



ABSTRACT

The study examines museums in West Africa and their relevance as decolonialising agents. The prime objective of the study extends the discussions on the nexus between African museums and colonialism, museological theory and reality. It opens discussion by highlighting the timeless relevance of museums in Africa and also takes note of colonial hegemony as the main bane that confronts institutionalised museums in the region. The study identifies

MUSEUMS AS AGENTS OF DECOLONIALITY: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THEORY AND PRAXIS IN WEST AFRICA

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Introduction

In Africa, the discussion of institutionalised museums is embedded within colonialism. And because of this stricture, the signal role museums can play in the rediscovery of Africa's past, their usefulness as agents of liberation, and their pedagogical importance in Africa need to be further explored. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines museums as "institutions that preserve and interpret the material evidence of humankind" (<https://www.britannica.com>). Succinctly, a museum is an organised institution that investigates, preserves, and exhibits the tangible and intangible, natural and cultural evidence of humans to educate and entertain society about the past, the present, and the future course. The museum institutions are therefore built to promote the collection and preservation of archaeological and ethnographic objects. Museums, the study notes, play significant roles in promoting the cultural identities of people, and they have been successfully employed to achieve such in several parts of the world, however the study observes that in Africa they have not been deployed



Malinowskian theory and perspectives as contributors to cultural studies in Africa. The problem of the study examines why and how researches on museums in Africa continued to be devoid of dialectical discussions. It highlights the lack of critical hermeneutics and radical perspectives that pose critical questions on Eurocentrism, Colonialism and globalisation, which are embedded in African cultural narratives. By engaging in critical analysis, it illustrates the envisaged usefulness of museums as agents of decoloniality. Using a polymethodic approach that involves synthesizing literature and critical theory, the study provides a penetrating discussion of the current situation of museums in West Africa. Research findings reveal that museums in West Africa are tailored along European concepts and therefore they failed to engineer social change. These are consistent with submissions from studies that argue for more people-centred museums in Africa. The study recommends the adoption of radical museum pedagogy and an overhaul of heritage management to revolutionise the consciousness of Africans. Overall, the study contributes to critical discussions of decolonialisation of management and use of cultural heritages in Africa.

Keywords: Decoloniality, Cultural heritages, Critical theory, Museums, West Africa.

appropriately. The study aims to examine museums as agents of decoloniality by offering critical perspectives on theory and issues confronting museums and the museum profession in West Africa. The rest of this paper highlights some of the colonial aspects of the museum profession in Africa. It also offers suggestions that may help to decolonise museums and make them relevant to Africa's quest for asserting the past glory of the continent and its peoples. African scholars, such as Andah (1990), Chitima (2021), and Chipangura (2020), among others, have highlighted aspects of decolonising African museums. This study brings fresh data to deepen our understanding through ongoing discussions that address emerging issues, fostering dialogue between academics and museum experts. This path is taken because museum issues have elements of persistent timelessness and relevance in contemporary Africa. The study seeks to fill knowledge gap which exists because of nonapplication of critical theory in scholarly discussion of museums in West Africa. The study therefore provides critical comparison of theoretical approaches in museology and its application to the region. The criteria for visiting museums in the course of research were accessibility and functionality. The number of museums visited were 9 spread across Nigeria and Benin Republics. The nature of museums visited were diverse ranging from slavery museum (Ouidah), historical museum



(Lokoja), archaeological museums (Esie, Ile Ife and Benin), a personal museum (Cotonou), and university museums (Ibadan, Nsukka and Lokoja).

The study identifies four prevailing problems which confront museum institutions in West Africa. First of all, it discovers the pervading Malinowskian tendencies in cultural studies in Africa, which subsumed anthropology as a tool of colonialism (Malinowski, 2012). Secondly, we are confronted with the non-articulation of what an authentic African museum is. This fact graphically confronts us when we seek to examine museums in several parts of Africa. The study observes that museums as presently constituted in West Africa are not serving the interests of the people of that region of Africa, and it is apparent that museum experts are yet to fully articulate their thoughts on what an authentic African museum should be. Museums in Africa today lack touch with reality of the people, as it does not educate them on challenging their unfavourable socio-economic conditions or exhibit the prevailing culture-induced stagnation of Africans in the world's affairs. Thirdly, the study also notes a very slow rate of intellectual discussion of museums in Africa. Fourthly is the issue of colonial hegemony over museums in West Africa. It is a fact that cultural resource management as a tool for decoloniality is not properly integrated into museum activities in the region, and it is true that museums have been complicit in colonial narratives in Africa. This is very lamentable because no discussion of the relevance of museums in Africa would be meaningful without adequate attention to the relevance of decolonialisation of cultural resources management.

