Museums and Intangible Heritage: The Afrikaans Language Museum

By

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Introduction

When one has been involved in museums for the past two to three decades in different ways, from an academic as well as a popular viewpoint, in theory and in practice, and was always very much aware of the importance of acknowledging and exhibiting intangible culture, it is astonishing to realise that the world of museums, especially in published works, today still accentuates material culture and in many cases totally ignores the existence of intangible culture. Proof of this statement is found in the definitions of museums formulated by ICOM and the Museums Association of the UK, for example, which both refer explicitly to material culture:

> *...which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, **material** evidence of people and their environment* (ICOM: website: http://icom.museum /definition.html)
> *...collect, safeguard and make accessible **artefacts and specimens**, which they hold in trust for society* (MA: http://www.museumassociation.org/ixbin/ hixclient.exe)

Intangible culture or heritage can of course be presented in museums in two different capacities: firstly it is in my opinion almost impossible to exhibit and explain artefacts without the context of customs and other intangible culture that forms the environment in which these artefacts belong. This capacity has received much more attention in recent years than a few decades ago. Secondly, intangible heritage can and should in many cases be exhibited as such: as a song, a custom, folk belief, folk dance or language. I believe that there are several reasons for the fact that this was seriously neglected in the past, the most important reason certainly that of tradition which can be traced back to the origin of museums. Another reason is the fact that it is much more difficult to display intangible heritage; it demands considerable imagination and maybe more technical aids than the display of material culture.

Several consulted works on museums dated in the past decade, give no reference at all to intangible culture in museums or suggest even vaguely that it exists. Their point of departure is that museums are there to collect, research and display **material** culture (Falk & Dierking 2000; Boylan 1992; Moore 1994; Moore 1997; Belcher 1991; Macdonald 1998).

In South Africa the term *oral history* is such a buzz word nowadays, that each and everybody connected to the discipline of history, museums, archives, certain government departments and several other institutions wants to conduct oral history projects. Although this may sound promising and positive, the pity is that most of these people do not really understand the concept, know nothing about the academic side of oral history, have no idea how to conduct such a project and last but not least, are not willing to learn from experts.

At the Department of Cultural History at the University of Stellenbosch oral history has been conducted for almost four decades. It is not a 'new' concept, like the website of the Oral History Society suggests. This homepage says: *No longer are we dependent only on the written word,* (http://www.oralhistory.org.uk) as if oral history is a totally new invention. We have for centuries not been dependent on the written word. For ages local history, community events, folklore and genealogy have been transmitted orally through generations. It is inter alia as a result of this work done by the Dept of Cultural History, that some museums in South Africa have been made aware of intangible heritage and have been encouraged to incorporate this in their exhibitions. The attention due to intangible heritage was further enhanced in South

Africa's National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 which enforces the conservation of living or intangible heritage (Act no 25 of 1999).

Why a language museum?

In 1942 the inhabitants of the town Paarl decided to erect a monument for the Afrikaans language, to establish a museum and to start a special study fund for students of Afrikaans. They started to collect funds for this monumental idea and in 1975 the Afrikaans Language Monument was inaugurated.

The original idea behind the Afrikaans Language Museum in the 1970's was to honour the members and work of a society (the GRA) founded in 1875 in Paarl. Their aims were to establish Afrikaans as a written language, to standardise the language and to start publishing in Afrikaans. The home of one of the leaders of this society, Gideon Malherbe, was bought and furnished as nearly as possible to the original. During the past two years a lot of work has been done to put up a complete new exhibition on the top floor of the building, while the ground floor is still dedicated to the original idea. The new exhibition can be seen as an additional function which aims to indicate that the language is dinamic and it develops and adapts continuously as circumstances require (Brochure: *The Afrikaans Language Museum,* 2003).

The exhibition

As the museum is housed in a family home with several rooms, smaller than rooms normally designed for museums, it was very challenging to utilise these rooms to their optimum. All the signage in the museum is presented in the three official languages of the Western Cape, namely Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa. That is also the case with texts and commentary on sound systems. Another challenge in which the exhibition succeeds is to avoid making the museum or the exhibtion itself a political instrument, which, according to San Roman, should be avoided at all costs (San Roman 2000: 27).

