The role of national museums has greatly evolved in recent years. As the notion of nationhood is transforming, the challenges they face are multifaceted. From the older “universal” or “encyclopaedic” museums containing objects from around the world, to relatively recent institutions inspired by European models, to new institutions dedicated to country-specific topics, these national museums are undertaking a serious reflection on their missions, their methods of revitalising their collections and the means of involving their audiences, creating a new relationship with the public in an ever-evolving social and cultural landscape.

Background Paper

National museums, history and contemporary challenges

National museums now exist across the globe, with nearly every nation state and federal state having a premier institution to represent its collections, its history or its story. Historically, the museums of European countries established in the 18th and 19th centuries were seen as being the primary examples of a “national” museum, representing humanity in all its myriad forms. The exhibits of most of these museums were formed from royal and clerical collections, private societies, and objects collected from local communities and abroad. These museums were used as templates for many other state museums in smaller European countries, who sought to emulate the prestige of their larger neighbours.¹ Yet, these museums are seldom synonymous and their origins are also rarely, if ever, similar. The British Museum and the Louvre are often seen as the forerunners of “universal” or “encyclopaedic” museums. The British Museum, established in 1753 from a bequest by Sir Hans Sloane, used its collections to raise itself above other institutions and countries, presenting a seemingly shared narrative common to all peoples. The Louvre, by contrast, was originally a royal domain that was nationalised by the revolutionary National Assembly in 1793 and transformed into a repository for France’s national treasures.² In the late 19th century, smaller European states tended to follow the examples set by France and Britain, using their national museums as institutions to anchor their nationhood, to protect it against societal change or to enhance social cohesion.³ The founding of “national” museums, therefore, was never a homogenous experience.

In the post-colonial era, many new, emerging states used national museums to express their national and cultural identity and are inextricably linked to nation building. For instance the National Museum of Ireland was originally established as an offshoot of London's Kensington museums, but, upon independence, it was reimagined as a Celtic and Gaelic institution, with an

² Ibid. pp. 8, 45
³ Ibid. p. 47
emphasis on the country’s archaeological past, overlooking its colonial legacy.\textsuperscript{4} Similarly, the important role of the National Museum of Afghanistan, established in 1919, in shaping national identity has been recognised by the Afghan Government and the international community, who together have been funding the upgrading of the museum.\textsuperscript{5} Settling on the location for a national museum can also be important; the choice of the former Qatari Royal Palace to house the Qatar National Museum was seen as an attempt to assert Qatari history and culture and disassociate it from the legacy of the Ottoman and British empires.\textsuperscript{6}

In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, national museums face a variety of challenges. In some cases, national museums, especially national history or war museums, have taken on high-profile symbolic roles as centres of memory and commemoration. The emotional nature of some of these museums, can prove challenging for museum professionals in their attempts to engage younger audiences and present the evidence to them clearly and concisely.\textsuperscript{7} Modern national museums also face the challenge of remaining relevant in a changing world, which can be a demanding task for a museum unused to operating in new and untested ways.\textsuperscript{8} The recent opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the United States bears witness to the efforts of national museum institutions to represent its diverse constituencies. Commenting on a similar challenge, one staff member from the National Museum of Colombia noted that the museum would work on topics that were all-encompassing and inclusive, such as family.\textsuperscript{9} Singapore, a post-colonial, multi-cultural and internationally-orientated state, has similarly managed to address the challenges facing national museums in a multi-cultural and globalised world. Its two branches of the Asian Civilisations Museums successfully balance national cultural identity while acknowledging the cultural differences and multi-layered identities existing in the multi-cultural city-state.\textsuperscript{10} While challenges do exist for modern national museums, these examples demonstrate that museums can adapt and survive in a globalised world without diminishing their original role.

**Diversification and the changing roles of national museums**

While many national museums are rooted in the past, in recent years several national museums have been established or reorganised and deviated away from the traditional model. For instance, the Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM), the first French national museum located in Marseilles (France), represents various aspects of Mediterranean life, cultural and history, not just in France, but from all the continents bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Not only does the MuCEM deviate from a traditional national narrative, it also demonstrates an interesting re-use and reorganisation of previous collections to tell a new narrative, as many of its objects have come from the Musée National des Arts et Traditions

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\textsuperscript{10} Emily Stokes-Rees “Making sense of a Mélange: Representing Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museum” in *Museum Anthropology* Vol. 36, No 1, (2013) p. 47
Populaires in Paris. However, the MuCEM is also not the first museum in France to reuse collections, and some have suggested that the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, now housing the reorganised collections of the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée national des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, has liberated these collections (mainly indigenous art) from the French national or colonial narrative, to the extent that they are recognised as unique and creative expressions in their own right. The opening of the quai Branly was also compared to the opening of the Louvre in 1793 in that it epitomised the refocusing of cultural institutions taking place across the world.

The quai Branly is also part of a greater shift by western museums in the representation of foreign cultures and many high profile institutions in the last few years have gone through this important process of redefinition. The Musée des Confluences in Lyon is another flagship project with similarities to the quai Branly and the MuCEM. While these museums are reusing older collections to tell new stories, other museums are addressing previously overlooked stories. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, nearly one-hundred years in the making and situated in the centre of United States politics on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., is a striking example of a national institution that is on a mission to tell the “unvarnished truth” about a segment of its society.