The study adopts a polymethodic approach which consists of literature reviews, inspection of cultural sites, and visits to museums. For discussion and analysis of narratives, it adopts critical hermeneutical theory because it provides open-ended questioning and analysis. Critical hermeneutics encourages questioning of colonial legacies, recognises multiple narratives, and provides room for marginalized voices to question, reflect, and interpret their data (Fanon, 1972; Freire, 2008).

Literature Review

Historically, the most ancient structures that housed cultural materials, the forerunners of modern museums, were first erected in Africa. This has been archaeologically substantiated by Egyptian expertise in museums as shown in preservation, conservation, and exhibition of materials that were unrivalled in ancient times (Diop, 1974). However, the concept of modern museums as currently instituted and managed in Africa is a colonial hegemony. According to Andah (1990:148), "the aim of that phenomenon for a very long time was to assimilate to Western models the indigenous peoples of the countries in which they appeared", and that "museums were created for the purposes of conservation and ethnological study and research from a purely European viewpoint".



The signal force in museums that can revolutionise Africans has been examined by Andah (1990), Chitima (2021), and Chipangura (2020), amongst others. They offer perspectives that are capable of shaping museum management on the continent. This is set within the general context of liberating Africa from centuries of debilitating foreign influences. This study notes that the focal point of the impact of colonialism was in severe cultural dismembering of Africa which continues amidst ongoing globalisation.

Colonialism was a Western imposition with imperialistic forcefulness of Europe that effectively imposed its will on Africa and Asia. In specifics, Ocheni and Nwankwo (2012) analysed Colonialism and its impacts in Africa that imposed new epistemologies and ontology of Africans, who consequently looked down on their ancient cultures as outdated, and if useful, were to be known through museums. Writers like Andah (1982), Fanon (2008), Freire (1972), and Wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that Africans were subjected to what can be called *epistemicide* and *linguicide*. Having been deprived of the foundation of their culture, Africans were completely overwhelmed with Westernisation, and they lost touch with their culture, and the effects of colonialism continue to be felt on the continent and its cultures thus, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) asserts that colonialism is a destroyer of heritages.

Decolonising museums in Africa generally has received input from scholars like Brenner (2020), Chitima (2021), and Chipangura (2020). The focus of discussions and analyses so far points to the envisaged task of museums in Africa, which unfortunately has not been met. It was desired that colonial legacies in frameworks, taxonomies, operational narratives, and infrastructures in the cultural sphere would be completely overhauled with new paradigms based on indigenous norms. Scholars' opinion points to the fact that little has been done to achieve these laudable objectives (Andah, 1990; Chitima, 2021:73). Decoloniality for this study refers to critical engagements that seek to dismantle all relations that impose hegemony of one group over another. Having secured Independence from Western domination, it was anticipated that Africans would, as it were, decolonize all vestiges of cultural, political, and economic dominations.

Museums in West Africa

Museums in Africa can be grouped under two eras: ancient/traditional and modern.

Traditional museums in West Africa: Traditional museums in Africa are institutions that preserve and communicate the cultural consciousness of the locals. It should be stressed that love of antiquary is an ancient practice of Africans which continues to the present. Africans across all eras and cultures have always collected and stored several objects for aesthetic, religious, economic, social, and historical purposes or simply as curiosities. Also,



Africans engaged in veneration of the aged and thus material left by them was valued as heirlooms. Shrines were particularly valued and respected. They contain several carved wooden objects, worked iron or brass, intricate pots, and paintings. The study notes that the region of West Africa is home to numerous ancient sites that have been under conservation and preservation by museum experts. In this regard we can mention several traditional institutions that are classified by UNESCO as heritage sites namely the Royal palace of Abomey and Koutammakou in Benin Republic, the Old Owo palace, ancient Kano city walls, and Sukur, Nigeria, ancient ferrous metallurgy sites Douroula, Tiwega, Bekuy in Burkina Faso, Asanti traditional architecture, Ghana and Old Town of Agadez, Niger amongst others.

