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**POLITICS OF DISPLAY: DIGGING DEEP ON EXHIBITING THE INDIGENOUS  
COLLECTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE'S NATIONAL HERITAGE AND  
CULTURAL STUDIES CENTRE**

By

Misiwe Madikane

University of Fort Hare, South Africa

**Abstract**

The University of FortHare's National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS) has been tasked with a very important job of conserving and making accessible the indigenous collections of most of whose origins are the Eastern Cape and some parts of KwaZulu Natal and Mpumalanga regions. This is a rare collection, the only one of its kind in South Africa. Aspects of 'ethnographic' material that were donated by Hamilton Welsh and F.S.Malan, via the pre 1994 South Africa's Department of Education date to as far back as the nineteenth century. The material including other African collection in the NAHECS Visual Art Gallery are on display for public viewing. This paper addresses the fundamental question regarding the rationale behind collection of indigenous objects as well as their display and their access to public viewing, which are only a section of the NAHECS collections. Such questions pose challenges to NAHECS's role in representing a collection that has been declared a national treasure as well their role in re writing and preservation of our history.

*Processes of decolonizing museums are far from simple, and are not without contradictions, ambiguities, and points of resistance<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

NAHECS<sup>2</sup> evolved from the Center of for *Xhosa* literature that was established in January 1981. The objectives of the Center were to accumulate, document, preserve oral and written literary materials pertinent to the *Xhosa* language and make them accessible to researchers and general public. In 1991, Senate approved a change of the Center's name to Cultural Studies Center apparently because of the limiting ethnic nature of the previous name, and to reflect more accurately the scope and direction of the Centers functions and activities. The aim of the Center was 'to promote growth, knowledge and understanding material and human resources through the preservation of the collection, study, exposition enrichment and advancement of material evidence. In 1995, a Council Task Force reviewed the Center's mission and activities and concluded that it should play a unique and multiple role including cultural production, hence the name was changed to NAHECS and after the South African Heritage Agency (SAHRA), which was called the National Monuments Council at the time declared the collection a national treasure.

From all the other universities in South Africa, University of Fort Hare was chosen to be a custodian of this collection. There are many reasons for that and these draw from the history of the University. The University of Fort Hare of is a first Black university in South Africa and its illustrious alumni are international figures such as Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela- South African former president, President Mugabe of Zimbabwe, A.P Mda, Tom Mboya, the late Chris Hani, Govan Mbeki and Robert Mangaliso Sobhukhwe and many others within the country and other African countries. It legacy and tradition goes back to the 1940's when a political tradition emerged that was to fight for democracy and African sovereignty. That resulted in a significant opposition to the segregation government of the day. Such legacy has grown up with Fort Hare even today and that is why all the liberation movements in South Africa decided to deposit their history with the university.

The act of display is a politically fraught process which even in the best of times raises political questions of authority, power, meaning, ownership, control & appropriateness. This is often accentuated in the display of ethnographic collections. Does the fact of this collection being at Fort Hare mitigate these questions? Could it? What is the rationale behind the collection of the indigenous objects, their display

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley Ruth Butler, *Contested Representations revisiting Into the Heart of Africa*, Gordon and Breach Publishers, Amsterdam 1999, p. 5

<sup>2</sup> The background and the history on how NAHECS evolved has been taken from the NAHECS strategic plan, 2000-2004.

and public access? These are the challenges that a facing Fort Hare as a custodian of this important collection.

### **Why is this collection important to the university of fort hare and the South African nation?**

It is such an irony of history and fate that whereas the first universities in the proper sense of the word were African – the concept is now largely seen as western and European origin and ownership. It has become common knowledge that Fort Hare is perceived as a university in the Spirit of Africa – an African university. Being an African University, Fort Hare has to present a true African image, not the image of Africa as seen through the eyes of Western countries. Truths about what Africa is should come up through academic programs, and various researches that are conducted by academics and students of the University. The western notions of what Africa actually came about because of the difference in culture and resources at the moment of encounter. Africans were regarded as primitive because they were different from the Europeans, and that led to all these stereotypes. Fort Hare automatically fits the profile of preserving, interpreting and facilitating access to the collection, because it is seen as embodying the spirit of Africa. Other Universities are seen as drawing inspiration from Europe and the West and other sources.

