An Overview of the Country's Museums

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Abstract

This article was commissioned by the government's Information Department in 2006 to be part of its commemorative publication for the 40th anniversary of Independence. It was only recently that I discovered that this book had indeed been published but without this chapter. The historical background remains as factually correct as it was then. Other information, for instance, such as staffing levels, was correct at the time of writing. Otherwise significant change since the article was written has occurred only, I believe, at the Phuthadikobo Museum in Mochudi.

The Country's Museums

Botswana's pattern of museum development has probably been one that has occurred nowhere else because neither the pre-Independence British government nor the post-Independence government established even a single museum. Yet, in one form or another, the country now possesses no less than eight museums every one of which has been started as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiative. On the other hand, one of those museums, now known as the Department of National Museum and Monuments, was taken over by the government in 1976, eight years after it was established. But let us start at the beginning.

The founding father of museums in this country is clearly the colonial administrator, Vivian Ellenberger who was responsible for drafting the terms of the Historical Monuments Commission in 1935. He drew up the first list of monuments and in 1938 he proposed that a museum be established. Ellenberger sought funds through the Colonial Office from the Carnegie Corporation in New York, and suggested that the museum could be located either at Mahikeng, Mahalapye or Gaborone. Mahikeng was chosen. Ellenberger's idea was, however, blocked by London the following year and with the outbreak of the Second World War shortly afterwards, the initiative was effectively killed.

At around the same time that Ellenberger was trying to make his move, Kgosi Bathoen II of the Bangwaketse was developing ideas about starting his own museum in Kanye. He had an almost ideal building available for this purpose –the late nineteenth century London Missionary Society (LMS) church –which he used to display his collection but by the 1970s and 1980s the building was in a very poor condition and the collection was being looted.

The next person to enter the scene was the government senior game warden, Alec Campbell who in 1966 revived Ellenberger's earlier idea of establishing a museum. The government accepted Campbell's proposal and gave him authority to go-ahead. Campbell's natural partner in this venture was Kgosi Bathoen who not only chaired the first museum board but contributed what was left of his Kanye collection. Unsurprisingly, his study (office) of the mid-1930s was re-created in the National Museum and Art Gallery as one of its earlier displays. Campbell's other partner was Doreen Nteta and those three decided that the focus of the new museum should be on archaeology, and natural history and that its theme should be 'Man and His Environment'.

In one of her letters, Sheila Bagnall (2001) noted how on 1 October 1968 she and myself looked in at the National Museum in Gaborone. She writes that we went there 'to see how they were getting on in the preparations for the official opening on Monday. Two Englishmen were hard at work preparing

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and labelling the exhibits, one of them being the Deputy Attorney General, Denzil Will. We joined them and started sawing off chunks of plastic sheet and making permanent labels with letraset kits. The exhibits were very interesting indeed, lots of Bushman stuff and much tribal history and craft. Of course, there ought to be a representative of each tribe on the Museum Committee but there isn't. And the Bamangwato, for one, had not many exhibits'.

In a short comment it is surprising how many key considerations Sheila managed to pin point. Firstly, there appeared to be no Batswana involved in preparing for the official opening –thus tending to confirm the unhelpful idea that museums, like Christianity and knives and forks, are a foreign import. Secondly, the exhibits were not representative of the entire country and thirdly the tribes were poorly represented on the Museum Committee -Kgosi Bathoen being the sole representative. Nearly fifty years later, it may be helpful to have a quick look at those questions -who, what and how and see how matters have worked out since Sheila Bagnall's visit.

Given the country's precarious financial situation in the first ten years or so after Independence, it was probably inevitable that the Museum should have experienced difficulties in obtaining funding. In 1976, however, for reasons which still remain unclear, government decided to take over the museum. This move, however, did little to improve its financial situation and were it not for the continuing support of DANIDA, and later SIDA, the Museum would have remained static. It was not until the middle 1980s that government began to provide significant financial support to the Museum. As a result, it immediately grew so rapidly that today it has an annual budget of around P9 million, a staff of nearly 160 and seven departments of which the Technical Services Division has been described as perhaps the best equipped in Southern Africa.

Five of these departments have built up major collections –botany, archaeology, art, ethnography and, not to be overlooked, books (or the library). Little is publicly known about most of these collections in terms of their relative size (let's say in comparison with major museums in South Africa), quality and range. The botanical collection of the Herbarium, the largest in the country, comprises 20,000 specimens, which includes many rare and endangered species. The art collection is believed to be extremely impressive but only rarely are items extracted from it and put on display. The archaeological collection comprises 20,000 artefacts with a large proportion having been contributed by Alec Campbell and Jim Denbow. The ethnographic collection comprises over 8000 objects of which 6700 are classified as ethnographic, 900 as historic with 400 audio-cassettes. It includes important artefacts from the minority ethnic groups.

