

## **Heritage Management and Community Engagement: The Story of the National Museum, Benin City, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Heritage management is essential to the preservation of a people's tangible and intangible culture. The heritage of a people may change over time or become extinct in the absence of conscious preservation, as is evident with many African cultures. Central to the preservation of heritages, is the engagement of communities in a dynamic process of continuity. The Great Benin kingdom engineered this process with the institution of the guild system, which served the royal court of the Oba (king). Although the guild is no longer practised strictly as court art today, the system is preserved as community art centres run by descendants of the ancient guild. Artisans in Benin City, play an important role as custodians of the culture and system, while the National Museum, Benin City houses some of the important relics of the Benin kingdom. This article looks at the history of the National Museum, and the structure in place for heritage preservation. It also examined the role played by Igun bronze casters who are important custodians of the arts and culture of the Benin kingdom. The study is qualitative research that relied on historical content and ethnographic methods, interviews and online publications for its data. Much of the ethnographic data was collected while the researcher was engaged in fieldwork in Benin City. His observation of the Benin guild workers, informal interviews and visits to the National Museum, Benin City are important parts of the data. Data collected were evaluated from observation assessment, text and interview analysis. The findings are presented within the general content of the essay. The study concludes that, although the National Museum, Benin City is an institutionalized heritage management organ of government, the preservation and continuity of important aspects of the tangible and intangible heritages of

the Benin kingdom is been done also by the bronze casters who have continued with the ancient culture of bronze casting. This synergy, though informal, is a significant module, which may be adopted by other museums with similar structures.

**Keywords:** Art, Heritage, Benin Kingdom, Community, Culture, Management, Museum.

### **Introduction**

The National Museum, Benin City was opened to the public in 1973 following the commissioning of a new building by the government to house the collections, which have been in the palace museum for nearly three decades (Akponana in an interview with the researcher in 2018). The National Museum, Benin City is one of the museums managed by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) in Nigeria. The federal government of Nigeria established the commission to replace the Federal Antiquities Department with Decree no. 77 of 1979. The decree was in 1990 replaced by the NCMM Act Chapter 242 of the Law of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The act establishing the commission detailed its roles, functions, scope and responsibilities.

### **Administration**

The National Museum as regulated by the NCMM has seven departments. They are - Heritage, Education and Training, Research and Publication, Admin and Supplies, Accounts and Audit, Legal Services, and Museums.

- The Heritage department is in charge of all heritage sites. Essentially, they oversee the natural heritage of the people. These include tangible heritages like wildlife parks, rivers, and other designated sites, and intangible heritages such as dances, music, songs, proverbs and all non-material culture. They identify, collate, document, maintain, interpret and store information on these on behalf of the communities and the government.
- The Education and Training department is in charge of public enlightenment, outreaches and training related to the public. They also interface with the National Museum Training School in Jos, Nigeria to train museum staff in various states of the federation.
- The Research and Publication department is responsible for ensuring that all investigative findings by museum archaeologists, ethnographers, historians and field officers are

properly documented and featured in the museum publications. They interface with the education and training department for information dissemination.

- The Admin and Supplies department is responsible for the day-to-day running of the museum especially staff welfare and office needs. They ensure consumables are available for effective office work, handle issues of staff employment and promotion, leave and general staff needs.
- The Accounts and Audit department is responsible for the budgetary allocation to all departments. Salaries, wages and audit of expenditure. They interface with the admin and supplies department.
- Legal Services is responsible for all legal aspects of the museum. Litigation, Memorandum of Understanding with communities and foreign organizations, negotiations such as the recent ones for the repatriation of illegally obtained antique artworks from Nigeria, Treaties and statutes, recovery of museum properties whether landed or artworks, etc. They initiate the framework for the localization of all foreign cultural treaties entered into by Nigeria on behalf of the museums and federal government.
- Museums. This department is in charge of the museum collections. They handle, restore and conserve collections.

**General Information on the National Museum, Benin City**

Administration	Public (government-owned and controlled)
Mission and Objectives of the NCMM.	To manage the collection, documentation, conservation and presentation of the national cultural properties to the public for education, enlightenment and entertainment.
Establishment	The supervisory board created by the NCMM Act.
Type of Museum	Archaeological and ethnographic museum.
Number of Staff	About 160 full-time members of staff (over 20 in management positions)
Stakeholders	They include the Oba of Benin and the Benin Traditional Council, visitors to the museum, schools, the police, friends of the museum, press.

Themes / Subject	Art and other cultural objects from the old Benin Kingdom, neighbouring states and Nigeria in general.
Main Exhibition Format	The museum uses acrylic cases and stands mainly for the display of artworks, artefacts and other ethnographic materials.
Services, Programmes and Community Activities	The museum has a reference library and archives attached to its educational unit. It is open to the public but registration is required. It welcomes scholars and other researchers to visit and use them between 9 am and 4 pm daily. Manuscripts and other items in the archive can be accessed under the supervision of a staff of the unit. Several community programmes and outreaches are using the museum and there is direct involvement with high school students, stakeholders and the public.
Website / Social Media	The museum does not have a website or social media handle. However, its collections are mentioned regularly online, and in local and foreign media.
Communication Approach and Language	The museum utilizes printed flyers, handbills and posters for promoting the exhibition and other community programmes and outreaches. The gallery display labels are written in English language (Akponana in an interview with the researcher in 2018).