Modern museums in West Africa: In contrast to Europe and America, modern museum as conceived in Africa is thoroughly an imported institution. By focusing on West Africa, records show that modern museums began in Nigeria in the 1930s through the pioneering efforts of colonial anthropologists like Murray, Clarks, Fagg, Hunt-Coole, and Milburn of the Education Department of the Colonial Office. Nigeria has 53 national museums under the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), not counting states and private ones. In Ghana, museums began with the establishment of the Ethnographic Museum at Achimota College in 1929, and the project has now spanned to 29 museums in various parts of the country. Similar events occurred in Sierra Leone. The enactment of the Monuments and Relics Commission in 1946 began institutionalised museums in the country. In the Gambia, it was the 1974 enactment of the Monuments and Relics Act that formalized museums in the country. In the same vein, Togo's national museum was established in 1875 (Ardoiu, 1998; Ardoiu and Arinze, 2000; M'Mbogori, 2023; Opadeji, 2020; Lindsay, 2014).

Objectives and Roles of Institutionalised Museums in West Africa

Institutionalised museums are primed to play important roles in society, namely, the retrieval and acquisition of relevant objects, documentation and quarantining of objects, curatorial services, and exhibitional and conservatorial duties in this regard. Thus, the objectives of institutionalised museums in West Africa are multifaceted. Despite the changes in form and varied definitions, one can conclusively say that a museum is supposed to perform four interrelated roles, wherever it is situated (Okita, 1982);

- i. to achieve education in the widest sense by providing assistance to formal teaching in schools, colleges, institutes, and Universities
- ii. to provide recreation and entertainment for the general public and thereby provide informal cultural education



- iii. to contribute to scholarly and scientific studies/researchers within the general advancement of world knowledge
- iv. to contribute to the enrichment of the cultural personality of the nation concerned and, in turn emphasise the role of that country in world culture.

Taking Nigeria as a case study, the NCMM statutes underline its basic functions (NCMM <https://museum.ng>), five of which are cited:

- i. To organise and simulate research, train and disseminate special education and cultural knowledge that will promote and propagate Nigerian cultural heritage and museum development.
- ii. To establish and maintain a stable museum system in Nigeria, which will ensure the preservation of the nation's tangible and intangible heritage.
- iii. To standardize and harmonize the administration of museums, monuments, sites, and objects of national and cultural significance in Nigeria.
- iv. To ensure the proper conservation, protection, and preservation of Nigerian natural and cultural heritage at home and abroad.
- v. To promote professionalism and efficient management of the Nigerian cultural and natural heritage.

Assessment of Problems Associated with Museums in West Africa

The study notes that despite these laudable aims, institutionalised museums have, since their introduction to Africa, become pastime for the elite class and have served colonial interests, in concepts, and orientation, such that, though they use material evidence from Africa, they still have an elitist and colonial outlook. The study identifies some of the basic problems associated with museums in the region and these are discussed below:

- i. **Absence of indigenous character:** Despite the independence from colonial powers, museums in West Africa and indeed the whole of Africa South of the Sahara are yet to evolve an indigenous African character. They are structured after European tastes and foreign tourists. As pointed out by Andah (1990:149), "As an institution in Africa, the museum is still holding on too strongly to its colonial heritage". Through an introspection into the history of museums, it is apparent that museums were related to the administrative system of colonial rule in Africa. According to Andah (1990), to ensure more and smoother exploitation, appropriation, and approximation of African economic resources, it was necessary to have a good grasp of the history and culture of Africa. To achieve this, a new discipline soon emerged from the rubble of colonialist interest, which became the study of applied anthropology with museums as an integral part. Applied museology and anthropology in Africa began primarily by studying Africans in the bid to exploit and subtly rule them. As a necessary adjunct to



