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### MUSEUM, MUSEUM THEATRE, AND THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES OF LIVING MUSEUM

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#### ABSTRACT

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A major problem decipherable from the study of museum and museum theatre is that perceptions of the two appear deficient as they tend to ignore the interests and perspective of Africa. The problem derives from the position of dominant Western Museum scholars which has always profiled museum in Africa as a colonial legacy, bequeathed to Africans as vestiges of Europe's "civilising mission". By implication, Africans, supposedly, had no prior idea of museum until the white man came to "civilise" them. It is therefore unsettling that major discourse on museum and museum theatre hardly ever reflect on the 1897 British looting of Benin palace which significantly accounts for the presence of African cultural/religious objects and antiquities in foreign museums. I am therefore arguing that the existing concept of museum and museum theatre is deficient to the extent that Africa's age-long practice of collecting, preserving, conserving and exhibiting artefacts for education and entertainment hardly features in museum discourse. So, manifestations of museum theatre in traditional African culture are explored in this essay. The practice of museum and museum theatre is therefore examined from the African context of traditional festivals in venues like palaces, village squares, shrines, groves, ancestral homes and other heritage sites. This study therefore identifies an organic fusion of museum and theatre in the traditional African setting devoid of any controversy whatsoever. It is on this premise that festivals and other cultural practices fit in as African examples of living museum.

**Keywords:** Museum, Museum Theatre, Africa, Artefacts, History, Living Museum, Palace, Colonial

#### INTRODUCTION

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What appears to be a strained relationship between Museum and Museum Theatre may have been overly escalated by the declaration of Robert Hewison that "Museums are not theatres. Visitors are not audiences. History is not drama. Character interpretation in museums is not acting"

(Hewison, 1987, p. 1). This outburst must have propelled many museum/museum theatre scholars like Tessa Bridal (2004), Susan Bennet (2013), Charles Garoian (2012) and others to write glowingly in defence of museum theatre - a more engaging and more entertaining variant of museum

practice. The adoption of theatre by museum practitioners culminated in an unavoidable emergence of a hybrid form of museum practice known as Museum Theatre. Even while it remains unquestionable that museum theatre, through the initiatives of interpretive artists, transformation of guests into audience and animation of history, culture, artefacts and other cultural objects, has helped to perform the core functions of museum, the perception most scholars have of museum theatre is still that of an appendage (Garoian, 2001, Bridal, 2004, Bennet, 2013 et al).

According to Tessa Bridal, Theatre is a catalyst, a motivator, a means of encouraging audiences to want to encounter and wrestle with ideas. Theatre fosters an imaginative, creative, and culturally diverse understanding of the objects we choose to display—and sometimes of those we don't choose to display. It achieves this by adding the personal – a sense of time, a sense of space, and a story. (2004, p. 6)

Bridal's (2004) definition, in apparent ways, does not describe a symbiotic relationship that should suggest a successful fusion or blending of two interrelated disciplines. It merely puts theatre forward as a tool (in the hand of the museum practitioner) that helps to serve the purpose of museum practice. Indeed, Museum Theatre has therefore often been defined to denote a practice that helps to perform or enhance the functions of museums. Some definitions of museum theatre are also known to reflect the role of museum as a public institution that deals in

history, arts and culture. In other words, the definitions draw attention to museum as an independent professional practice and not to museum theatre as a collaborative or interdisciplinary practice. The general perception of the practice of museum theatre therefore denies any form of symbiotic relationship between museum and theatre. Museum is then to be seen as the main practice while theatre is assumed to be playing a subordinate, "concubinary" role – a mere tool in the hands of museum practitioners. What then could be the implication of the term Museum Theatre not operating in its full strength as an interdisciplinary or a hybrid practice?

From another, and the most central perspective of cultural dimension to this essay however, while still engaging the same subjects of museum and theatre, museum scholars' perception of the concept of museum/museum theatre appears to be selectively oblivious of African concept of living museum which, if properly investigated, may have the capacity to subsume the whole essence of museum along with that of theatre. It is conjectured that an investigation of this gap may help to supply the missing link between the appendage status of the "theatre" in "Museum Theatre" and the non-recognition of the extant African concept of museum?