This presentation will bring you only highlights of the exhibition, not of course the complete one.
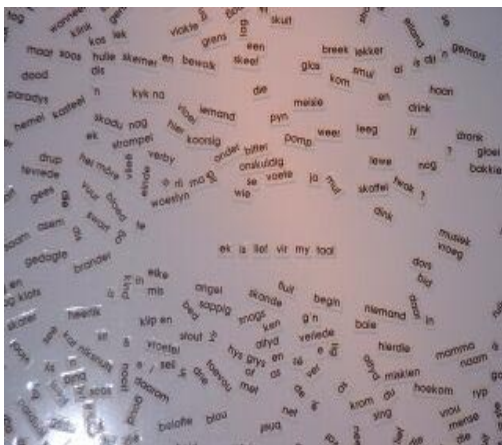
Room 1: Of the four types of orientation that Belcher suggests are necessary in museums, namely geographical, intellectual, conceptual and psychological, the first room in this exhibition only complies to the last type, the psychological (1991:99-100). The reason is that the theme of the room is: MEET AFRIKAANS, and the visitor is not geographically orientated or guided in any way, or taken intellectually from the unkown to the known. It is a room where the visitor can walk around and enjoy several aspects of the language, for example the names of seaside holiday houses, pinned like washing on a line. The names reveal an important ability of Afrikaans, namely to form puns with words and parts of words which results in very good humour, sometimes sophisticated and difficult to catch, but in others straight forward and very funny. There are also signposts like road indicators displaying very catching place names. On one wall is a large board with plaster poetry, where visitors can put together sentences, rhymes, names or messages as they like. Another board has a collection of satirical poems by a well known Afrikaans poet, Philip de Vos. Visitors enjoy this tremendously. Next to that is a collection of Afrikaans jokes that can be found on the internet. From the ceiling hang a few banners with short verses of folk poetry, mostly quatrains.

Room 2: The next room is devoted to the roots of Afrikaans. Very informative are the banners indicating Afrikaans vocabulary taken from the different languages other than Dutch, that contributed to the formation of the language, like the Khoi language (actually there were several Khoi languages), Malay, Portuguese, Arabic, Nguni, Sotho and English. One wall displays a huge map of the world which indicates with the aid of arrows the parts of the world where the roots of Afrikaans lie. At the southern point of Africa is a port-hole that enlarges South Africa as the geographical background of the formation of this language. There is a sound system where the visitor can listen with earphones to an explanation of the roots of Afrikaans in all three official languages. Another large circular design in this room introduces the visitor to the different cultural groups that contributed originally to the first stages of the language, for example the Khoi people, the Dutch, the slaves and the French Huguenots.

Room 3: Room 3 houses examples of group language and variants of Afrikaans. On a stand at the entrance is a short summary of the meaning of group language and the different examples traced in South Africa. On the walls are photographs of speakers of a particular group language or variant, with phrases or vocabulary underneath. What makes this theme very

lively, is a video playing short clips of people speaking variants of Afrikaans. There are for instance examples of the Afrikaans spoken by sheep shearers, fishermen of Waenhuiskrans, taxi Afrikaans, Cape Afrikaans, spoken by the coloured people of Cape Town and vicinity, Afrikaans of the West Coast and student language.

Room 4: This room represents folk language in different forms, for example folk tales, songs, rhymes, riddles, place names and idioms and sayings. It is partly focused on the interests of children, but there is enough for the adult visitor also. Firstly there is an armchair next to a CD player where one can relax and with earphones listen to tall stories, a particularly popular genre in the folk tale tradition of Afrikaans. A large board is devoted to riddles, painted in bright colours with a cosmic theme of moons, stars and planets. One sickle moon is transformed into a big question mark. Each riddle is printed on a laminated card which hooks onto a small door with a wooden knob. As the door opens, it reveals the answer to the riddle. The visitor can therefore test him/herself before looking at the answer, and the riddles can replaced to ensure that the display does not remain static.

