

History, context and identity at the Sukuma Museum

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How can a museum avoid 'silencing' objects that have been removed from the practices and context which gave them meaning? This question is of particular importance to African museums where individual artefacts often have a living relationship with the community and form part of a total cultural experience. The thoughtful and innovative response of the Sukuma Museum in the United Republic of Tanzania is recounted by Mark H. C. Bessire, who has just completed a Fulbright Fellowship in Museum Studies at the Sukuma Museum. He recently coordinated the exhibition Art of Identity: African Sculpture from the Teel Collection for the Fogg Museum at Harvard University.

The Sukuma Museum in the northwestern region of the United Republic of Tanzania has recently undertaken the task of re-cataloguing its collection of objects from the Sukuma culture and is redesigning its exhibition spaces. Such a vigorous task has unearthed many issues regarding contemporary museum display and the contextualization of cultural artefacts in the museum setting. In reorganizing the twenty- to thirty-year-old display, the museum took the opportunity to reconsider the significance of the objects and the efficacy of their educational value. The issues that were raised during the project were of topical and philosophical interest to museums of art and cultural artefacts. The museum wanted to maintain the cultural heritage and ritual power of the objects and was concerned to avoid the silencing of such objects which were removed from practice and context when placed in the museum. There was also an awareness of the relationship of the museum collection to the history of the institution and the taxonomies that were utilized to organize the collection.¹ All of these considerations were related to the need to gain a better understanding of the permanent collection by reconciling its history, context, and identity within the museum setting.

In past years the issue of the contextualization of cultural artefacts has been a topic of discussion for museums, artists, academia and cultural groups. This discourse has often exposed the tendency of museums to defend a specific curatorial agenda through exhibition constructions or the decontextualization of an object or culture. The challenging of traditional cataloguing and taxonomic paradigms has revealed the consequences of the curatorial manipulation of objects and their meaning. These issues influenced the Sukuma Museum's initial project evaluation of its exhibi-

tion display. The alternative to the dilemma of decontextualization, the museum decided, is to display cultural objects in an educational setting providing all relevant cultural, aesthetic and historical information, while at the same time recognizing the inherent existence of the curatorial voice. This creates an agenda that strives to educate the public as to the objects' original contexts and meanings, and, on another level, recognizes the objects' changing identities created by the decontextualization or layering of contexts within the museum.

Today, one question that faces the museum in its current soul-searching revitalization, is how it should define its identity and context: ethnographically, historically, culturally, or as a living museum? Who is exhibiting whose culture? The Sukuma Museum is not only redesigning its exhibition of Sukuma culture, but re-examining the history of the institution itself. It is a process that will attempt to reveal the agenda of those in control of the display and the reasons why and how they chose to present certain aspects of Sukuma culture. This tactic is intended to demystify the authority of the museum and place the institution's history and mission on display as a historical document, an artefact in itself, alongside the art collected and chosen to represent the culture. This is not a simple proposition for the museum, which was originally founded by Fr David Clement, a Catholic missionary in Africa, with the help of two indigenous church groups, the Bana Cesilia and the Bujora Research Committee.

Up until now what has been presented at the Sukuma Museum does not reveal the full history of the museum's origins. Visitors view the excellent cultural art/artefacts of the permanent collection and are exposed to information

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The monstrance designed with Sukuma symbolism is carried in the annual procession on the feast of Corpus Christi.

concerning the Sukuma chiefs, dance societies, blacksmiths, and traditional doctors. But, on another level, the museum represents the history of the Catholic Church in Africa and specifically the Sukuma region in the United Republic of Tanzania. The church at Bujora is situated at the end of a tree-lined avenue where it towers over the surrounding museum's exhibition halls. The large circular church dominates the landscape and its painted patterns symbolically represent the triangular shape of a traditional Sukuma home. The triangular shape also resembles the *lupingu*, a Sukuma amulet worn in reverence for one's maternal ancestors which the Bujora Church translated into a signifier for the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When the round church, the first of its type in the country, was built in the 1950s in the shape of a Sukuma traditional home, it created quite a controversy.