colonialism, one will not be surprised to read that those who set up these museums in Africa were colonial government anthropologists. Malinowski (2012) had long advocated for applied anthropology "for the task of assisting colonial control". This was aimed at understanding the colonised people more, to understand the economic potential and the political setup of the colonised territories. Thus, the Malinowskian tendencies gave rise to museums which aimed at subjective exhibitions that portray the primitiveness of the African, consequently demanding a civilising mission from Europe. In 1884/5, when European leaders and cartographers assembled in Berlin to parcel out Africa for economic loot, museums were a fashionable institution in Europe. Similar institutions had to be erected for the colonial masters in Africa for pleasure and a pastime for the aristocrats of Europe, and where studies were involved, museums were used parochially to illustrate the advanced culture of Europe over Africa. Moreover, behind the facade of the so-called "civilisation mission," one could see elements of theft and looting by the Europeans. For instance, the British invasion of Benin in 1987 was a smokescreen to loot the cultural property of Africans.

- ii. **Faulty structures:** The colonial legacies entrenched could be seen in the faulty structure of museums in Africa that were set up to serve colonial interests, and therefore their relevance to Africans had little or no effect in the plan. If one takes note of the concept, function, and environment of these museums, one will see that they are alien in concept to Africans, who are the original possessors of these cultural objects being exhibited. This study calls for museums to be completely overhauled in Africa at the level of structure and function. In the face of prevailing colonial features that have been deeply entrenched in museums, they failed to make meaningful impacts on Africans, and therefore, museums have almost remained sterile or of little relevance to the average African. Post-independence Africa continues to maintain the defect of colonial times, exemplified by the urbanisation of museums, to the neglect of the rural areas. Therefore, one will be right in saying that museums in Africa are elitist, urban-based cultural institutions. How many farmers, fishermen, labourers, and craftsmen will ever benefit from the activities of our museums in West Africa?
- iii. **Inappropriate methods:** On the methods and techniques of reaching the public, West African museums have not adequately served the culture-bearers whose heirlooms are exhibited. African museums follow the early European method whereby the museum is similar to a place where one could visit for recreation and relaxation while enjoying humanity's past glories using the material culture. In this fashion, museum specialists in Africa see their job as a means of glorifying the past of Africa as the



ultimate end. In their exhibitions and storage, one will find elements of awe, confinement, and solitude around museums (e.g., Esie, Kwara state), but these have not offered the despoiled Africans a means of liberation from the clutches of imposed poverty and domination.

- iv. **Exhibitionism:** This term refers to the practice of showcasing cultural objects for the sole purpose of sensationalism, attention-grabbing, commercialisation, rather than educational, historical, cultural and critical thinking purposes. The study notes the housing of African cultural objects for mere exhibitionism for tourists, which are usually alien to the folks, thereby an air of strangeness pervades through museums. Museum structures lack touch with the reality of indigenous backgrounds and are unfamiliar to the cultural milieu of the concerned communities. What is more, collections in showcases are sometimes arranged in such a way that the natural appeal is not felt. Archaeological and ethnographic objects are displayed without any sense of traditional imagination and appeal. Most of the time, we are treated only to sensational finds of "big-time archaeologists". Even though the exhibition may be referred to as temporary, it can remain there for several years. This is contrary to the indigenous museums represented by the grooves, shrines, and rock shelters, which are embedded in indigenous concepts and realities of annual rituals. Museums in West Africa, the study notes, are still gasping for fresh air. Under this severe bane, museums have been stultified and our cultural heritages have been exploited for the benefits of tourists, dominance of Eurocentric perspectives, perpetuation of negative stereotypes, disdain of indigenous knowledge and disrespect of cultural ethos.
- v. **Problem of professional insularity:** The problem of insularity affects West African museology. This is a narrow focus which prioritises one's own profession and a tendency to operate within professional silo, and limited interdisciplinary engagement that limit collaboration and exchange of ideas. There is a lack of adequate cooperation between museum officials and academics. Museum operators in the region need to open up to the larger society. Museum journals and associations are not very popular in West Africa. Museum staff live as it were in a cocoon, which isolates them from associated disciplines. In the course of this research, the study was unaware of unions called Nigeria or Ghana, or Mali Museum Associations or similar ones in West Africa at large, nor has the study found sustained propagation of museums and activities in the region. Either by accident or design, museum officials insulate themselves. The study envisages that removing insularity can deepen collaboration, sustain cross-training, and regain lost innovation.