This paper therefore draws attention to the often ignored, and therefore, untended concept of museum in Africa as opposed to the colonial concept of museum which has been foisted on the erstwhile African colonies of Western powers. Having visited the traditional colonial museums in Ife, Ilorin, Ibadan, Lagos (Onikan) and Owo

museums, which are representative enough of other museums across the country, a quick survey would reveal an institution that has failed to demonstrate a satisfactory sign of growth or development. So, museum theatre does not even come close to the equation at all as Africa is yet to come to terms with the strait-jacket idea of colonial museum. My argument is driven further to reiterate an earlier position (Adegbamigbe 29) that the colonial concept of museum is deficient to the extent that it fails to capture the pre-colonial existence of African tradition of collecting, displaying and preserving/conserving important cultural and artistic objects and practices as the practice of museum.

This cannot and should not be an acceptable scholarly practice because the early European contact with Africa has only betrayed the former's deliberate attempt at cultural imperialism and repression of the latter. History, in turn, has exposed the, ab initio, mercantile and exploitative motive of the Europeans in Africa which made it expedient for the Europeans to ignore the existence of, probably or most likely, a more vibrant tradition of museum practice.

## Methods

In this respect, this paper is descriptive and qualitative by nature, as it seeks to explore and observe the hitherto forgotten nature, trends and patterns of living museum practice of the Yoruba cultural group in Nigeria. Existing scholarly works on colonial history, museum and museum theatre, and cultural heritage were closely consulted to shed light on the obscurity that had been hitherto foisted on African concept of living

museum. To this effect, I have provided an explanation on the traditional African concept/context of museum that comes alive in the cultural and traditional practices of the indigenous people of Yoruba land in Nigeria. To access the relevant information, aside consulting existing scholarly works on museum, museum theatre, and heritage studies, I have also paid keen attention to cultural and religious practices in some ancient Yoruba towns and communities through interviews and participant observation. Visits were equally made to some palaces, shrines and other selected heritage sites to access relevant information. But first, what is museum?

## What is Museum?

There have been many debates on the most appropriate definition of museum, and at the centre of these debates is International Council of Museums (ICOM) along with its subsidiary International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM). Going by ICOM statutes, in its Section 1 of Article 3, museum is defined as a:

Non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (Brown and Mairesse, 2018, p. 526)

It is worth noting that in November, 2015, UNESCO adopted this ICOM's definition in its "Recommendation on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections". According to Brown and Mairesse, the definition was subsequently adopted by the

195 members of the council. The next pertinent question raises the issue of inclusivity. This question is reinforced by the authors saying that the definition is still largely European in origin. There is also the domineering impact of English Language as the most acceptable language of expression for the definition. Where languages like Dutch, French, Spanish may have a fair chance and representation of their languages being used to convey their thoughts and concept of museum, where does Africa stand when the language(s) used to define museum is a borrowed one, different from their indigenous languages. In a way, Africa is already disadvantaged because not all their thoughts and ideas will be effectively represented and conveyed in a foreign language while trying to define an institution that is indigenous to them.

IMTAL, (Oyewo, 2013, np), provides a rather wide angled description of museums as, “any cultural or informal learning institution, including but not limited to art, science, children, natural history, and history museums, historic sites, zoos and aquariums, public and botanical gardens, arboreta, parks, libraries, and cultural centers.” Areo and Areo (102) observe that, “Museums are the treasure houses of human race, they store the memories of the world’s people, their dreams and their history”. Oyewo (2013, np), concludes by proffering a functionalist description that, all museums, irrespective of their specialisations, perform the same basic functions of preservation, documentation and dissemination of culture. IMTAL’s definition underscores the extensiveness of the subjects and areas covered by museum,

while Areo and Areo hint on the universality of the practice of museum as it borders on the generality of human race. The three definitions above appear all-embracing, yet none of the three shows any interest in how the social, educational and artistic functions of museum are carried out. This, of course, does not capture the whole essence of museum practice.

