

MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITY; BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE MUSEUM AND ITS AUDIENCES THROUGH RESEARCH & EDUCATION

Muzeele și comunitatea; Reducerea decalajului dintre muzeu și publicul său prin cercetare și educație

Winani THEBELE

ABSTRACT

The above theme chosen by the Romanian Journal of Museums, together with the theme for International Museums Day for 2024 (Museums, Education and Research) are clearly embedded in the ICOM definition for museums, which emphasises the educational role of the museum and its dynamic relationship with society.

Museums offer a captivating preview into our collective heritage, making them indispensable places for learning, inspiration, and wonder. This also talks about a museum whose doors are open to all sectors of the society. It serves society through “community education”, entertainment and as a platform for discussions, performances, showcasing talents and celebrating culture. It covers different activities that allow individuals and the community to make positive changes in their own lives, through education, personal development, self-awareness and pride. The museum, therefore, becomes a community centre with a participatory approach and also an ecological centre focusing on science and research. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate this evolutionary and diverse nature of the museum through its key functions in society. My paper also seeks to establish how much the museum has truly established itself as a dynamic tool for education and research. What learning and research activities serve to bridge the gap between museums and their audiences? The article uses case studies from Botswana and Malawi to authenticate and support its arguments.

Key-words: Platform, Participatory approach, Community education, Community centre, Dynamic, Inclusive, Best practice, Contemporary, Bridging the gap.



<https://doi.org/10.61789/rm.2024.05>



Fig. 1 – The Textile Museum in Totnes is another good examples of the different types of museums we find today (picture taken by the author from the textile museum in Totnes)

According to John Simmons and colleagues, the inclusive history of museums originates with the derivations of collecting in ancient history. The evolution of museums is then traced from grave goods to hidden treasures, from the Alexandrian Temple of the Muses to the Renaissance collections of curiosities, onto the various displays of modern institutions worldwide.¹ The modern museum has since evolved into a multifaceted institution that plays a vital role in society by serving both scholars, children, the community, artists and curators.² For example, Britain is uniquely rich in the quality and variety of its small museums: incredible collections built up by devotees and supporters, based in small to huge buildings dispersed throughout its towns and counties. These museums contain cultural, archeological and scientific riches for all who visit, ranging from costumes, watches to chocolates, carts, sledges, railway coaches to snuff boxes, coins to typewriters etc.³ According to Rammapudi, former curator at the Botswana National Museum, ‘museums and schools evolved as the definition of the concept of education to describe a lifelong process of developing knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that take place not only in the classroom, but also in a variety of formal and informal contexts and settings’⁴ (Fig. 1).

The museum offers alternative non-linear learning settings, starting from its own collections, displays, exhibitions, to its outreach programmes and scholarly initiatives. By stirring beyond its traditional function of keeping and caring for collections, the museum has proven to be a dynamic educational institution that goes beyond its mission of establishment,

1 Simmons et al (2016)

2 idem

3 Redington (2002)

4 Rammapudi (2010)

which is conservation and presentation of heritage. It now presents a much more vibrant, diverse and inclusive educational and research function. The educational and research valence are here explored on several levels, consecutively – through exhibitions, educational projects, publications and research, partnerships or other forms of structured relationship with communities and stakeholders.⁵ I also want to add that the museum today has also delved into deep global discussions around restitutions, provenance researches, reparations, genocide, human remains etc. Central to all this is the community, which is demonstrated through the many and different partnerships established in the discussions that follow.

Moreover, there is an intersecting research line that cuts across all museums and their interactions with the communities in which they operate and with the different classifications of the public. This also includes their educational function and related initiatives. The museum community relation in turn offers a platform for museums to assume their educational role through creative events and different activities related to the theme. Their engagement with their audiences also highlights the important role of museums as institutions that serve society and its development.⁶ On a distinct note, Gerald and his colleagues succinctly explore the future role of museums by addressing the challenges museums face in the digital age, where technologies are rapidly changing and how museums cater for their audiences. Against the backdrop of these dynamic developments in museums and society, museums have to change in approach and operations in order to remain relevant.⁷ It is the relevance that gives the museum its power and dynamism in society. A constant theme throughout this article is that museums have evolved to become institutions in which objects and learning are associated to help human beings understand the world around them.⁸ It is therefore compelling to explore all the different, relevant and suitable ways to achieve this.