In China in the last thirty years, there has been an increased emphasis on ancient Chinese civilisation in its national museums. Chinese national museums have also become more visitor-orientated, focusing on the visitor’s needs, desires and expectations.

Museums, cultural diplomacy and dialogues on history

Some national museums have also engaged in cultural diplomacy. “The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army” and “Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran” exhibits at the British Museum were credited with promoting dialogue between the United Kingdom and China and Iran, respectively. France and Singapore recently engaged in a similar exchange, both signing an agreement which will increase cultural cooperation between the two countries and intensify the exchange of exhibitions between national museums in France and Singapore. Afghanistan initiated a similar project with Japan by loaning collections from the National Museum in Kabul to the Kyushu National Museum. This exchange was not simply intended display Afghan culture and heritage to a new audience, but it was also a token of appreciation for the cultural support offered by Japan to Afghanistan in recent years. Another striking example of museum-led international dialogue is National Museum of Kenya in Nairobi. With collaboration from staff at

11 Tobias Grey “The Mucem Marks a First” Wall Street Journal 27/01/2012
13 Ibid. p.14
18 Ibid. p. 132
the British Museum and financial support from the European Union, this €8 million refurbishment aimed to reuse and redesign the museum’s old collections, as well as the display of African collections previously held in European museums. These cases are further examples of the policies enshrined in the 2015 Recommendation, notably the promotion of international cooperation in capacity building and professional training, while also representing the positive effects of a greater mobility of collections, professionals, visitors and ideas.

The Maison des Esclaves, on Gorée Island, Senegal, is an example of a museum which is connected to a World Heritage property, representing a site of universal value. The museum’s three-year-long revitalisation project, implemented by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and the Senegalese Ministry of Culture, with support from the Ford Foundation and the Senegalese Government, seeks not only to expand areas for engaging visitors, but also to refine the exhibition content and interpretation of the house to better reflect what life was once like there. New exhibitions will be informed by recent and ongoing research on the history of the house and the island within the wider context of the transatlantic slave trade. The project aims to position the site as a global hub for dialogue on slavery and its contemporary legacies. The project shall also ensure that the Maison des Esclaves remains a poignant memorial and symbol of the transatlantic slave trade and a major part of Senegalese identity.

National museums and their audiences in a globalised world

The growth in international trade, tourism and globalisation is a challenge and opportunity for many museums. For example, while there has been a yearly increase in museum visits in the United Kingdom, on closer inspection the statics reveal that in London alone the increase in visitor numbers is largely down to international tourism. Since 2008/2009, there has been a 40% increase in international tourists, compared to 3% increase from United Kingdom nationals. While government agendas, economic crises and security concerns can prove to be disruptive for museums, there are countless other reasons to embrace change in museums; their audiences are becoming wealthier, better educated and have increasing leisure time, to name a few. Museums need to embrace these positive changes, rather than retreat from them. The importance of changing audiences can be seen in migration museums, which have becoming increasingly common in both immigrant and emigrant states. While they are important places of documentation, research and conservation, they are also increasingly important public meeting places, where ordinary people can liaise with the research and academic community, while also addressing important contemporary issues, such as the integration of incoming migrant communities, while also emphasising the importance of cross-cultural dialogue.

The changing and multifaceted nature of museum audiences has necessitated the diversification of museum programming. Many professionals have increasingly recognised that a museum, as well as being a place of research and conservation, is a social institution, a safe place for new ideas, where people can come to interact. Owing to this, museums must communicate with their

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21 UNESCO 2015 Recommendation, Art 35
23 Comments in conversation with AFRICOM officials
25 Ibid. p. 398
constituencies and, increasingly, visitor research is becoming increasingly important. The importance of communication is also recognised in the 2015 Recommendation, as it is a powerful tool for integration, access and social inclusion. Just as demographics have changed the way museums work, it also been suggested that information technology has forced museums to reposition themselves as interpretative institutions, rather than ones concerned with collections and preservation. The role of new technologies in museums has also been recognised under Article 19 of the 2015 Recommendation, with Member States acknowledging the importance of evolving information and communication technologies and agreeing to work to ensure that museums have access to these offerings to improve their work in preservation, research, communication and education. Social change and economics have also forced museums to change in unexpected ways.

Conclusion

In the grand scheme of human history, national museums are relatively new institutions. Yet in their relatively short existence, they have evolved from guardians of royal or clerical collections into anchors of national identity, used by nation states to cement their political process or to serve as symbols of national historical narratives. This process has not been static and national museums continue to change. National museums are facing increasing pressure to remain relevant as societies continue to transform, ideas of nationhood evolve, and as audiences become more diverse, better educated, more mobile and affluent.

The 2015 Recommendation and many of the above examples demonstrate that national museums can and should weather these changes by not simply maintaining their national focus but adapting to an increasing variety of public expectations in a global environment. Their status as national institutions, and thus significant players in cultural diplomacy, combined with their primary role as institutions for preservation, public education, research and communication, gives national museums the important task of placing national history in a global context, recording the changes it experiences and the future it faces.

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