Many ethnographic collections have historically been collected by universities which are seen as “European” universities or as embodying the spirit of Europe. These universities were previously called White Universities and were seen as different from those that are so called Black Universities. The difference was said to be in terms of standards, quality of education, and perhaps funds allocated White Universities being higher in all of these. The question is who determined these standards, and whose standards were in question? The reason I bring up the question of standards and South African Universities in this context is that, the same standards that the Black universities were judged with are probably those that were used in representing ethnographic collections. One can imagine how collections of a people at the bottom of a constructed hierarchy with supposedly low standards would be represented in these universities, galleries and institutions.

In most parts of the western world African indigenous collections have historically been at the margins and exotic curiosities seen through the eyes of the “Master race” with all the attendant prejudices. These were collected during the imperial raids, when Europeans wanted to display trophies of their imperial and colonial success. These plunderers suddenly paraded as experts on issues of African culture, and the dominant voice was theirs concerning such issues. Africans the people who lived this culture suddenly had no voice. They were only displayed as symbols living or non-living of primitive Africa. When they are on display, they are displayed out of context, often without adequate consideration of their spiritual and other significance. That led to silences and these need to brought to the fore and be given proper

recognition. I am sure in a moment like that Giyatri Spivak<sup>3</sup> would say the subaltern must speak. The issuing in South Africa of the Unesco<sup>4</sup> African history in 8 volumes side by side with the re-discoveries of the significances of Mapungubje and cradle of humankind is very significant in this regard.

Many African pieces are still languishing in the cupboards and museum storerooms somewhere overseas. Now that the theories of Black inferiority are universally rejected (at least in public) and are proven wrong on all fronts, these museums do not appear to have any more use for them as evidence of African barbarity. Revelations of the meanings, roles and uses of these pieces are now an indictment and evidence of European ignorance of Africa and Africans. Now that veil is lifting on the prejudices and negative stereotypes on Africans and the role of ethnography and physiognomy are exposed to better scrutiny, questions of repatriation and re-display become relevant. It was in this context when the President of South Africa Thabo Mbeki thanked the government of allowing the remains of Sara Bartmann to be returned to South Africa for a decent burial. African institutions should and can play a leading role in this regard.

The South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) governs the management and protection of heritage material in South Africa. SAHRA is a statutory agency under the National Heritage resources Act, No. 25 of 1999. It is moving from the premise that heritage resources should be managed by at the level closest to where they are located. This really helps in community participation which is an integral part of addressing the cultural misrepresentation. Government has adopted different measures including fines, are in place to prevent the illicit traffic, damage or destruction of cultural property. This shows how seriously government is beginning to take the issue of heritage management and its role in facilitating education and preservation of the history of this country. Fort Hare as a custodian of national collection would be expected to demonstrably ascribe to these values and make sure that they are realized.

Now the importance of this collection being at Fort Hare today when there is a universal renewal of attention on the best that is African, presents the following questions among many.

- Has the collection come home?
- Is the collection treated and depicted as if it is at home or in strange land? Is the collection at the depths of the rivers of Babylon or at the Summit of Mt Zion – can it sing its Lords song? Can its spirituality / SOUL be expressed to the fullest?
- Is the collection immune at Fort Hare from the issues African scholars raise about indigenous collections in other contexts?

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<sup>3</sup> An English well known author on post colonial discourses

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Education, Scientific, Culture and Communication abbreviated as UNESCO is an international body that encourages international peace and universal respect by promoting collaboration amongst nations

- Is Fort Hare depicting the collection any differently from the UNIVERSITIES OF THE OTHER? Does due sensitivity and robustness get displayed by the curators?
- If questions of reparation arose would they be relevant to Fort Hare

One can say this collection has come home. The challenge is can HOME treat the collection in a homely way, will HOME depict the collection differently from THE OTHERS, and will home sustain the OTHERIFICATION and EXOTICISATION of the collection or the opposite?

