

BETWEEN THE HOLOCAUST MUSEUM IN WASHINGTON D.C AND GHANA'S CAPE COAST EXHIBITION: CONTESTATIONS OVER MEMORY AND HERITAGE.

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Abstract

In Ghana, December 1994 marked the grand opening of the exhibition titled, “Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade” at the Cape Coast Castle Museum. While the exhibition represents five hundred years of Ghana’s history, it stands as an epochal reflection of the economic and socio-political events marking the transatlantic slave trade. This exhibition opens up a whole debate surrounding race, “horrors of the middle passage, the brutality of enslavement and the struggle for freedom” (Eilean Hooper-Greenhill 2000:19). This paper deploys the “Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade” exhibition and the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. to show that the ‘nature’ of heritage is highly contentious. The paper demonstrates that subjectivity, meaning, the politics of knowledge production, truth and history are all mutually implicated in the discourse of heritage. The paper equally establishes the inevitable importance of power in the struggle to represent the past in both the Cape Coast Castle Museum and the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.

Introduction

Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade exhibition was opened in December 1994 at the Cape Coast Castle Museum. This exhibition was mounted on three connected rooms on the second floor of one wing of Cape Coast Castle. The three rooms were divided into five galleries where different forms of photographs were used to tell Euro- Africa’s story as it concerns trade relations, the middle passage and the African diaspora. A fifteen to twenty minutes film was commissioned from the famous Ghanaian filmmaker, Kwaw Ansah “in order to orient visitors to the themes of the exhibition.” The artifacts of the exhibition include archaeological materials, including nineteenth century locally made spoons, brass weights, gold dust, among others. There are seventeenth century illustrations of coastal life to explore the early trade in gold, salt, cloth, metal and slaves in Gold Coast as Ghana was previously called.

The exhibition was greatly affected by some globalizing conditions: first the venue of the exhibition was a site claimed by the World given its status as World Heritage designation; second, the local communities articulated the site as their ancestral place of descent, third it is interesting that African Americans make strong genealogical bonds with the site as a place of homage to their enslaved ancestors. The topography of contestation is, therefore, significant for its intersections with Ghana and the transatlantic slave trade. In terms of its content, the exhibition was designed to reflect both local and global influences in the transatlantic slave trade: it targeted both local and national Ghanaians, civilian and government officials; African Americans both local and those living in the Americas; wider international tourists, and those from international embassies, donor agencies, NGOs, and cultural heritage groups.

Each of the above targeted groups contributed in one way or the other towards the success of the exhibition. For example, Ghanaian government provided enormous logistical support with very minimal funding. The bulk of the funds was provided by international

donor agencies, particularly the United States Agency for International Development and the United Nations Development Programme.

Multiple interpretations

As both objects and spaces, Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle are imbued with multiple interpretations of history and memory by the different constituencies laying claim to these sites. Over time, there was acrimonious debate over the ownership, use, and interpretation of Cape Coast Castle and, by extension, other historic sites associated with the slave trade. In the ensuing politics of cultural representation that rocked the castle, the “Crossroads of People” exhibition got enmeshed in these debates. Local Ghanaian citizens, museums and government officials, international team that included mainly African Americans drawn from the technocratic fields, expatriates and tourists of African American descent were all engaging the politics of representation in the castle. Most of the above mentioned parties were involved in the conflicting perspectives that laid claim to ownership of the use and interpretation of Ghana’s historic forts and castles. In this struggle the status of the castle as a World heritage Site attracted the discourse that attached globalism and globalization to Ghana’s heritage forte. The complications now rests on the struggle for control between the African Americans who have brought huge funds for the development of the castle and the local Ghanaians who thought that the external funding and the status of World Heritage Site should not meddle with their ownership of the forte. Ghana’s Cape Coast Castle Museum exhibition, “Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade” compels us to ponder Eilean Hopper-Greenfield’s statement that “museums are sites of contestation and equally potential sites for change” (Eilean Hooper-Greenhill 2000:21).

When one also considers the struggles of the African American diasporas and the native Ghanaians over ownership of the Cape Coast Castle then it becomes evident also that “cultural struggles today take place on shifting grounds; they move across borders to re-view, see again former narratives... and they involve re-constructions, re-articulations of culture” (Eilean Hooper-Greenhill 2000:21). And if Christine Mullen Kreamer’s observation that the “Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade” exhibition “demonstrates how museums and the world heritage sites are modes of cultural production” (2006:439) then it would be apt to conclude that “reclaiming and rewriting history are central issues in cultural politics and especially in the museum” (Eilean Hooper-Greenhill 2000:19). I make reference to key phrases like “move across borders” and “rewriting history” here as used by Hopper-Greenfield to respectively articulate first, the journeys of African Americans into Ghana and second the effort of Ghanaian government to “restore some forts and castles to conditions that would stimulate increased local and international tourism” (Christine Mullen Kreamer, 2006:452). These two points above constitute the basis for the complex nature of the imbroglio emerging from the Cape Coast Castle. Most of these complications involve representation and the struggle over memory. For example, while some African American groups advocated “the returning of the Cape Coast site to their ‘original condition’, Ghanaians were more concerned with the conservation and stabilization of the sites” (Christine Mullen Kreamer, 2006:452). There is clash of ideas. One could assert that power is wielded, knowledge is intersected, meanings are interpreted and re-interpreted and subjectivity opposes objectivity or vice-versa. Some of the contentious issues in the exhibition revolved around how best to represent the issue of slavery. For example, lighting, the concept of architecture, whether to re-enact the horrific incidents of the age-long slavery or allow new tourist paradigms as prescribed by Ghana Museums and Monuments Board became unresolved topical debates around the exhibition.