From another perspective, Momin and Okpoko (Adekola, 2017, 637) provides further details that museums are publicly or privately owned institutions that collect, preserve, and display natural and cultural objects with the basic aim of entertaining, educating, and providing materials for research on aspects of man’s heritage and development. This too is functionalist in its approach to museum. It is noteworthy that none of all these definitions made any direct allusion to an alternative model of museum from Africa or elsewhere that may not necessarily come in the colonial garb of museums. The question then follows as to whether there had ever existed in pre-colonial Africa, institutions which performed the same or more functions as museum as defined above.

Andah (Adekola, 2017, 637), states that the development of museums in Nigeria had evolved as part of the colonial experience. The colonial museums, according to Andah, were established to discover the exotic and fantastic aspects of “the ways and customs of the natives”. But the colonial experience of Africa made it clear that the Europeans succeeded almost more than half way through in destroying the traditional African institutions that performed these varied

functions of museums. These are religious, cultural, social and political institutions exemplified in ancestral worship, rituals, monarchy, festivals, entertainment, cottage industries, wildlife and agriculture. All these were dismissed by the White Christian missionaries and colonial masters as primitive ways of life, and worshippers in traditional African religion were branded and stigmatized as pagans, heathens and idol worshippers who will ultimately end up in “Hell Fire”.

However, Adékólá, (1992 and 2010); Momin and Okpoko (1990) aver that, in pre-colonial Nigeria, cultural materials of ritual, religious, and political importance were fashioned, preserved and conserved in temples and shrines and in the palaces of kings and chiefs. These materials were often kept in the custody of family heads, priests, or palace officials. These claim was corroborated in the course of my research visits to some palaces, shrines and heritage sites in ancient towns like Ife, Oshogbo, Owo, and Ile-Oluji in Osun and Ondo States of Nigeria.

What is immediately decipherable from the above descriptions is that museum derives its essence from the functions and roles it performs in the society. Museum is therefore a cluster of cultural institutions that functions as a collector, custodian, displayer and research base of cultural, artistic, historical objects and practices of a diverse group of people with common heritage. As mentioned in some earlier definitions, museum’s content and mode of operation are diverse, spanning all aspects of life. The central goal of this institution is

to preserve and conserve the cultural heritage of the people by using same to educate and entertain its public simultaneously. The museum, from Western perspective however, was, amongst other things perhaps, designed and deployed to “affirm the superiority of Western cultures and the primitivism of everywhere else” (Bennet, 2013, 13). That, perhaps, is why it is difficult for most Western museum scholars to imagine Africans are capable of conceiving and birthing an idea as noble and superior as that of a museum before the European incursion into Africa.

It is rather antithetical to the purported “civilising mission” of Europeans in Africa, as history reminds us that, in 1897, the British colonial soldiers attacked and overpowered Benin soldiers. The Benin monarch (Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi) was captured and his palace was invaded and looted by the British soldiers. Multitudinous religious artefacts, visual history, mnemonics and artworks were carted away to England where they were later auctioned to defray the cost of their punitive expedition (Osarumwense, 2014, np). The stolen treasures subsequently found their way into various museums scattered all over the world. The Oba was afterwards banished by the British colonial lords to Calabar where he eventually died. That was the height of British denigration of the cultural and political order of the traditional society of the Edo in ancient Benin Empire. This type of massive pillaging and brigandage happened across Africa, India and many other places in the name of colonisation by Europeans. Ola Rotimi wrote *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), a well-researched historical tragedy on the

British sacking of Ovonramwen Nogbaisi's Benin Empire. In the historical drama, upon overcoming the Benin forces, the British headed straight for the palace of Ovonramwen to steal the treasures that have been housed in the palace for centuries. Below is how Ola Rotimi imaginatively described the scene in the stage direction:

*Consul Moor, accompanied by other British officers, Roupell and Rawson, rush in, heading directly for Ovonramwen's throne. They ransack the general area, greedily removing elephant-tusks, carvings and bronze work from the palace shrine ... General Moor, Resident Roupell and Admiral Rawson begin to leave furtively, overburdened by the looted treasures.* (Rotimi, 1974, 45)

Even if one chooses not to believe the raw facts embedded in the historical tragedy of Ola Rotimi, the indubitable facts and truths abound in the thousands of African cultural and artistic objects and antiquities that adorn public and private museums in Europe, America and other climes. So, if there was no museum or its equivalents in pre-colonial Africa, how should the palace and palace shrine of Ovonramwen, like other palaces across Africa that have been collecting, preserving and displaying those artefacts be described? Yet in 1943, the Antiquities Service was established by the colonial administration in Nigeria. That was the beginning of what was to be later christened National Commission for Museums and Monuments that was put in place by Obasanjo in the twilight of his

military administration in Nigeria on the 28th of September, 1979.

The above serves to hint at the pre-colonial existence of institutions performing the role akin to that of museums in Africa, the content of which, as attested by written record, was greedily looted by Europeans. So, what is called museum in various African countries today are the creations of colonial masters who had their motive for establishing what Adekola (637) calls "colonial museums" which do not represent the holistic essence of an organic African museum, the Living Museum.

### **The Essence of Living Museum in Yoruba Land**

Such an institution as mentioned earlier would include a king's palace in Yoruba land, for instance, which is naturally a traditional facility that houses a variety of religious, cultural, artistic and historical objects. The palace is therefore a point of convergence for virtually all the gods of the land. In that respect, the palace houses many objects of worship, with the king himself being the nucleus of the culture and an object of veneration. Kurunmi, the eponymous character of Ola Rotimi's another historical tragedy, *Kurunmi*, is accused by his warlords of having appropriated all the gods of the land to himself in his palace:

Epo: You are even Chief Priest to all the gods; look at them, Sango,

Ogun, Oya, Orunmila. All of them, the gods of our fathers are no your personal property.

Akinola: Like clothing, you use them to your taste; tired of one, you pass it



to your brother Popoola, who now owns the Egungun cult.

(Rotimi, 1971 p. 39)

Beyond the dialogues however, the opening stage description of Kurunmi's palace which Rotimi prefers to call "Agbo'le" speaks to the cultural and religious essence of what a palace shrine should ordinarily look like and symbolise. The palace is described thus by Ola Rotimi:

*The play opens on Kurunmi's 'agbo'le', the closest English term for which is 'compound'. Even this term falls miserably short in portraying the sacred pictorial essence of what an 'agbo'le' really is. In this particular 'agbo'le', for instance, the gods of the tribe are present in varying images of earth, granite and wood. Here also exist, or are believed to exist, the spirits of departed ancestors: ethereal, invisible – eternal guardians of the bodies of the living, bodies that have warmth, and blood, and sweat.*

Apart from religious and historical objects, the king's palace is also adorned with numerous most sublime artistic objects. All of these in their thousands were recorded to have been stolen by the British colonial soldiers and their principals from just one palace, that of Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, the monarch of the Benin Kingdom. This pillaging and brigandage by the various European countries was inflicted on Africa in the wake of the Berlin Conference of 15th November, 1884 and 26th February, 1885 barely after the abolition of the inglorious Transatlantic Slave Trade in varied damning degrees as Africa was preyed upon and shared like a piece of cake.