But as Sheila Bagnall earlier suggested, and has more recently been noted, the collection whilst being strong on baskets is poor on utensils and holds relatively few artefacts from the east and south of the country. It is only right that people should know what items of major national historical and cultural importance a national museum possesses but unfortunately it is not possible, in this instance, to state what items, with two exceptions, these might be. The exceptions are the enormous kaross (*phate*) presented by Tshekedi to King George VI in 1947 which was later returned to the Museum by Queen Elizabeth (Campbell 2012), and the nineteenth century wooden buffalo found in 1969 by the late Peter Smith in a cave at Gubatsha in the Chobe National Park.

As might be expected, all of the Museum's departments have particular achievements to their credit. The Art Department, for instance, has organised regular art exhibitions for many years some of which have been of exceptional importance. It has long been its policy to acquire items from these exhibitions so that its collection is not only growing but is regularly garnering material from new and young artists. Its annual national basket exhibition has played a significant part in raising the quality of the baskets, and in promoting that particular craft industry.

Starting late, the Archaeology and Monuments Division has subsequently made considerable progress and has recorded around 1700 monuments of which some 150 have been proclaimed national

monuments. The Department's two high profile projects have been the World Heritage Site of Tsodilo and the statues of the three Dikgosi in Gaborone both of which absorbed a great deal of its time. Apart from those two projects, the Museum now has custodians deployed at Kolobeng, Matsieng, Old Palapye, Domboshaba, Lekubu, Majojo, Gcwihaba and Moremi. It has also teamed up with, and reinforced, the two NGO museums at Mochudi and Molepolole in, firstly, researching Modipe Hill in the Kgatleng and secondly in overnight rescue archaeology on part of the threatened Ntsweng site. But to properly appreciate the Museum's achievement in the last 30 years we need to recognise the enormous contributions of the late Alec Campbell and Jim Denbow.

Unusually the National Museum has available to it three distinct outreach opportunities. It has its weekly radio programme. It has its publication programme which includes its monthly (now vamped quarterly magazine) *Zebra's Voice*, and, more occasionally, its booklets on a range of relevant topics. It has also its mobile museum, 'Pitse Ya Naga' which was internationally applauded as an interesting innovation in its early days but is now in need of an overhaul and a re-think. These three tend to play their message widely instead of bringing it together in a focus which better reflects the Museum's enormous and probably unrealistic responsibilities for almost everything which includes art, archaeology, historic monuments, ethnography and botany.

Whatever may be its behind the scenes achievements, this Museum, as with any other, will be judged by its displays. The dismissive comment made by the Lonely Planet may be taken as representative of the reaction of others. 'If you come with expectations reasonably lowered, you may enjoy this small, neglected museum. It's a good way to kill an hour if you're into taxidermy; exhibits of stuffed animals sit between those on pre-colonial and colonial history –it's curious how there is next to no mention of the San, Botswana's first inhabitants. In the art gallery section, there's a permanent collection of traditional and modern African and European art' (Lonely Planet nd).

There is an extraordinary difficulty about considering together both the huge government-owned Museum and the little NGO museums. Not only are they so profoundly different but each NGO museum is also so different from the next. It can hardly be otherwise. The National Museum in the capital city has to decide how it should best illustrate its priority topics and themes. Elsewhere museums have their themes almost pre-selected for them. A museum in Maun must tell us about the Okavango, a Francistown museum should illustrate early mining, Serowe about the Khama family, Shoshong, and Old Palapye, Molepolole about Sechele and its host of sites, Dimawe, Ntsweng, Dithubaruba; and Mochudi and Kanye about the extraordinarily rich history of both places. It seems to be poorly understood at the moment that local and national museums meet different needs and have different responsibilities, and that the trick is to ensure that they mesh together for the benefit of the public they serve.

In reality, however, no attempt is made to ensure that the museums do mesh together. Apart from a small central government subvention that is channelled to the seven NGO museums through the National Museum, there is virtually no connection between them. Two of the eight museums belong to the pre-diamond era – the National Museum (1968) and the Phuthadikobo Museum (1976). Both were established as a result of individual local partnerships, Campbell and Kgosi Bathoen with the National Museum and myself and Kgosi Linchwe II of the Bakgatla-ba-Kgafela in respect of the Phuthadikobo Museum. Thereafter, individuals continued to be instrumental in establishing museums, as with Catrien van Waarden in Francistown and Robin Know the driving force in Maun whilst both Serowe and Molepolole came into being when the Danes provided the necessary cash and expertise to get them off the ground. Thus successive Danish curators, Mrs Maria Rytter and Hans Christian Vorting, got the Khama III Museum firmly established whilst in 1991 a similar contribution was made by Mrs Inger-Marie Borgesen for the Kgosi Sechele I Museum in Molepolole.

