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Title: Documenting Local Knowledge Systems and Objects: Experiences of Documenting the Bemba Initiation Collection at Moto Moto Museum

Introduction

Interpretation and documentation of indigenous knowledge systems, practices and related objects has become one of the most significant aspects of heritage management, with museums at the heart of this process. With about 73 ethnic groups in Zambia with diverse traditions, museums in Zambia assume the role of documenting, researching and preserving this rich heritage through their collections. With over 15,000 ethnographic objects, Moto Moto Museum is the only museum in the Northern half of the country, drawing its collection from ethnic groups like the Mambwe, the Lungu and the Bemba. In the documentation of a part of its collection-the *Mbusa* collection, which is a collection of sacred objects used for initiation among the Bemba, Mambwe and Lungu, the museum has drawn on the *expertise* of local community members who have knowledge on the rites and knowledge associated with the objects, ensuring that the knowledge rights and cultural values associated with the objects are maintained. This paper also highlights challenges of documenting this collection, which include access to rites and practices whose observance is shrouded. The paper calls for the

documentation of objects and practices the plural perspectives in order to achieve a representation of human culture that highlights progress and continuity.

Moto Moto Museum *Mbusa* collection

The *Mbusa* collection is a collection of clay figurines or sacred emblems involving the practices associated with sacred and highly secretive processes of initiation among the Bemba, Mambwe and Lungu people of Northern Zambia. Together with the majority of the museum's collection which has objects on the material culture of the people of Northern Zambia, the *mbusa* collection was collected by the founder of the museum, a catholic priest by the name of Jean Jacques Corbeil in the 1940s¹. The *mbusa* have highly encoded and symbolic meaning and were/are used through teachings, dance, songs and performance to teach moral, social and sexuality knowledge to young initiates during puberty and marriage rites. These initiation rites are done by specialised midwives in society, who also hold the knowledge of the figurines, as well as the song, dance and other performances such as gesturing that went with each specific emblem. The most significant aspect of the *mbusa* ceremonies and rites is that they are considered sacred and are done in secret. Hence only the traditional midwives and those who have undergone the initiation actually know the teachings involved.

Museum professionals and other 'experts': Documenting the *mbusa* collection

¹ Corbeil was the second person after Audrey Richards –the British anthropologist- to make a sustained study of Bemba initiation ceremonies. In the 1930s Audrey Richards spent 38 months of anthropological fieldwork among the Bemba. Richards also collected some *mbusa* emblems which she later donated to the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg South Africa. See A I Richards, *Cisungu: a Girls's Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia* (New York: Grove Press, 1957).

Corbeil did not document all of the collections he collected given that he originally did not conceive of his collection as a museum. His collection was mostly private, and collected as part of a policy of enculturation by the Catholic Church in its formative period in Zambia (Northern Rhodesia until 1964). For most of its early life the collection was stored in ad hoc means and was also displayed in his different homes and posting in the manner of a ‘cabinet of curiosity’ until the collection grew immensely and was afforded the status of a national museum in 1974.

Against this background, one major success on the management of this collection has been the collection of information on related objects. This has been done through manual documentation which involved the collection of object names, uses, descriptions, and meaning.





Mbusa emblems on display in Ethnography Gallery



Part of documented collection in the museum storeroom

The documentation of this collection has been done through partnership between the museum and the traditional initiation experts. Since the late 1990s, the museum has formed a group of about 20 *fimbusa* who have become attached to the museum education and research sections and helped the documentation of this collection by providing related information on the objects and their interpretation. Considering that the initiation ceremonies are done in secret, very few people know how to interpret the meanings, or the songs, dance and other kind of performance to go with each object, the museums partnership/collaboration with the traditional knowledge experts is has being key to the documenting of the collection. The

collaboration between Moto Moto Museum and the traditional knowledge experts represents for me one of the most successful and sustainable partnerships between museum professional and community members' in the documentation and interpretation of museum objects.



A traditional initiation expert making replicas of the mbusa for educational and mobile exhibitions purposes

Museum documentation is not only concerned with recording information related to objects but also how this information is disseminated to different sections of the public through exhibitions, research, publications and other programs. In the past six months alone, the *mbusa* collection has been the subject of at least three temporal exhibitions, including a publication and exhibition for young adults that uses the teachings in the initiation emblems to teach on HIV/AIDS.² In this vain the museum collaborates with these traditional initiation experts in information dissemination. Hence during the temporal exhibitions, public programs the initiation counsellors are called in collaboration with museum staff to interpret the exhibition for the public.

² Victoria Chitungu and Clare Mateke , *Viengo and Mbusa in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS* (Lusaka: University of Zambia Press, 2015)



Traditional

initiation experts interpreting and performing mbusa during museum programs

By collaboration between the museum professionals and local knowledge experts in knowledge production, a form of co-authoring interpretation and knowledge is enabled. In this way, the spiritual and cultural values that the community attaches to the objects and related practices are served through museum- community collaborations.