### **Location and Collections**

The location of the museum was influenced by the then Oba of Benin, HRH Akenzua 11, within the King's Square (aka Ring Road) in Benin City. It is less than a kilometre from the palace of the Oba. It is also close to the famous Igun Quarters, a UNESCO Cultural Heritage site (UNESCO, 2003) where the guild system that produced significant artefacts of the kingdom is located to date. Effectively, one can say that the museum is located within the ecosystem that produced its famous works of art. The museum is renowned for its cultural and political relevance to the people of Benin kingdom, the people of the defunct Midwest region and Nigeria in general.



Entrance to National Museum, Benin City  
Photo Credit: Amy Staples

According to Akponana (in an interview with the researcher in 2018), who was Deputy Director (Heritage) of the National Museum, Benin City at the time of this study, each floor of the museum is dedicated to collections from specific geographic locations across cultural boundaries. The first floor houses some of the original artworks and cultural objects of the old Benin kingdom. They include bronze and brass works, shrine installations and many objects of Benin origin. The Benin Traditional Council donated some of these.



Royal Ancestral Altar  
One of the Shrine Installations at the Museum  
Photo Credit: Amy Staples



Benin bronze Pieces Repatriated from Europe  
Photo Credit: Lambert Palace

The second floor has a slightly wider frame of collections. They include artefacts from cultures like the Urhobo, Esan, Etsako, Itsekiri, Ukwani, Ika, Ndokwa, Ijaw, Isoko, Akoko-Edo etc. These cultural areas spread across Edo and Delta States, which made up the former Midwest State of Nigeria.



A View of the Second-Floor Exhibition Gallery  
Photo Credit: tripadvisor.com

The third floor of the museum is called the *Unity Gallery*. It is a floor dedicated to artworks from all over Nigeria. It displays many contemporary art pieces from renowned Nigerian artists. The concept of the unity gallery was conceived after the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970. The federal government decided to use museums across Nigeria as part of its instruments of healing, reconstruction and unity (Akponana in an interview with the researcher in 2018)



Another View of the Museum Gallery

Photo Credit: tripadvisor.com

### **Museum Practice and Challenges**

Museum practice is measured by its compliance with the definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the UNESCO standards for the safeguarding of tangible and intangible heritages. The National Museum, Benin City arguably falls within the definition of ICOM 2007, which is:

A non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for education, study and enjoyment.

From the foregoing, it is clear that a museum is more than a mere building that collects and keeps objects for viewers. It is rather an establishment, publicly or privately owned, where valuable artistic artefacts such as paintings, sculptures, drawings and vases, and scientific, historical and natural objects are kept and preserved, for viewers who come to appreciate and enjoy their aesthetic value and/or their educative and historical implications. It is usually in service to its community in particular, and the world in general (Omoera & Ode, forthcoming). Furthermore, the ICOM (2019) definition of the museum stresses the importance of community engagement in museum practice. It states that



museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and the future. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

Although the 2019 definition of ICOM generated quite some controversies, it reflects critical thinking in the future of museum practice and the concept of new museology. The second paragraph of the definition particularly, emphasises the partnership between the museum and the community. While, this may be difficult for institutionalized museums that are strong government organs, for instance, modules such as the one existing between the National Museum, Benin City and the community art centres present viable options. The merit of the system is the synergy it provides, the empowerment of the community, and the continuity and preservation of the community heritage. Whereas the museum is the structure for the preservation of important relics of the tangible heritages, the community is the *living arts centre* and connoisseur of the culture and intangible heritages of the community. This synergy puts the community at the fore as an important stakeholder of the museum; provide avenues for community engagement and empowerment in places like Nigeria where the museum is a strong arm of the government.

The National Museum, Benin City is an example of an institution under the strong influence of government and its machinery. As earlier observed, the creation of the 'Unity Gallery' on its third floor is the product of the government's social and political narrative in 1973, a few years after the Civil War in Nigeria. The museum has a civil service structure firmly under government control. Typically, the political party in power, decides who occupies the position of the director general of NCM, which is the umbrella body responsible for the administration of all museums in Nigeria. The Museum in Benin City is not equipped to exhibit the intangible collections of the people, which is vital to an understanding of the cultural chemistry of any given people represented in the collections, and one of the tenets listed in the ICOM 2007 definition of a museum. The

government structure and low funding prevent the museum from wider community engagements and initiatives that would have fostered a more inclusive practice in the museum administration. There is no structure in place for periodic external accreditation from international agencies, which is necessary to keep the museum within the ambit of best practices in collections management, archival practice, accessibility and inclusiveness. The absence of social media handles makes information about the museum and its programmes restricted to mainstream news media and print. The exhibits are not digitally supported, which makes them less accessible to people with visual impairment.