To prove the credibility of the museum as an educational and research facility, Mark Fisher talks about the museums of the British Isles and their contents as an enlightening paragon of riches and an irreplaceable record of the country's life and history. This talks about a museum that shows the familiar in a new light and introduces the visitors to the many hidden delights they never knew existed.⁹ As a result, the museum today comes up with a lot of initiatives and sustainability programmes aimed at the community. It also works to bring together and to serve both academics, practitioners and heritage managers. Therefore, the focus and preoccupation of the museum today is to come up with different ways of making active and meaningful contributions towards its goals in society and determining who will benefit from its sustainability initiatives. Through these initiatives, the museum also aims to serve the interest of both the

5 Simmons (2016)

6 idem

7 Bast et al (2018)

8 idem

9 Fischer (2004)

professionals as well as researchers.¹⁰ The museum today is inclusive and addresses all issues affecting society, such as health, the environment, sustainability, peace, security, tourism and economic growth.¹¹ All the initiatives prompted by the museum today, including its publications and research, are meant to educate and make students, practitioners and researchers from across the broad areas of history, heritage, education, archaeology, geography and development studies appreciate and understand heritage and its dynamics.¹² Eleanor Ross argues that museums and galleries, from the obscure to the splendid, are all but cultural, historical hotspots and enlightening spaces just waiting to be explored by both locals, tourists and scholars for their education and research.¹³ The publication *In Principle, in Practice: Museums as Learning Institutions* also adds that the science museum field has, on the other hand, made tremendous advances in boosting learning. However, there is still need for improvement in practice and relevance to the contemporary learning space. This is through the promotion of effective programs, exhibitions, identifying promising approaches for future research, and developing strategies for the implementation and sustaining of connections between research and practice in the museum community.¹⁴



Fig. 2 – The Botswana Society office at the Botswana National Museum today
(Courtesy of the BNMM)

The Botswana Society (a learned non-governmental organisation) was in the same manner established in 1968/9 as a research wing of the Botswana National Museum. It has presented itself as a platform for research and publication, with an annual journal called *Botswana Notes and Records* and has run annual symposiums to allow for debates and exchange of ideas by scholars and heritage practitioners¹⁵ (Fig. 2).

According to Ahmad and colleagues, many researchers have recognized that museums are an important resource for learning and are acknowledged institutions for society (Shamsidar Ahmad et al, 2013). According to them, scholars and museum experts in Malaysia have, in the same way, tried to come up with ideas towards developing educational exhibitions in museums. As a result, they have adopted new technologies i.e. interactive approaches in favour of the ‘traditional’ and ‘conventional’ ones as part of learning and best museum practices. We might also appreciate the museum’s educational approach, where participants learn through the

10 ICOM, 2024

11 Cross & Giblin (2022)

12 idem

13 Ross (2021)

14 Howard et al, (2007)

15 <https://www.thebotswanasociety.net/>, 2024



Fig. 3 – One of the museum curators during a zebra on wheels primary school session (courtesy of the Botswana National Museum)



Fig. 4 – Mobile Museum Van, zebra designed (Courtesy of the BNMM)

interaction with museum objects - 'object-based learning in museums'.¹⁶ When the Botswana National Museum was established in 1968, the initial inspiration was to provide the young generation with information relating to Botswana customs, indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values. The hope was that the information and artefacts collected at the time would retell the story of the different communities of Botswana to the learners and the public alike as a way of bringing understanding, unity, tolerance and appreciation of one another.¹⁷ A mobile Museum Programme dubbed 'The Zebra on wheels' or 'Pitse ya naga mo maotwaneng' in the local language - Setswana, was established. Its potential aim was to take the museum to the people, particularly the local and remote communities and schools that could not easily visit Gaborone, the capital city, where the only and first museum had been established¹⁸ (Fig. 3, Fig. 4).

In 1999, the Botswana National Museum introduced another educational programme called 'The Museum-in-a-Box'. Through this programme, a tailor-made box full of cultural objects from the different communities of Botswana was delivered to different schools, where they remained for a month or more depending on the request of the particular school. The objects were labelled with captions and they served as teaching tools. The programme also proved very popular and was in demand to an extent that the box was kept away for months, with a curator following up once in a while to ensure that all was well or to replenish.^{19,20} The argument behind the development of the programme was that "museums for urban children of Botswana are invaluable tools for learning about the lives of their ancestors. Meanwhile, for those who live far from the capital city Gaborone, the treasury of the cultural

16 Christopher et al (2018)

17 National Museum Monument & Art Gallery - Botswana, 1988

18 Mojalemotho (2022)

19 Phodiso (2023)

20 The Botswana National Museum Programme was launched in 1999 and was financially supported by the local UN -UNICEF office. It was dubbed 'The Museum-in-a-Box' and the artefacts were stored in a big lockable wooden box, which was taken to different schools in Botswana for learning and experiment by learners, Tube (2003).

artefacts is available as a special provision". Therefore, the 'Museum-in-a-Box' programme was an innovative solution to this educational fissure²¹. My conclusion is that, through these educational programmes, the Botswana National Museum has the capability to help educate learners, make teaching and learning an exciting undertaking, and to provide opportunities for hands-on activities and interaction with real objects. The two programmes also create a long-lasting partnership with the local communities and the teachers or schools in Botswana²². However, in order to fulfil and extend the potential of the partnership, museum educators and school teachers should be assisted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the museum-school collaboration. Support should come from the ministries of education, the community, the local municipality as well as the museums themselves.