In 1954, under Fr David Clement, the Bujora Parish became the official experimental and spiritual centre for 'adaptation'. At that time, adaptation, which was related to the teaching of the Catholic liturgy through indigenous symbols and traditions, was questioned by many Western missionaries and African priests. Yet, with the support of the Bana Cesilia and the Bujora Research Committee, Clement was able to channel local knowledge and faith to translate the Catholic liturgy and symbols into Kisukuma and later Kiswahili. Never part of a vision or a plan, the notion of a museum evolved from his work with adaptation. It was an excellent opportunity, in a particular era, at a specific site. The museum later matured into a vehicle for adaptation and became an outlet for the work of the Bana Cesilia and Research Committee. It was also a time of transition for the Catholic Church in the United Republic of Tanzania, the post-independence government and a moment that Fr Clement realized he could tap into. In the mid 1960s, soon after the government had abolished the power of the Sukuma chiefs, Clement emerged as a collector. He gained the faith of some royal families who were interested in preserving their royal objects and willing to give or trade them to the new museum, or *makumbusho* in Kiswahili.

Slowly objects were collected and placed in the Royal Pavilion, a structure built in the shape of a royal throne. Yet, even before the Royal Pavilion was built in 1969, the first museum building, the Sukuma Homestead, was dedicated to the Bana Cesilia and opened on 22 November 1968, the Feast day of St Cesilia. The Homestead is a collection of Sukuma cultural artefacts donated by individual members of the Bana Cesilia. In 1971, the Dance Pavilion was built to illustrate the importance of dance for Sukuma culture and to pay homage to the region's most important

dance societies, the Bagalu and Bagika. From as early as the 1950s, Fr Clement had attempted to incorporate Sukuma songs and dance into the church. He also realized the importance of gaining the respect of Sukuma dance leaders. To this end he sponsored a dance festival that was inaugurated after the traditional religious Corpus Christi feastday procession. Clement was the first leader to bring these two groups together for meetings and encouraged them to participate in dance competitions at *Bulabo*, the Sukuma name for the feast of Corpus Christi.

Reclaiming history

This brief history and description reveals how history complements the objects on display. It also forces a much richer understanding of this unique museum's place within Tanzanian, Sukuma, and Catholic history. And if we return to the notion of constructing a curatorial agenda, one that chooses a single point of view, we can see how easy it would be to disguise its identity and alienate the Catholic influences in order to recode the collection as a strictly Sukuma undertaking. When we examine the Sukuma Museum's history as well as its exhibition agenda it is necessary to recognize the Western role in its founding. For the African museum, it is a challenge to define the philosophical heritage of categories and taxonomic systems.

The museum's current project is partially an attempt to define its categories and conceptual systems, which can be defined as taxonomies, and their relationship to history, context and identity. The museum wants to reclaim its history and to activate the collection to signify a reversal of perspectives. A large aspect of this break is a response to the Western notion of what the African philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe calls



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'the idea of Africa,' one that is framed by Eurocentric taxonomies, modes of display, and a linear perspective on civilizations and art history. When these issues, which are equated to the museum agenda, are brought to the forefront, limitations are placed on the museum's institutional authority. Some museums in the United States have already been criticized for forcing certain readings of an artist or movement through particular exhibitions in an attempt to validate their institutional collecting. There may be post-colonial criticism of early collecting at the Sukuma Museum, but the museum feels responsible for unveiling its history, context, and identity, allowing others to decide for themselves.

The Royal Pavilion, Sukuma Museum.

As we have witnessed the post-modern shift in anthropology and the humanities from nature to culture and from history to discourse, so too are art and ethnographic museums transforming outdated

taxonomies and attempting to at least decode outmoded designations and labels. Today, exhibition planning depends as much on how to display art as on what art to display. The Sukuma Museum plans to go well beyond the basic museological criteria for labelling by decoding the permanent collection and providing full documentation in Kisukuma, Kiswahili and English. It will also eventually reveal its agenda through an exhibition of the museum's history. In many ways this recoding of the collection begins the process of levelling the labelling field and prepares the way for the Sukuma Museum staff to then fully deal with the relation of object and order. Once the objects have been defined within their own history, context and identity, a new 'ordering' may emerge.

Dr Paul Msemwa, director of the Village Museum in Dar-es-Salaam, feels that contextualization is necessary when displaying African objects in a museum setting. He explains in an interview that

objects should be accompanied by a cultural description, a photograph of the object (or of a similar type) *in situ*, and if possible a video. In addition, he views the totality of the performance as art and points out that it can be difficult to single out an object and say this is an art piece. The Village Museum, which Dr Msemwa defines as a 'living museum', has chosen to have cultural days supported by local communities who present dance, song, cooking and other activities of their specific cultural group to create a context around the art. The Village Museum's African audience, he claims, is more interested in the 'totality' than in looking at individual objects in a static setting.²

Collection and community

Similarly, in considering the issue of context, the Sukuma Museum has attempted to integrate the permanent collection with