Around that same time (1992) the Supa Ngwao Museum, the initiative of the archaeologist

Catrien van Waarden, acquired its first building. For the previous ten years it had existed only as a discussion and interest group. Four years after Supa Ngwao came the Nhabe Museum (1996), then the Bathoen Museum in Kanye (2000) and then, the small Kuru Museum collection in D'Kar.

Having briefly considered the question of who has started museums, there is a need to consider how they are organised and administered. The one super-sized museum is a government department. It has no board and no mechanism for allowing the general public a role in deciding what its objectives and displays should be. The seven small NGO museums are all established as trusts and are owned and run by boards composed mainly of local people.

Sheila Bagnall's third question, about function and achievement is difficult to deal with satisfactorily because the seven NGO museums, taken together, amount to little more than one of the National Museums seven major departments. How can judgements be made about these eight museums when seven have functioned in such very circumstances from the one? What common criteria could be used?

The National Museum is a purpose built modern edifice. In contrast six of the seven other museums utilise historic buildings of varying degrees of historic importance. Perhaps, three of them are listed as national monuments with the old Bakgatla National School (now the Phuthadikobo Museum) and Tshekedi's house (the Khama III Memorial Museum) being of exceptional importance. Two were acquired as donations from their respective district councils (Mochudi and Maun), three from central government (Molepolole, Kanye and Francistown) and one from a private owner (Serowe). Without the local initiative to establish these museums, those historic buildings would easily have been lost to the nation. A priority need now is for the government to provide the funding required to maintain those national monuments in a satisfactory condition as it has done for the old hotel in the Gaborone Village which it owns and uses as its Herbarium.

All these museums have been one off initiatives, all of them have struggled in exceptionally difficult circumstances, have suffered from working in a vacuum, have developed their own personality and have a range of varied achievements to their credit. Mochudi and Serowe stand out because of their internationally important collections and associations. Mochudi has long had a close relationship with the great anthropologist/historian and ethnographer, Professor Isaac Schapera. When it invited him to be one of its patrons in 1976 it became the first institution in the country to give him any form of official recognition. It displays many of his photos of the 1930s and supplements them with a range of others taken both before and since. It focuses on rain making, and initiation, but uses a mix of ethnographic items and documents of various kinds to tell the life story of a remarkable community over the last 130 years. The two bojale (female initiation) drums of the later nineteenth century, rediscovered by myself in Mochudi, and the National Museum's wood buffalo from Chobe must be two of the most important artefacts to have been acquired by the museums in the period since Independence.

The Serowe Museum is the only one in the country that holds a major collection of personal papers, in this instance, those of the writer, Bessie Head. This is excellently organised and regularly used by people from all over the world. It also holds a small part of Tshekedi Khama's papers – by far the larger part being held by the University of Botswana Library. The Phuthadikobo Museum in Mochudi has a small collection of the papers of Isang Pilane (Bakgatla regent from 1920 to 1929).

Molepolole is on its own in having a support group of older ladies, the Matsosa Ngwao, which has made a remarkable contribution in building, maintaining and decorating two magnificent Kwena style rondavels. None of the other museums have comparable support groups. Kanye should have been the first place after Independence to establish a museum because it is the longest settled Tswana town in the country and arguably, in cultural terms, the richest. Sadly, this initiative occurred very late and when it did, and for whatever reason, it failed to realise its potential.

Three of the NGO museums have been archaeologically involved. At the Pan African

Archaeological Conference in Harare in 1986, Phuthadikobo was congratulated for providing a rare example in Africa of a local museum undertaking archaeological research on a project of national importance (Modipe Hill). Molepolole sounded the alarm when it discovered that part of the old Ntsweng site was being utilised for new community development needs. It quickly organised a salvage exercise. In Francistown, the association of the museum with the archaeologist, Catrien van Waarden, has given it professional persona which is peculiar to itself.

Two of the NGO museums, Phuthadikobo and Supa Ngwao made particular efforts to link up with their local Second World War veterans on the occasion of past anniversaries. With its publications, Phuthadikobo secured a specialist area for itself. It re-published two of Schapera's works, produced three illustrated booklets on Mochudi and with *Decorated Homes in Botswana* came up with the most ambitious publication of any museum during the last forty years. Mochudi was alone, in the past, in having its own craft project perhaps because most of the other museums have preferred to be involved in art and in this respect, the Sechele Museum has greatly benefited from its proximity to the Molepolole College of Education.

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