The Botswana National Museum found this to be part of best museum practices because it is relevant to both children, adults and family groups. Object-based activities in and by museums provide children with experiential learning and the cumulative effect contributes to their social and cognitive development, enhances their interpersonal interactions, and plays a vital role in the development of their higher mental functions. Meanwhile, object-based learning for family groups strengthens family ties, social interactions, and can also stimulate exchange of information and reactions among members of a family group.²³

In the view of Christopher and his colleagues, museums should develop educational policies and apply educational theory through specific tutoring as a way of guiding visitors' learning in museums and improving museum educational services. In the Botswana case, the museum had to work with the Ministry of Education towards the development of such a policy.²⁴

The publication by Dierking and Falk, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experience and the Making of Meaning*, also offers a clear guide on the educational posture of the museum and its value to the visitor. It looks at what really draws people to the museum and how learning occurs within the museum context. This includes both formal and informal learning, with more emphasis on the fact that museums can serve as valuable learning environments beyond traditional classrooms²⁵ (Fig. 5).

The book provides advice on how museums can improve their learning environments by understanding visitors' needs and preferences first. Museums can then design exhibits, programs, and interactions that foster effective learning. The authors emphasise the importance of context, socio-cultural factors, and physical dimensions in shaping the visitor experience.

21 UN Web TV, 2016

22 National Museum, Monument and Art Gallery - Botswana, 1993

23 Christopher et al (2018)

24 Information derived from a conversation with Ms Tickey Pule, the ex-Director of the Botswana National Museum and co-founder of the Mobile Museum Programme, 2020

25 Dierking & Falk (2000)



Fig. 5 – Botswana National Museum today
(Courtesy of the BNMM)

They offer an updated and synthesised version of the Contextual Model of Learning, which is a more suitable tool for the museum visitor. This model considers personal, socio-cultural, and physical dimensions, providing insights into how visitors engage with museum content.²⁶ As a museum curator myself, I also believe that learning from a museum is a memorable journey because it creates the linkage between the objects, the curator and the visitor. This always creates a sense of pride and triumph in museum community projects, where the community has also been a part of the provenance research and development of a museum exhibition. While “Learning from Museums” sheds light on the intricate relationship between museums, learning, and visitor experiences, it also offers an inclusive, invaluable, enriching and memorable experience for all.

Adding to the multifaceted nature of the museum is the fact that it appears as a leisure and holiday activity for both tourists and locals and also as an economic resource. The museum has to generate revenue to fund its upkeep and for national museums. This is also to contribute to the national economic budget. This is realised through different funding activities, commercial exhibitions, entry fees, donor funding, collaborations and partnerships.²⁷ Brad King and Barry Lord’s publication, *The Manual of Museum Learning*, offers a comprehensive approach to learning in museums and related institutions, while bridging theory and practise through a collection of case studies and success stories that indicates ways in which museums can connect and facilitate self-directed learning by linking people with resources as part of museum best practices.²⁸ The source also emphasises the importance of making learning and education institution-wide priorities and focuses on individual learning strategies. Meanwhile, the second edition by the authors emphasises institutional strategies, interpretive planning, operations, and facility planning to enhance the visitor’s experience (this includes organised student lecture visits, group visits, seminars and workshops by museums).²⁹

26 idem

27 Frey & Meier (2006)

28 King & Lord (2007)

29 idem



Fig. 6 – The infamous Malawi Cleanser, or ‘hyena’ as they are commonly known (Courtesy of Wikipedia)

Learning in the Museum³⁰ examines major issues and shows how research in visitor studies and the philosophy of education can be applied to facilitate a meaningful educational experience in museums. Hein, on the other hand, combines a brief history of education in public museums, with how the educational theories by Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky relate to learning in the museum. He also explores how visitors can best learn from exhibitions which are physically, socially, and intellectually accessible to every single visitor. In a similar way, the ‘mobile museum’ and the ‘Museum-in-a-Box’ programmes in Botswana (discussed earlier) are an example of how museums can adapt to create what he calls the ‘constructivist museum’. This means providing essential notional analysis for students and museums, to maximise the educational experience of every visitor as well as the experience of remote communities³¹. This in a way shows how the visitor and museum learning can present as a meaningful educational experience in museums. The UCLA Arts Library uses its diverse ‘special collection’ as research guides to assist researchers in discovering art resources, strategies, and information. These guides cover various topics, including art and art history, architecture, design, media arts, film, television, and theatre. Any curator, scholar, student can explore these guides to find relevant resources for their museum studies research³².

