2001 in Durban, South Africa; the efforts being made by African states towards the consolidation of African Union as manifested by the Lusaka Summit of African Heads of State in July 2001 and its eventual launch on 8<sup>th</sup> July 2002 in Durban, South Africa ; economic integration efforts being made through regional groupings like Southern African Development Community (SADC), Common Market for Southern and Eastern Africa (COMESA) and Economic Commission For West African States (ECOWAS) and New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) launched in 2000 attest to Africans' realisation and effort to seek solutions and achieve prosperity from within the continent. Africa is searching within its cultural base for self-esteem to march forward. Museums have a stake in this. The National Museums Board of Zambia is the Government's instrument in this cultural crusade. However, for it to function effectively it must be adequately funded. Investment in cultural heritage may not show immediate benefits like in a manufacturing sector but it will ultimately pay off as it did in many countries elsewhere. Museums need recapitalization to start commercial oriented projects that will generate income needed for their operations.

## References

1. ICOM, Code of Professional Ethics, (1996)
2. National Museums Board Strategic Plan, (1996)
3. Susanne Peters et al (eds) Directory of Museums in Africa (London, Keg an Paul International, 1990)
4. Project Report on the Assessment of Developmental Needs and Museum Building Conditions in the National Museums of Zambia (National Museums Board and Norwegian Museums Authority,1998)

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ICME - International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography

<http://icme.icom.museum>

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