So, the palace (and its vicinity) is certainly a natural venue to many traditional practices that have been conserved from generation to generation for hundreds of years. It is in the king's palace, naturally surrounded by Oba's Market (Oja Oba), groves and shrines, that one could experience ancient practices such as rituals, ceremonies and festivals during which certain histories, legends and myths of the community are either re-enacted, narrated or celebrated. An example of such enactment and ceremonies is Owe Festival in Ile-Oluji, Ondo State, Nigeria, where the history of Oduduwa's historic journey from Ile-Ife to Ekun Ijama (present-day Ile-Oluji) is re-enacted annually, (Adegbamigbe, 45-46, and Akinfemiwa 98-103). The ceremonies also venerate Oduduwa as their progenitor and the bringer of New Yam to Ekun Ijama. Aside doubling as the New Yam Festival, royal and heroic poetries are performed by traditional bards and a sacred drum (Tomtom – *Ulu Lofin*) is strategically stationed at designated locations around the palace and the grove of *Olofin* to be played (or beaten) by all and sundry. The drum must get torn by 12noon, and be replaced by another tomtom which will last till the end of the festival late in the evening. The rhythm played on the drum is: Pabu! Pabu! Pabu!

Pabu tetetete

Pabu!

The drumming go on while the youths of various age grades engage themselves in endurance exercise of whipping with an artifact called *Olele*. This act of whipping and being whipped is usually accompanied by accolades chanting "Olele japa japa, olele japa japa" to encourage the principal actors

to demonstrate perseverance and endurance as they are whipping and are getting whipped. The cultural objects that are in active use during the *Owe* festival would naturally include *Olele* (the whip), kola nuts, the paraphenelia of the shrine of *Olofin*, *Laghoró's* costumes, libation items and the drum.

The drum, an ancient artifact, could not have been this preserved, conserved, exhibited and activated in any foreign or colonial museum as it is annually, between the months of June and July in Ile-Oluji. It would only sit dumbly in a glass case or on a giant diorama waiting for a culturally alienated tour guide or an interpretive artist to recite his lines about the object that would have lost its colour and tune. Quite on the contrary, the drum, *Ulu Lofen*, regularly refurbished and retuned, comes alive yearly to justify its very existence in its primordial location. According to the tradition, the drums are usually in the custody of the priests of *Olofin* who must bring them out year-in year-out to celebrate the festival of *Owe* in Ile-Oluji, Ondo State of Nigeria.

Essentially, the king's palace is a performative site on a daily basis. There are palace musicians that attend to the king regularly and they accompany the king in all his outings. They accompany the king during Lerins (Legislative Assembly), festivals and other important ceremonies. It is inevitable that palace guests would learn more than a few things about the lore, mores and history of the people. In this process, such palace guests or casual visitors are not only sufficiently educated and entertained, they also willingly participate. This experience is

culturally engaging and more sublime than one would find in a museum in the Western sense, in every respect.

In some palaces, the colonial museums are known to have been situated right inside the King's palace. Such examples can be found in Ife Museum that is located inside the palace of Ooni of Ife and Owo museum located inside the palace of Olowo of Owo. This is an emphatic declaration that no single colonial museum is big enough to contain or display the people's culture, arts and history. The museum in Africa is therefore alive. It is not a repository of dead fossils of history and culture as cautioned by Oyewo (np).

Besides, the African festivals and traditional ceremonies have the capacity to activate the various components of the people's culture such that the various elements and techniques of theatre are engaged in the process without any form of conflict or controversies as typified in the activities of Western museum and museum theatre.

It is therefore worrisome to have gone through various definitions of museum theatre (Bridal, 2004, Garoian, 2012, Jackson and Kidd, 2007, Bennet, 2013.) without coming across any with the slightest consideration for African historical and cultural perspectives. It becomes more bothersome considering the frightening volume of artifacts from Africa and the unwholesome history of how they ended up in Western museums (Adegbamigbe, 2021).

I am therefore reinforcing my earlier argument that existing concept of museum theatre is deficient to the extent that African contexts and perspectives are not factored



into the discourse (Adegbamigbe, 2021). Along this line, I explore the concept of museum and theatre from traditional African perspective.