It is worth mentioning that the Cape Castle exhibition is emblematic of how “exhibitions are powerful agents for the articulation of identity and thus are sites of potential

conflicts as invested constituents struggle to secure a voice in the telling of their own stories” (Christine Mullen Kreamer, 2006:461).

Revisiting Holocaust

The Holocaust is taken from the Greek word *holokaustos* broken down as *holos* meaning whole and *kaustos* meaning “burnt”. It is also known as the Shoah in Hebrew which means “catastrophe”. Holocaust was the deadly genocide of about six million European Jews during World War II. This genocide was systematically sponsored by the state of Nazi Germany led by Adolf Hitler, and it happened throughout Nazi-occupied territory. Before World War II about nine million Jews resided in Europe. By the end of the War about two-third of them have been murdered, including about one million children, two million women and three million men. Some people have contested the definition of genocide and that it should include other Nazis’ genocide of millions of people in other groups including Polish, Soviet and Romani civilians, homosexuals, people with disabilities, Jehovah’s Witnesses, certain artists, among others. If these groups are included the figures of Holocaust victims would rise to between 11 and 17 million people. In the United States a museum was built in Washington D.C in commemoration of the Holocaust victims.

In fact, it seemed that after the construction of the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C, “many Americans seemed to feel it was essential to describe their particular ethno-historical experiences as a holocaust” (Ruffins, 2006:400). Consequently, there was a “proliferation of holocaust description” (Ibid, 400) and this became a preponderant metaphor in the media, in the public domain and museums. Part of this wild publicity came with a television film known as *Roots* by Alex Haley. *Roots* heralded a new epoch in the representation of slavery in most American museums. Before *Roots* slavery was a phenomenon of much insignificance in American cultural discourse. *Roots*, however, gave impetus to similar retrospection of a violent past such as the Holocaust.

Many exhibitions in most American museums reenacted the slavery memory much as novelists, film makers, actors and actresses made it a subject matter. Many of these exhibitions and films evoked pathos, feelings of poignancy and a sense of loss. They generated public altercation, disagreements, squabble, debate, conflict, bickering such that for the first time in the history of America, slavery became a ubiquitous institutional preoccupation. According to Faith Davis Ruffins, “However, the controversy about the exhibitions once again underscored that slavery was not simply a historical topic... but rather a living, fire-breathing subject that many saw as deeply relevant to the American present” (Ibid, 406).

The term ‘holocaust’ became a commonplace slogan for evoking the turbulent past among many Americans. It became an unobjectionable idiom used to re-awaken the Middle Passage experiences. And it was already established that “during the last decade in America, the Middle Passage has passed into public usage as a concept and as mythos” (Ibid, 412). Many Americans now see slavery as a veritable equivalence of the holocaust and which must receive a commensurable attention as the holocaust itself. Slavery however made an incursion into the museum where its representation became even more contentious than previously imagined. Paul Gilroy remarks that “the small world of black cultural and intellectual history is populated by those who fear that the integrity of black particularity could be compromised by attempts to open a complex dialogue with other consciousness of affliction” (Gilroy, 1993:215). It is certain that ‘other consciousness of affliction’ that Gilroy suggests is the Holocaust. And it is obvious that the tensions become more palpable when slavery and holocaust are juxtaposed. Gilroy states that “there are dangers for both blacks and Jews in accepting their historic and unsought association with sublimity” (Ibid, 216).

Central to the representation of slavery in American museums were two incompatible ideological drifts: reparations and reconciliation or put in another way, 'museumization' and 'memorialization.' While the former is championed by the Afrocentric faction the later is backed by the inter-racial coterie. The Afrocentric community conjures the slavery *qua* holocaust idea as a rallying cry to attract financial restitution while the interracial group sought to understand slavery through colloquy, racial reconciliation and dialogue. Many enterprises like that of former Virginia governor, Douglas Milder and former Mayor of Charleston, Joseph Riley were microcosms of the macrocosmic efforts to immortalize the slavery project. However, some white Americans have propagated a message not in consonance with the message of African Americans and which does not see slavery as *sine qua non* in the history of America.

Conclusion

In conclusion the struggle over memory in Ghana's Cape Coast Castle and in the Holocaust Museum in America depicts a consciousness that is rooted in power and politics of representation. It has brought to the fore the cataclysmic and the iconoclastic damage brought by both holocaust in the case of America and slavery in the case of Ghana. In the case of the Holocaust, the last struggle lies with the American confederacy to constitute a common platform for cultural egalitarianism. Their final assignment rests on how best to present the stories of the African Americans and the White Southerners and indeed many other groups in America in a way that would usher a comprehensive and all-inclusive experience devoid of contestations. In the case of Ghana's Cape Coast, there was struggle over who will control the Cape Coast Museum. This struggle was between the African American, the local Ghanaians, the government and others. This essay suggests that the representation of the past is political. It also reminds us that memory and power are mutually implicated in the discourse of heritage.

References

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