Networked Communication: Are Museums in Sub-Saharan Africa Ready?

Mubiana Luhila
Livingstone Museum
Zambia

Museums and the online world: possibilities for museums in sub-Saharan Africa

We live in an information age. The age of the Internet and the World Wide Web is with us. It is here to stay. New ways of doing business, delivering services and achieving greater impact on communities have been opened up.

Can museums in sub-Saharan Africa ignore these new opportunities that will allow them to increase access to their collections, improve the public's perception of their relevance and to stay in touch with the world? I think not.

Nevertheless, are issues of digitization and going online the most pressing issues sub-Saharan African museums currently face? If they choose not to ignore the opportunities presented by the Internet, do they have the resources to effectively go and stay online?

With the advent of the information revolution a conceptual shift over the value of the museum object is occurring. Andrea Witcomb, narrating this shift says "for George MacDonald (Canadian Museum of Civilization) 'all museums are, at the most fundamental level, concerned with information: its generation, its perpetuation, its organization and its dissemination' [1992:161]. This means that objects and other documentary material are important not for any intrinsic value but for their information value." He continues, ... "It is thus that he (George MacDonald) can claim that museums are about information rather than objects. From an information perspective, for MacDonald, there is no difference between an object and a photograph or an oral tape. All three represent information." [Witcomb: 1997].

Given this scenario, the object thus relinquishes its traditional role as the sole communicator of messages. Copies, digital copies of the object, can now communicate the message(s) of an object. However, can a digital copy of an object communicate all of the message(s) carried by an original object? Can it, for example communicate the smell of an object? I think not.

A recognition of the limitations of digitization and the internet is necessary if we are to ensure this new technology only compliments but does not overrun the traditional role of museums and the importance of original objects.

We should not, on the other hand, ignore the great opportunities this new medium offers for providing increased access to museum collections. Museum collections placed on the web can be accessed, no matter where they may be. As Steven Smith states, "this makes collections accessible to those who, for reasons of location, physical disability, working hours or nature of their work are unable to physically visit a collection institution during its normal opening." [Smith: 1998].

However, I wish to believe that there are limits imposed by technology, if not, by financial costs as to how many digital objects a museum can place on the WWW. If this is the case, the expected increased accessibility to a museum's collections would then be limited by the said technological and/or financial limitations.

The Internet and the WWW hold great promise for increased access to collections for museums in sub-Saharan Africa, as they do for museums the world over. This increased access would mainly result in:

- Increased public awareness of the museum collection resource.
- Easier and more effective research on collections held by a museum.
- Greater use of the collection resource.

These outcomes can only be achieved if sub-Saharan African Museums could, in the first instance, go on-line and in the second, stay on line. There, however, are many limitations to this being possible.

The on-line world: current limitations in sub-Saharan Africa

Many limitations face museums in sub-Saharan Africa that wish to go online. Lorna Abungu, Lawrence Monda and George Ombachi adequately outlined the associated technical problems in their paper " Connectivity, Collaboration and Culture: Challenges of African Museums on the Web". (Abungu, Monda, Ombachi: 1999). Some of these limitations are:

- Poor telephone networks and low international bandwidth resulting in poor connectivity.
- The high cost of dial up Internet access subscription and telephone call charges to the service provider which tend to hike the Internet service out of the reasonable financial reach of many museums.

Whereas much is being done to improve connectivity and to bring down costs. Several other limiting factors are still to be resolved. These are that:

- With a few exceptions, there is a general lack of awareness of the capabilities of the computer and of the Internet among museum managers and staff. The opportunities offered by computers and the Internet is consequently, not addressed in museum policies and plans.
- A cadre of staff with relevant skills required for digitizing collections and going online does not, with a few exceptions, exist.
- The majority of people in sub-Saharan Africa do not own computers and of the small fraction that does, even fewer are connected to the Internet. For increased access to museum collections to occur and have a positive impact more individuals need to own computers and be connected to the Internet. What this means in effect is that people in the developed world would have more access to collections in African museums that have gone online than would the Africans themselves.
- Regular changes in computer hardware and software technology for both digitization and the Internet can impact negatively on a museum that has digitized and gone on-line, as updating hardware and software regularly would be unaffordable.
- The general lack of financial resources by sub-Saharan African museums renders questionable the sustainability of going on-line.

The state of collections documentation in sub-Saharan Africa Museums - a hindrance to going on-line

I believe if a museum wants to increase accessibility to its collection by putting the collection on the Internet, it first has to have its collections documentation, card or computer based, in order.