Breaking the Colonial Legacies

Considering the above strictures and the fact that museums have a colonial and neo-colonial, elitist character in Africa today, can one therefore be right in calling for the scrapping of museums so that scarce funds could be used for better projects? The study does not come to this conclusion nor share this view because museums can be tools of revolutionising the consciousness of Africans, if properly channeled. To break the colonial influence, the study argues for the adoption of the following:

- i. **Adoption of appropriate Cultural Resource Management:** If museums are truly to be indigenous, then deliberate and concerted efforts must be put into the adoption of appropriate cultural resource management of the people, which will focus on recovering, preserving, documenting, and exhibiting our ancient artefacts and ethnographic materials. With the help of cultural resource management, it is envisaged that new concepts, methods, orientations, and techniques will be evolved to replace colonial legacies. In terms of appropriate research, museums and archives are veritable tools of management of the cultural resources of Africans; this means that a lot more is expected of museums in Africa. This would be achieved through survey of cultural inventories, documentation of cultural heritages, identification of stakeholders, development of appropriate laws and strategies, community involvement, compliance with relevant laws, respect for professionalism, and collaboration with partner agencies.
- ii. **Indigenising museum structures:** This term means transforming museums structures and practices in such a radical way that promotes traditional perspectives. Agreed that modern museums owe their origin to Europe; however, under current museology, significant efforts have not been made to study in detail how to apply the concepts of indigenous museum by museologists in the region. As a start, one might suggest that research in this wise, should be directed to early traditional ways and models of conservation, exhibition restoration, and preservation, prior to the colonial era, (Andah, 1982). The wealth of evidence so derived will be of immense help towards the bids at decolonising our museums. Indigenization of museum structures would be linked to their cultural and historical roots in Africa, thereby making museums relevant institutions to the present yearnings of Africans. The study contends that Africa needs museums that will project the diversity and inclusivity of our indigenous narratives, respect for cultural sensitivity, promote cultural conservation, and engineer cultural education.
- iii. **Contextualising archaeological and ethnographic research and data:** This refers to archaeological and ethnographic data that are harnessed and analysed within broader socio-cultural perspectives. Such would give information on historical,



environmental, social, symbolic, and chronological contexts. Currently in Africa, contextualization of cultural materials is beyond returning of looted objects, it's about reconfiguring the narratives, practices, and structures of museums. It involves restoring traditional meaning to cultural objects and monuments within each cultural context. We need radical rediscovery of buried voices, retrieval of traditional epistemologies, and reconfiguring of historiographies. Now that independence has been won back, even if nominal, it is necessary for cultural agencies to prove Africa's past glory and seek to interpret the authentic African autobiographies with particular attention to conserving, preserving, restoring, and exhibiting the cultural materials necessary. For museums to lead Africans to discover themselves, they must rely on cultural resource management with the single-mindedness of embarking upon a cultural programme on a completely different model from the European concept. This will bring about a clean break from the colonial and neo-colonial domination. Also, contextualization demands that Africa's cultural heritage must be harmonised. The duplication of cultural agencies like museums, art councils, archives, public libraries, etc., with a thin line separating them, does not augur well for Africa (Okita 1982:8). This leads to dissipation of energies, duplication of efforts, poor handling and unskilled treatment of cultural objects.