### **Why Museum Theatre, Why not Living Museum?**

Bridal (11) expresses uncertainty about the beginning of museum theatre, but she opines museum theatre may have been around for over a hundred years due to the historical evidence she once stumbled on. The above assertion that museum theatre might have been around for about hundred years can only be construed to have further undermined the pre-colonial existence of Africa's living museum which dates way back beyond a thousand years – and is as old as Africa's monarchical system of government. The verdict of art historians on Ife and Benin bronzes dates them back to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (Rodney 38) to validate the above claim. The assertion above further corroborates Walter Rodney's position that, "Because of the impact of colonialism and cultural imperialism, Europeans and Africans themselves lacked due regard for the unique features of African culture" (Rodney 38). Consequently, it becomes difficult for a Caucasian to perceive the pedigree and organic nature of Africa's living museum, which is an older and more enduring version of the modern day museum theatre.

From another perspective, through Barthes' allusion to Einstein's brain as a mythological object (an exhibit and a repository), by Garoian (234), the analogy provides a parallel in the apprehension of the African Palace and the king as simultaneously

exhibits and repositories of cultural and artistic materials. First, the palace is a heritage site to be visited by guests and tourists while at the same time it functions as a treasure house that accommodates tonnes of religious, artistic and cultural objects, and antiquities. It is also a performative sites where series of festivals and traditional ceremonies take place at regular intervals, and where some of these cultural and religious objects are put to active use during ceremonies.

In the same vein, Alafin of Oyo, the king in Yoruba land – referred to as "Iku Baba Yeye, Alase Ekeji Orisa", meaning, "Death, the Patriarch, the Matriarch, Second –in-Command to the gods", is a cultural object of veneration and a lone tourist attraction. While on his throne, he is on "display", a living exhibit, representing his ancient forefathers. At death, he is deemed to have joined his forebears, only to resurrect as the Egungun (Masquerade) you encounter during ancestral feasts or special occasions. While still alive, the king is an embodiment and a repository of his people's culture, history and tradition. His crowns, beads, robes, sculptures, horsetail, sceptre of office, ancient throne are all cultural, artistic and historical objects that have been preserved and conserved from one generation to another. Wars and natural disasters may have depleted their sizes and number, yet new ones are regularly built to replace lost, damaged or stolen ones. Festivals and ceremonies are ever present to inject life into the cultural objects through the various activities of music, mock duels, costuming, mimicry, acrobatic displays, dance and dramatic enactments.

Many of these heritage performances and sites in Nigeria are still very much available and replete with all the historical and archaeological potentials of a museum theatre venue. These potentials naturally provide the basic content partially required for museum drama. Some of the myths and histories are latent, waiting to be accessed, explored, activated and adapted to the contemporary situations of their immediate communities. For instance, the story of Oluorogbo's sacrifice by Moremi at the shrine of Esinminrin in Ile-Ife has been re-contextualised and re-chronicled in dramatic form to speak to the present social milieu of the immediate Ife community.

### Conclusion

While the historical-mythical-archaeological content of museum theatre is very important, it is noteworthy that it is the arts of the theatre like music, rituals, mime, dance, drama, costumes and makeup that inject life into the whole experience. Even these resplendent arts of the theatre are drawn from historical and mythical repertoire. All of these contents put

together are accessible from traditional festivals which abound in South Western Nigeria. Segun Oyewo (np) alludes to the total theatre nature of African festival, which he considers to be a complete living museum experience. Such festivals include *Ogun* and *Owe* festivals in Ile-Oluji, Ondo State, *Eyo* festival in Lagos State, *Oke'Badan* festival in Ibadan, Oyo State, *Olojo*, and *Edi* festivals in Ife, *Osun Osogbo* in Osogbo and *Egungun* festival in Ifetedo, Osun State.

With the foregoing, it is logical to assert that Africa's living museum is the original essence of museum/museum theatre, imbued as it is with internal mechanism of drama and theatre, which is self-sustained and conserved by the extant traditional practices of the people. It is therefore imperative to adopt the nomenclature of "Living Museum" as that which best names and at once describes the traditional African institution that performs the same and probably, more complex functions than that of museum and museum theatre in the Western or colonial sense.

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