The International Center for the Study of the Conservation and the Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) through its Prevention in the Museums of Africa (PREMA) Programme, 1990 - 2000 has, since 1986, been a leader in training staff, raising awareness and providing technical and financial support for the upgrading of the collection conservation situation in sub-Saharan Africa.

After 9 university courses, 9 national/sub regional courses, 8 directors seminars, 18 specialized workshops and meetings and a variety of technical and financial support packages benefiting over 400 professionals from 42 sub-Saharan African Countries, the conservation situation in African Museums has improved.

The situation as regards collection documentation in the same region is, on the other hand, still in a very poor state. This became very apparent at the PREMA Programme organized workshop on collection documentation held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 7th September to 2nd October 1998. Twenty two museum curators, conservators, collection managers and documentation officers from thirteen sub-Saharan English speaking African countries attended this workshop.

The workshop aimed at reviewing the documentation situation in museums of sub-Saharan Africa, at demonstrating what a good documentation system should consist of, how it should work and what it can help a museum do.

The workshop was a revelation. It established that:

- There are no opportunities for training museum documentation personnel in sub-Saharan Africa, resulting in the lack of, in most cases, basic documentation knowledge.
- Documentation is nobody's responsibility in most sub-Saharan museums as evident in the lack of staff structures for the documentation function and the lack of designated staff to carry out this function.
- The material and financial resources to carry out documentation are generally scarce.
- As a result of the above points, most museums lack key elements of a documentation system (i.e. accessions register, accessions catalogue, classified catalogue, loans and object movement register and the object information file) and in cases where they exist, they are usually poor and unusable.
- Whereas standardization of documentation entries is desirable and now possible, thanks to Africom's handbook of standards, such standardization can only be meaningful if the elements discussed above are put in place, or in order, first.
- Whereas computerization provides an advanced and quicker medium for managing and retrieving object information, considering however:
  - The current poor state of the manual systems.
  - That 90% of museums use the manual system.
  - The unaffordable cost of purchasing and maintaining hardware and software.

  African museums have an obligation to put their manual system in order first before computerization is embarked on.

The workshop, in short, concluded that documentation in many of the museums in sub-Saharan Africa is poorly organized, inconsistent and in some cases, non-existent and that it needs urgent attention.

This being the case, where, therefore, do sub-Saharan African museums stand Vis-a-Vis networked collection resource sharing?

The way forward

Sub-Saharan African museums have to set their priorities right. They have to organize the basics of their documentation system first. Training in collection documentation should be provided and resources for the practical upgrading of collection documentation should be gathered in order that minimum documentation standards are achieved.

This is a priority for sub-Saharan Africa and is an essential prerequisite if sub-Saharan African Museums are to meaningfully join the networked world.

As the PREMA Programme ends in the year 2000, new museum training and development support initiatives have been put in place in Africa. The "Ecole du Patrimoine Africain" - EPA - (School for African Cultural Heritage), a joint effort of the University of Benin and ICCROM, has been established, in Porto Novo, Benin. It will save as a base for museum development in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa. The Programme for Museum Development in Africa (PMDA) is being establishment in Mombasa, Kenya. It will serve as a base for museum development in English-speaking sub-Saharan Africa.

These initiatives can assist in improving the documentation situation in museums of sub-Saharan Africa.

Sub-Saharan African museums desire to improve their collection documentation, however, expertise and resources are scarce. The above mentioned initiatives can assist in improving the documentation situation in museums of sub-Saharan Africa.

CIDOC and the **mda** as well as potential donors and partners need to urgently consider assisting sub-

Saharan African museums in this matter. They can do so by:

- Developing documentation training and support programmes with the EPA or the PMDA.
- Developing documentation training and support programmes with museum authorities in individual African Countries.
- Developing documentation training and support programmes with reputable sub-Saharan African museum associations and bodies.

Conclusion

Digitization, the Internet and the WWW provide opportunities for increased access to museum collections. Sub-Saharan African museums should not ignore this reality. However, even as the prospects for going online open up for African museums, it is essential that the limitations of digital images in transmitting the message of an object is understood. Digital images should complement and not substitute actual objects.

The collection documentation situation in most sub-Saharan African museums is deplorable. Documentation is poorly organized, inconsistent and in some cases, non-existent. This situation needs urgent attention. ICOM - CIDOC and the **mda** in collaboration with the EPA, the PMDA, national institutions and regional associations and bodies should take the lead in searching for solutions.

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