### **Community Engagement and Partnerships**

The museum has a robust relationship with the surrounding community, although unofficial. The National Museum is located at the Kings Square, which was an extension of the palace grounds before the British invasion of 1897. Close to the King's Square are the traditional quarters of Igun and Igbesanwan where art and crafts production flourished before 1897. Bronzes are still being produced today at Igun in Benin City. It serves as a stopping point for tourists who buy Benin artworks as souvenirs after they visited the museum.



Local Artists at Igun Producing Priced Bronze Pieces for the Collection of Tourists to the National Museum  
Photo Credit: Amy Staples

According to Osasuwa (in an interview with the researcher in 2017), the Oba was the greatest patron of the arts of the Benin kingdom. Artists and artisans were organized into a guild system that served the needs of the palace. Every major event in the kingdom, festivals and visits from foreign emissaries were documented in sculptural form. The system provided a continuous job for the artists and ensured the preservation of the skills along selected family lines until today. Although the scale of production may considerably have reduced following the British invasion, the industry survived. Artists and artisans are still active today producing works for a much wider audience, especially tourists and traders who resell these art works in other Nigerian cities or abroad. The furore generated by illegally obtained works of Benin art, which attracted global attention to the exceptional quality of the Benin bronzes may be partly responsible for the increase in patronage for the local arts and crafts workers. The international exposure perhaps is the most important reason why there are ready buyers for the Benin arts today in European markets and elsewhere.

**Community Participation** - Many tourists to the Benin Museum today, also tour the community arts centres. The museum has original antique works on display, while the community or guild centres provide experiential knowledge to tourists. The visit to the community arts centres is usually twofold - to buy art souvenirs, and to witness firsthand, the production process that has survived from antiquity. Many tourists find these twofold services provided by the arts community very enriching and worthwhile. As noted earlier, the artisans being descendants of the original families practising the guild system for several generations have become embodiments of history and knowledge of the guild. They can answer historical and knowledge-based questions about the guild and Benin art in general from tourists. The museum has the responsibility of vetting any work of art acquired by tourists and giving the necessary permit for export purposes. The vetting is to ascertain if the artworks are antique pieces, as those are prohibited from export. The museum charges a fee for this service, and it constitutes a part of their internally generated revenue.

**Outreach and Community Service** - The museum renders many services to the community in partnership with collaborators and stakeholders. The collaborators include members of academia, notably scholars of history,

archaeology, fine and applied arts, theatre arts, sociology and so on. The stakeholders in addition to the above are the press, high school management, art institutions, the police and security professionals, the Palace of the Oba of Benin, and 'friends of the museum.'

- The most common of its outreaches is to students in high school. Usually, in collaboration with the management of the high school concerned, the students are given lectures on the role of the museum in national development. Sometimes, students are invited to participate in quizzes and essay competitions on the role of the museum in national orientation and development. These are direct offshoots of the government's intention of developing unity and national consciousness in the hearts of high school students after the end of the Civil War in 1970.
- Children's educational programmes are organised by the education unit of the museum in collaboration with 'friends of the museum', which are a group of museum enthusiasts. Apart from storytelling and puppetry, the children are taught soft skills in arts and crafts making, drawing, hairstyling and simple paper designs, etc. They are also made to undergo a guided tour of the museum's collections.
- Art exhibitions are hosted for free at the exhibition gallery of the museum annexure. Unfortunately, this gesture has been disrupted for over 10 years now with the demolition of the museum annexure by the state government and the replacement of it with a water fountain, which regrettably does not add value to the museum.
- Television and radio talk shows are organised by the museum to raise awareness about the museum, especially on the 18th of May each year, which is regarded as 'World Museum Day.' Usually, guests are invited to the talk show where issues relating to the museum as an institution, arts or culture are discussed.
- Another periodic engagement of the museum with the public is talk on tourism and investment potentials. The museum is the custodian and administrator of all tourist sites in Edo and Delta States of Nigeria. The talk aims to woo tourists to these sites to generate income for the museum.
- The museum prints and distributes pamphlets during its programmes as another way of engaging the public. Usually, there are telephone numbers and email addresses for follow-up of

those who are interested in becoming friends with the museum or interested in any form of sponsorship or partnership.

- Bookshop and craft shop. The museum sells items such as postcards, hand-made jewellery and artworks in its bookshop and craft shop. Proceeds from these are subsidies for financing some of the other programmes of the museum.



An Ancient Benin Bronze Handed over to Nigerian Authorities  
Photo Credit: jamaica-gleaner.com

## **Conclusion**

Museums are important institutions for the preservation of culture. Cultural heritage whether tangible or intangible is a product of a community of people (Ben-Iheanacho, 2019), who are important parts of the normal functioning of the museum. The National Museum, Benin City is strategically located within the community of people whose ancestors produced some of the great pieces of the old Benin kingdom. Its location is unique as it allows viewing objects on display in one hand, and a guided tour of the art community on the other. The repatriation of objects taken from the kingdom will boost the collections of the museum, but it is also necessary to update the museum facilities to accommodate these priceless objects as they arrive back to their place of origin. While the engagement of the museum with the community is commendable, it is important to increase the museum community outreaches to encourage more collaboration of the community in the documentation and preservation of its intangible heritages.

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