According to Caulton when the term *hands-on* is used, there is normally an assumption that the activities will involve interaction and provide added educational value, that hands-on will lead to *minds-on. Interactive,* he says, implies that visitors will engage in mental interaction, which can happen without physical interaction taking place. The term is therefore often associated with computer games where the only physical activity taking place is via the keyboard and where entertainment and education are not necessarily joint objectives (Caulton 1998:2). One computer in this room of the exhibition supplies interactivity which happens via the keyboard, but where entertainment and education are definitely both provided. An enjoyable programme of Afrikaans idioms and sayings called *Gekke Gesegdes* was designed for the computer. It is done in the form of a test, supplies humoristic comments on your answers and results in a certificate which indicates your percentage obtained, prints your name and can be signed by a staff member of the museum. As part of the exhibtion on children's songs and games, a beautifully illustrated panel which provides the words of songs and rhymes and suggests different children's games, covers one wall. On another computer the visitor can access a number of children's games by activating a dvd to watch the children play and sing together with their play. The words of the songs are transcribed and projected at the bottom of the screen. Of all the thousands of interesting place names in Afrikaans, the so called *fountain* names were selected to be represented here. A collection of more than 200 place names ending on the Afrikaans word –*fontein* (fountain) is written in a curving S form from big to small, suggesting the infinity of these interesting names. An explanation for the abundance of these names in Afrikaans is also supplied. The last feature in this room is a white board supplied with a temporary marker for use by visitors to make comments on the exhibition or to add interesting facts.

Room 5: The more formal aspects of the word craft are represented in room 5, for instance the art of the making of dictionaries. Examples of several volumes of the dictionary of the Afrikaans language are displayed on a desk that is specially designed for lexicographers. An enlarged reproduction of a Scrabble board is mounted in the centre of this room with huge letter blocks that visitors can play with. This is a very enjoyable and intellectual internationally known word game, of which the Afrikaans version is particularly challenging and has lots of potential for creativeness. Afrikaans authors are represented by their names and dates on individual laminated cards, hooked with S-brackets onto a large mesh panel. Each period, covering more or less three decades, is represented by a specific colour, but the colours are evenly spread over the board; that means that writers of a period are not grouped together. This is quite cleverly done, because apart from the fact that it gives an aesthetic pleasant appearance, it is also difficult for a visitor to check whether a certain writer's name is there. Even so, if they may find a name or names lacking, there is also a white board like the one in the previous room where they can supply names or make any suggestions.

Room 6: The contents of the last room of this exhibition is aimed at the visitor who does not mind reading and actually appreciates information of an historical nature. This display is dedicated to Afrikaans in the media, especially the audio-visual media. Four categories or genres were identified, namely drama and music, radio, film and television and general cultural historical events. The history of these four genres in Afrikaans was thoroughly researched and incorporated in a time line, separated by four soft colours. The time line is presented on both sides of each of three lengthy boards, put up in the centre of the room. The highlights in history of each category are indicated on the time line, and on the blank spots on the different lines where nothing of importance was recorded, interesting drawings and photographs are incorporated. The time line covers the period from 1652 to 2003 and can be extended. There is also a noteboard which lists all the sources used for the compilation of the time line.

Conclusion

There is a truism in the museum field that people do not read labels. Casual observation of museum visitors will tend to confirm this. Nevertheless it is not true of every visitor, nor is it true of every exhibition (Klein as quoted in Edson & Dean 1994: 189).In the first five rooms of this exhibition there is relatively little convetional card type material to be read and the reading material which is supplied, is easily readable and not presented on small cards in small print, but rather on large banners or interesting panels. Many hands-on, minds-on and interactive displays are presented, which makes a visit to this museum an enjoyable as well as an educational experience. There are of course other museums in South Africa which are successful in representing intangible history, but they are few as yet. This museum in its totality presents intangible culture and this new display makes the Afrikaans Language Museum, although very small in comparison to most other museums, one of the leading institutions in South Africa in the field of displaying intangible heritage.

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