The visitors experiment with the objects, gain insight and connect with the diverse perspectives. In this way museums enhance cultural literacy and foster appreciation for creativity and expression of interest and talent.³³ They contribute to scholarly knowledge through the study and interpretation of their collections. Researchers explore the historical

30 Hein (1998)

31 idem

32 Craig (2020)

33 Půček, Ochrana & Plaček (2021)



Fig. 7 – The Window Cleansing Tradition in Malawi, a Cause for Concern – Many activist groups have stood up to fight it

context, artistic techniques, and cultural significance of museum artworks. The modern researchers interpret the museum's mission as a commitment to common well-being based on humanistic ethics. Museums contribute to society by fostering understanding, dialogue, and appreciation for diverse cultures and ideas. According to Milan Pucek and co-authors, "the modern museum serves as a bridge between the past, present, and future. It connects people, preserves heritage, and contributes to our collective knowledge and understanding".³⁴ The source sees the museum as an invaluable resource that combines its classical heritage function (collections management) and an educational function. This educational function is implemented through the experience with the objects. It represents a combination of academic excellence and experience from real managers in museums and other public institutions. These are combined with a core research management function.³⁵

As a complement to the use of museum collections as teaching and research aids, museums also use other resources such as workshops, seminars, conferences and lectures as teaching and research tools for its audiences. According to Goabaone Montsho, a curator at the Botswana National Museum, museum institutions in developed and developing countries are socially and culturally positioned to address their audiences, raise awareness and instigate or counter behavioral changes towards issues that affect society such as climate change, xenophobia, genocide, HIV Aids, Covid 19 etc.³⁶ For example, in Malawi, the museum education curators took it upon themselves to visit different communities in Malawi to teach and encourage behavioural change (and the adoption of protected sex) towards certain cultural practices that encouraged promiscuity and the

34 idem

35 idem

36 Montsho (2010)



Fig. 8 – The popular *chitenge* used during the *m’bizwa* (the female / male partner) dance

spread of HIV Aids. These are cultural practices such as the local ‘*chitenge* dance’ or *M’bizwa* (in the local language) as well as the ‘cleanser’ practice for widowed women amongst some ethnic groups, such as the Chewa.³⁷

In the same way, the Botswana National Museum also raises awareness or teaches through scientific methods i.e. indigenous environmentally friendly methods of preservation. Botswana communities have traditionally used resources such as indigenous herbs, wood ash and cow dung to control pest infestations on their crops, food storage facilities and dwelling places. Presenting and practising these methods on museum collections, displays, exhibits and monuments could contribute to the preservation of biodiversity and the environment in the long term (Fig. 6).

The switch from using environmentally toxic pesticides to green pesticides is a solution to safeguard the ecosystem and long life learning process for those who visit the museum. Through its quarterly newsletter, *The Zebra’s Voice*, the National Museum provides a platform where innovative ideas and dialogues on green technology as well as other cultural programmes and innovations are published and shared³⁸ (Fig. 7).

I conclude by arguing that indeed museums have evolved into public institutions that are critical tools in diverse societies for understanding the world. The modern museum plays a multifaceted role, serving as a cultural, educational, and research institution with an important social mission, a mission that goes beyond the preservation of objects. It is about generating culture for learning by both current and future generations. The collections, which are a part of its foundation, make this role possible. They are an invaluable educational

37 *Chitenge* dance (*M’bizwa*) practice is a local dance where two people of the opposite sex dance together in a sexually provocative way wrapped together in a local African print, known as *chitenge* in the local language. Usually, one did not dance with their current partner, but any other secret admirer and this encouraged a lot of unprotected sexual encounters. On the other hand, the cleanser practice involved a local traditional practitioner dubbed the ‘hyena’ who had to have sex with any woman whose husband had died as a cleansing ritual. This also fueled the spread of HIV Aids in Malawi. However, the education by the museum curators brought understanding, appreciation and change of behaviour by the community and, hence, the decline of HIV affected individuals in the country.

38 Montsho (2010)

and research resource by the museum. Curators, collections experts, and researchers study the origins and significance of each item. By tracing their journeys over time, museums shed light on our past and current relationships with their communities of origin. People from all over the world visit museums in order to experiment, to learn and be creatively inspired. Beyond visitor engagement, museums function as centres for science and research (Fig. 8).