These are challenges that museums and university museums face throughout Africa. We believe that indigenous South African art forms can and will reach a standard of excellence, and if anything, can set new and even higher standards of excellence because they grow out diversity which characterizes our vibrant cultural inheritance. This is the spirit that University of Fort Hare should adopt in reaffirming and promoting our heritage that will help in the writing of our history.

### **Contextualising the collection**

Africa has been represented as a land of the primitive, a land of savages and barbaric peoples by the Western countries. It is a continent that was supposedly discovered from the dark and was brought to civilization. The early twentieth century anthropologists worked with a sense of urgency to record and collect the cultures of non Western peoples whom they believed would soon disappear completely in the face of the Western expansion and imperialism<sup>5</sup> The so called ethnographic collection and artifacts emerged in that context. This context included the notion that studying objects of a people or the shapes of their heads you may be able to confirm how backward a people is.

Aspects of culture of these people was appropriated and taken back to Europe as curios, for research and as trophies that showed conquer and victory. When these artifacts surfaced in Europe, they were represented as if they are showing the actual identities of the people who made them? This went even further when certain parts of people's bodies were displayed in European museums. That according the Thabo Mbeki as barbarism at its best. He made this clear in his statement at Sara Bartmann's funeral, when he strongly criticized such an act, saying that 'it was not the lonely African woman in European, alienated from her identity and motherland who was barbaric but those who treated her barbaric brutality<sup>6</sup> That was a clear statement against these constructed grotesque and racial stereotypes.

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<sup>5</sup> Shelley Butler, *Contested representation revising Into the Heart of Africa*, Gordon and Breach Publishers, Amsterdam 1999 p.16

<sup>6</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/218371.stm>

One can safely say that ‘ethnographic artifacts are created by ethnographers themselves’. Objects become ethnographic by virtue of being defined, segmented, detached, and carried by ethnographers<sup>7</sup> This matter should come up more frequently when people are talking about ethnographic collections so that their nature and history be understood. Directly related to this is the problematic assumption that you can collect, cart off, and analyze the shapes of people and confirm the backwardness of a people. At the center of the problems with ethnography and physiognomy have been the assumptions of inferiority that are then cast on Africans.

When the exhibiting of cultures started in Europe with world fairs, these artifacts were exhibited as evidences of strange inferior cultures. The whole point of world fairs was to exhibit the Western progress in terms of civilization, whilst at the same time asserting its superiority and supremacy to the world. These artifacts always were given a lower level in the hierarchy of civilization and so were its peoples.

The South African government during its apartheid years also reinforced the same kind of representation to show how inferior Black people were to White people. Indigenous artifacts were exhibited and kept with natural collections. That in a way was saying that these people are not human and qualified to be classified with animals. The indigenous collections of the University of Fort Hare carry with them the same history and do face the challenges of trying to diminish ethnocentrism, racism and colonialism.

### **A reflective stance**

The indigenous collections are often represented as mythic objects, relics of the inferiority of the past<sup>8</sup> This gets constructed as universal thinking or a given truth. There is a need to decolonize museums from that kind of thinking. The authors and primary givers of the objects are not acknowledged and generally referred to as *Xhosa* people for example. The specific village where the artifacts come from will not be known. There is lack of in-depth in describing characters of the African people. For example the indigenous collections at Fort Hare are generally known by Hamilton Welsh and F.S. Malan, the people who collected them. These people neither created nor used these artifacts, and it is not even clear how they got hold them. This state of practice needs to be challenged because theirs is not an isolated case. Naming is only one of the examples that arise when one considers the politics of representation.

South Africa lacks adequate training in heritage education. This presents a serious problem of understanding culture in context and worse still a problem in representing and presenting South African

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<sup>7</sup> Shelley Butler, *Contested Representations revisiting Into the Heart of Africa*, Gordon and Breach Publishers, Amsterdam 1999 p.387

<sup>8</sup> Shelley Butler, *Contested Representations revisiting Into the Heart of Africa*. Gordon and Breach Publishers, Amsterdam 1999, p.6

heritage to outsiders. People often inevitably participate in their own caricaturing by buying into hegemonic ideologies even as they struggle against those oppressions and those ideologies<sup>9</sup> Sustained use of language that emphasizes the exoticness of Africa effectively sabotages African history and heritage.