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The opening of the Traditional Doctors Pavilion at the Sukuma Museum; traditional doctors are dancing the mbina ya Balungu.

the local community. In this way the museum objects have maintained their potency as cultural icons and the Sukuma Museum can also be regarded as a living museum. Although the objects are separated by the boundaries of the museum walls, it is desirable that Sukuma culture and museum context meld to create a hybrid environment of institutional authority and cultural surroundings. There are many examples of the close connection between the community and the museum. In 1995, elders from the Bana Cesilia group accompanied the loan of two royal drums for use in a royal ceremony in a neighbouring chiefdom. As another example, Mzee Kishosha Budomaji, an *ntemi*, or local leader of the Bagalu dance Society and father of the manager of the Sukuma Museum, Jefta Kishosha, often visits the museum to cleanse and re-empower the Bagalu Society objects.

As these celebratory events with objects take place, the works are able to project a strong sense of identity and cultural purposes which remains with the object as it is placed back on display. Thus, rather than silencing objects through display, the Sukuma Museum attempts to keep them 'alive' and resists any tendency towards neglect or a lack of *beshima* (Kiswahili for 'respect'), for the objects in its care. The registration team learned from interviews with traditional doctors that most of the ritual *dawa* or medicine contained in the calabashes, dance bags or *pembe* (animal horns) has sustained its power while in the museum. Yet, like many Sukuma medicines, some must be used or cleansed to revitalize their strength, so it is not the display that extinguishes the power but the lack of respect or practical use by someone who is initiated in the knowledge of the medicine.

The ability to resist the mausoleum effect which can stifle cultural artefacts is made possible by fostering the trust of the community represented and especially of those elders whose objects are in the permanent collection. The cultural vitality of the museum is also achieved by creating a cultural centre for those practising the traditional ways, those who want to learn history, and those who are creating the new traditions. Theory is often reinforced with practice in such instances as when Joseph Mahyegu Lupande, the Bujora Cultural Centre's manager, attended a royal installation in the Sima Chiefdom in 1995. For over twenty-five years there had been no chiefly installation ceremonies in Usukuma and the recent re-emergence has been difficult as much of the royal regalia has been lost and most of the *banang'oma*, or royal attendants, have died. This has left the present generation in a vacuum without information concerning the royal Sukuma ceremonies. The museum and its staff filled this vacuum for the Sima Chiefdom and on other major occasions provided not only the necessary information concerning the traditional rites and rituals, but authentic examples of Sukuma royal regalia that are essential to the ceremonies. Mzee Lupande explained that during the installation in the Sima Chiefdom, he guided the new chief through the coronation steps like a teacher, as few of the participants had ever experienced the royal rites and rituals.

Just as integration with the Sukuma community is a major part of the museum's activities, the overall agenda must be reshaped and the future reconciled with its Sukuma and Catholic past. To be in control, to project identity, the Sukuma Museum plans to reveal its original agenda and the historical experience of the institution in order to offer the visitor the option to gaze at the collection on multiple levels. The museum is

counteracting the suffocation and decontextualization of ethnographic museums by offering the permanent collection the opportunity to tell its own history through museum display as much as through contemporary dance competitions and royal ceremonies.

With limited financial support and professional training, the Sukuma Museum is fighting to sustain its commitment to Sukuma culture. Though the museum's mission may be very different from other museums, the positive and negative issues raised by the experiences of other museums helped set the parameters of the project to register the collection and redesign the exhibition spaces. During the work, the museum kept returning to the issues of history, context, and identity. It realized that the use of its objects for rites and rituals alongside those of the local community enhances the identity and symbolism of the objects in the museum's care. In many ways the object's identity is related to history and changing contexts; when these traditions are perpetuated, its identity is reinforced. Its use also expresses identity while at the same time projecting the history which places it in its original context. It is within this locus that tradi-

tional objects and ceremonies are renewed and revitalized by contemporary innovation and society. The museum wants to be positioned at this site where tradition and innovation are melded because it is the meeting place of the shifting identities of the museum and Sukuma culture.³ ■

Notes

1. Sukuma history and culture are still very much based on oral traditions. As the founders of the museum were the first to institutionalize Sukuma history and culture, the history they chose to present through the museum display should be seen in the light of their agenda and as a construction of Sukuma history.
2. See Fidelis T. Masao, 'Reviving the Village Museum in Dar-es-Salaam', *Museum International*, No. 177 (Vol. 45, No. 1, 1993).
3. The author would like to thank members of the Bujora Village, the Bana Cesilia dance troupe, the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology and the Fulbright Committee, for supporting the work of the Sukuma Museum.