Bibliography

Books

1. Fisher, M. 2004. *Britain's Best Museums & Galleries*. Hardcover.
2. Cross C. & Giblin, J. (eds). 2022. *Critical Approaches to Heritage for Development*. Taylor & Francis
3. Denbow, J. and Denbow. J. 1993. *Uncovering Botswana's Past*. Gaborone: Government Printer.
4. Falk, J. H., Dierking, I. D., Foutz, S., Altamira R. (eds). 2007. *In Principle, in Practice: Museums as Learning Institutions*. Altamira Press.
5. Falk, J., Dierking, L. 2000. *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*.
6. John, E. S. 2016. *Museums: A History*. Rowman & Littlefield.
7. Hein, G. E. 1998. *Learning in the Museum*. Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group).
8. King, B. & Lord, B. 2007/2015. *The Manual of Museum Learning*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
9. Půček, M. J., Ochrana, F., Plaček, M. 2021. *The Modern Museum: Its Role, Function, and Social Mission*. Springer
10. Půček, M. J., Corina, F., Plaček, M. 2021. *Museum Management: Opportunities and Threats for Successful Museums*. Arts Research, Innovation and Society: Springer.
11. Redington, C. 2002. *A Guide to the Small Museums in Britain's*, I.B. Tauris
12. Ross, E. 2021. *London's Museums and Galleries: Exploring the Best of the City's Art and Culture*: Frances Lincoln.

b. Articles in Periodicals

1. Awam, D. C., Obinna E. 2018. *Object-Based Learning in Museum*. Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology: Research journal.
2. Campbell, A. 2012. *The National Museum: Remembering its Beginnings and Transfer to Government*, Gaborone: Botswana Notes and Records.
3. Henri, R. G. 2001. *Role of Museums of Art and of Human and Social Sciences in Museum International*, LIII. Paris: ICOM
4. National Museum Monument & Art Gallery - Botswana. 1988. *The Zebra's Voice*, Vol. 2. Gaborone: Government Printer
5. National Museum, Monument and Art Gallery - Botswana. 1993. *The Zebra's Voice*, Vol. 20. Gaborone: Government Printer
6. ICOM, 2024. *Museum Sustainabilities in Museum International*. Paris: ICOM
7. Montsho, G. 2010. *How Museums in Botswana are contributing to the Fight against Climate Change*. Paris: ICOM
8. Selter, E., & Jok, M. 2023. *Towards Sustainable Cultural Institutions for a New Nation: Creating a National Museum & Archives for South Sudan*. *Museum International*. Vol. 75, No: 1-4. Taylor & Francis

c. Articles of Collective Works

1. Ahmad, S., Mohamed, Y. A., Wan, Z. M., Yusof, M., Zafrullah M. T., 2013. *Museum Learning: Using Research as Best Practice in Creating Future Museum Exhibition*, Paper presented at An Asia Pacific International Conference in Environment-Behaviour Studies. Elsevier: ScienceDirect.
2. Giavani, T. & Bowen, J. P. 2019. *Museums and Digital Culture: New Perspectives and Research in Museums and Digitalism*: Springer
3. Fatana, M. 2022. MA Thesis, *Educational Leadership and Management*. Haramaya University.
4. Rammapudi, T. S. 2010. MA Thesis, *The Botswana National Museum as an educational resource in public school classrooms*. University of South Africa.

d. Articles in Dictionaries or Encyclopedias

1. Craig, J., 2020. *Museum Studies Research Guide*. UCLA Arts Library.
2. Frey, B., Meier, S. 2006. *The Economics of Museums in Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, V.A. Ginsburgh & D. Throsby (eds), edition 1, volume 1: Columbia Business School Journal.

e. Electronic Sources

1. Blast, G., Carayannis, E. G., Campbell, D. F. J. (eds). 2018. *The Future of Museums*. EBook.
2. Thebotswanasociety.net. 2024. Gaborone: Government Printer
3. UN Web TV, 2016.

f. Oral Literature

1. Mojalemotho, R. 2022. Former Curator and Head of the Ethnology Division of the Botswana National Museum.
2. Pule, T. 2020. Former Curator and Director of the Botswana National Museum and co-founder of the Mobile Museum Programme.
3. Tube, P. 2023. Former Curator at the Botswana National Museum, Officer for the Museum-in-a-box programme.

Winani THEBELE,
Director/Chief Curator
Winza Heritage Logistics (PhD)
(Transcending Cultural Boundaries)
winza3745@gmail.com