Challenges in documenting the *mbusa* collection

An integral aspect of the *mbusa* initiation ceremonies is that aspects of the ceremony practices and knowledge associated with it is secretive and only accessible to few legitimate members such as the traditional counsellors. It is considered taboo for initiates to share this knowledge or discuss it openly with uninitiated people. Commenting on the work of Audrey Richards on the ceremony, Corbeil the founder of Moto Moto Museum noted, ‘Dr. Audrey I Richards, the anthropologist...saw the initiation ceremony in 1931. However I have the impression that the midwives, especially Bana Ngoshe who was in charge of the ceremony, performed it more to please the good doctor than to reveal everything.’³ Without a doubt some aspects of the ceremony are still considered too scared to be shared publicly or documented in the manner that we might expect as museum professionals. This secrecy and mode of preserving and transmitting knowledge can be seen as part of the intangible heritage associated with initiation ceremonies and the emblems. Such a scenario invites a reflection on

³ Jean Jacques Corbeil, *Mbusa: Sacred Emblems of the Bemba* (London: Ethnographical publishers 1982), 1.

how museum functions may positively and practically engage with traditional knowledge systems that may conflict with conventional aspects of museum work.⁴ It also invites us to reflect on a provocative question: “how do community and museum-based epistemologies intersect and clash around each other?”⁵

Principles of museum documentation oblige us to document contextual information associated with objects. In the case of Moto Moto Museum, part of the contextual information that needs to go with the objects is the songs, dance and performance that accompany the objects. It is such kind of information that give life and meaning to the objects. Several factors, among them lack of resources and lack of specialised documentation staff, has hindered the museum from digitally documenting this contextual information and incorporating it in a digital database, with associations between objects and accompanying song, dance and other performance.

Additionally, in thinking about how contexts inform our documentation practices, I find it helpful to take the suggestion to reflect on how histories of collections impact the form of representations and meanings that museums through processes of acquisition, exhibition, conservation, and communication create around objects. As one of the papers in the 2014 CIDOC conference noted, documentation is the ‘link’ that brings all these processes together and is therefore at the heart of these processes of creation of meanings and representation.⁶ In

⁴ For a detailed case study on conflicts between indigenous methods of controlling knowledge and conventional museum functions, see for example Moira G. Simpson “Revealing and Concealing: Museums, Objects, and the Transmission of Knowledge in Aboriginal Australia”, in Janet Marstine (ed) *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction* (Blackwell, Oxford: 2006), 152-174.

⁵ Ivan Karp and Corine A. Kratz, “The Interrogative Museum”, in Raymond Silverman (ed) *Translating Knowledge: Global perspectives on Museum and Community*, (New York, Routledge).

⁶ Jens M. Lill and Werner Schwebenz, “Mind the gap! Documentation as a “missing link” in the ICOM definition of museum” paper presented at the CIDOC 2014 conference, Dresden Germany, September 2014. Accessed 20th July 2014.

1957 Corbeil started collecting the *mbusa* emblems out of fear of the ‘great danger that the traditional way of life with all the riches it contains will be abandoned in favour of pseudo-European way of life.’⁷ However, like many traditional practices, the Bemba initiation ceremonies continue to be practised today. The preservation and documentation of the objects Corbeil collected has ensured the preservation of these practices at a particular period of history, enabling us to appreciate the creativity and innovation of the society. Initiation objects like the ones Corbeil collected are still used for initiation rites today, both in rural and urban areas. However, the contexts between Corbeil’s time and now are different, and so is the contexts in contemporary practices between the rural and urban areas. In order to avoid a static representation of the *mbusa* objects and practices associated with them, the museum needs to collect research and document the contemporary practices of *Mbusa* ceremonies, including their plurality of perspectives such as the practices in the rural areas and in the urban areas. What this will enable is to show the story of human progress and cultural continuity associated with the *mbusa* objects, enabling the collection to be an archive of these practices.



Contemporary urban mbusa

marriage ceremony

Conclusion

This paper sought to share experiences at Moto Moto Museum in the documentation of a part of its collection whose practices, value and meanings are rooted in complex indigenous

⁷ Corbeil, “Forward”, in *Mbusa: Sacred Emblems of the Bemba*.

knowledge systems and practices. In documenting this collection, the *mbusa* Bemba imitation objects, the museum has entered into a long standing collaboration with members of the community who are experts in the initiation rites and ceremonies. This has enabled the community from where the objects come from to be involved in the documentation of this collection as well and in the creation of exhibitions and other activities involving the collections. Hence the intangible values and knowledge rights of the objects and practices are protected and sustained. However, documenting knowledge that is considered sacred and whose right of access is embedded in specific cultural observances and shrouded in secrecy as is the case of the *mbusa* presents the challenge of how museum can relate with such systems, raising the importance of reflecting on how museum activities interlock and clash with such forms of knowledge. Such cultural values and norms can be seen as part of the intangible heritage associated with the objects. This paper additionally reflected on the importance of collecting, researching and documenting the plurality of perspectives that are inherent in cultural objects and practices. This allows for the representation of objects as a part of a human story of progress, and can contribute to giving current and future generations a sense of continuity and identity.⁸

⁸ Unesco, "What is Intangible cultural Heritage" www.unesco.org/cultur/ich/scr/01851-En.pdf accessed 20th July, 2015.

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