- iv. **Adoption of radical pedagogy:** It is expedient to engage in educational and critical museology. If museums must be fully meaningful, they should develop educational programmes that project their potential for action in solving major problems of society. The contemporary African society must therefore see museums as contributing to its liberation. Rather than become “veritable graveyards of ethnographic materials” (Andah, 1990:150), museums should be agents of building up the consciousness of the masses. As educational institutions, museums should correct the distortions placed in African historiographies and ethnographies by the West, and they should evolve programmes that retrieve, distil, conserve, and disseminate the cultural potentials of the peoples. Our educational institutions should be programmed to include curricula that contain ample data on museums, archaeology, anthropology, and cultural studies. In general museum exhibitions ought to question power structures, promote critical thinking, and promote social justice amongst others.
- v. **Museums as critical agents of change:** It is apropos for museums to become critical agents of change in Africa by confronting prevailing challenges. Some of the problem areas are societal malaises like arson, religious extremism, xenophobia, social injustices, urban problems, etc. It should be possible to demonstrate the historical roots of social inequality in Africa through museum objects. One will call for the



exhibition of Nok, Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Benin, Rim, etc., archaeological discoveries to highlight community empowerment, social justice, cultural transformation and pedagogical activism. This will prepare the masses to appreciate and be prepared to arrest the widening gaps in society, thereby using the past to serve the present and the future. Also, museum exhibitions should be able to show pre-colonial interrelationships among African peoples as a way of emphasising the need for regional co-operation among African people, e.g., ECOWAS, which recently faced imminent breakup with the existence of Burkina Faso and Mali. For a meaningful museum, it must seek to be relevant to the present. With careful restoration, conservation, preservation, and exhibition of archaeological, ethnographic, historical, and folkloric data, museums should be able to comment on, throw light on, and provide possible solutions to current problems facing Africa.

Bridging the Gap: Progressive Transformation of Museums in West Africa

In parts of Africa like Zambia studies indicate that museums were deployed as instruments of community development. For example, outreach programmes at local museums in the country included public health education of critical areas like HIV prevention (Yoshida, 2016), whereas in contrast a study in Ghana found that museum engagement in such area remain very abysmal, (Dika and Agyei, 2018). Be that as it may, the study acknowledges the ongoing progressive transformation of museology in West Africa, (Abiodun, and Abiodun, 2024). This onerous task involves scholars, curators and cultural policy makers across the region are actively engaging in shifting the philosophy purpose and practice of museology from colonial-era institutions to community engagement and Afrocentric identity reconstruction. We can identify areas of progressive transformation to include (i) reclaiming narratives from Eurocentric frameworks of historiography of arts to becoming authentic local voices of indigenous knowledge system, and (ii) successful restitution and reparation campaigns which led to reclamation of looted artefacts, the best example being the gradual return Benin objects. (iii) There is also heightened increase in networking, capacity building and participatory researches, where members of the community, curators with local and foreign scholars are increasingly collaborating in excavations, curating, and exhibitions. Examples have come from Ile Ife and Benin, Nigeria. (iv) Digitisation of artefacts, expansion to online archives and virtual exhibitions are ongoing in West Africa, are ongoing which have led to sharing of best practices and resources.



Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

In summary, the study highlights the current state of museums in West Africa, and it has demonstrated that the main problems associated with museums in the region are the colonial legacies that have stifled museums and their proper roles in West Africa. It highlights the fact that museums do not at present serve the aspirations and yearnings of Africans in their search for cultural freedom. Also, it provides insight into how museums have failed to be people-centred and that museums as currently institutionalised in the region are not revolutionary-oriented and do not relate to the social, economic, and political problems facing Africa. Amidst onslaughts of Westernisation, globalisation, and Sinoisation, the study recommends that museums must turn from elitism and exhibitionism to people-centred institutions that will serve as liberation tools that work in the interest of the rural folks. It appraises ongoing progressive transformation in aspects of museology in the region and calls for inclusive programming and community engagement, where museums should attempt to reach out to the public first, rather than expecting the public to make the first move. In this wise, too, museum agencies should overhaul their publication mechanism to make room for all categories of people.

In conclusion, the study submits that historically, museums in West Africa were entangled with colonialism, which came with imposed Eurocentric narratives while excluding indigenous contexts and agencies. It submits that African cultural objects were exported to Western museums and therefore were invariably detached from their traditional cultural, spiritual, and historical contexts. The study challenges colonial legacies in the ownership, management, and curation of museums in West Africa. To the museum staff, who want to maintain the status quo, the above will represent an extremist view, too radical, idealistic, irrational, or ambitious. It is the view of the study that museums remain appropriate tools for decoloniality in Africa.

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