Inadequate heritage education and the legacy of the past is only part of the story. A bigger part relates to the economic situation that many African people find themselves in as a consequence of underdevelopment by colonialism and neo-colonialism. Now one finds Africans being objects of the tourist gaze, repetitively performing their expected identities for tourists and thereby being 'living signs of themselves'<sup>10</sup> or even living caricatures of their exotic selves.

Is this some kind of caricature of African life? What do these statements that are made in front of tourists say about Black people? Are they only people who live in mud huts growing along maize and other staple products? Are there no engineers, doctors, astronomers, artists, and architectures amongst Black people that go as far back as 1500-2000 years before the Europeans arrived on this continent? The things that are criticized in the way the west represents Africa are actually being reinforced in this new era. Are Black people now justified to do these because they are Black people? Is the story of barbarism best told by Africans because they actually lived it? Do they want to reduce their culture into something that they will be ashamed to claim? Africans should find new ways of representing their culture.

### **Politics of display**

The politics of display in most collections, including this collection as well relate to questions of uneven power, ideology, resources, contestation of representation, meaning, significance, relatedness, ownership and authorship. Conferences like the present one, spaces like galleries and museums provide the stage for choreographing out the politics of display. In much of a similar way to how the grandchildren of Israel must have felt when they sat down by the rivers of Babylon, under the willow trees refusing to sing their lord's songs in a strange land, yearning for a return to Zion their home. Many indigenous African collections must be feeling like that in different universities and museums throughout the world where they are kept, displayed on the margins as curiosities of the other, often shallowly mislabeled – for example “African Necklace,” Female headgear, a drum etc. These need labeling that has depth, in context and values complexity.

The very nature of exhibiting makes it a contested terrain<sup>11</sup> Power relations and subjectivity are constantly at play in exhibiting. Decision like what has to be told and in what way are the results of this contestation.

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<sup>9</sup> Kondo in Shelley Ruth Butler, *Contested Representations revising Into the Heat of Africa*, Gordon and Breach Publishers, Amsterdam 1999, p. 58

<sup>10</sup> Steven D. Karp and Ivan Karp, *Exhibiting Cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*, Smithsonian Institution, 1991, p. 388

<sup>11</sup> Steven D. Lavin and Ivan Karp, *Exhibiting Cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*, Smithsonian Institution, 1991, p.1

One can say that these are curatorial decisions and are neutral because the curators do what is best for the collection. But this is not as easy as that. There are political, economic, social and personal decisions that influence displaying in museum. Certain images are given focus, whilst others are at the background or are not on display at all. Association of displayed objects brings about certain narratives that are seen as 'truths' by the audience. With indigenous collections, this construction and appropriation becomes more extended in a sense because of the nature of how these have been represented in the past. The relationship between Africa and the West becomes more visible.

Displaying indigenous collections becomes more complex. Exotic displays in museums are only there because of the Western Imperialism and Colonial appropriation, and the story that such objects can tell is the history of their status as trophies of imperial conquest<sup>12</sup> It is the duty of curators in the post colonial era to change this kind of representations and make museums a place for confrontation, experiment, debate and negotiation.

### **The tourist discourse**

Tourists typical search for all that is authentic, pristine and genuine<sup>13</sup> Tourism industry responds to this by making people perform their so-called cultures in front of tourist. These people get objectified and are packaged into tourism products. Tourists are allowed to appropriate this experience through the use of camera and other means (buying curios) to have it in their private homes. At the museum, tourists view objects that metonymically stand for the culture of their creators. By viewing these ethnographic fragments, visitors can experience and appropriate 'authenticity' which is seen as representing the culture of those concerned.

The best indication of the final victory of modernity is not the disappearance of the non modern world, but its artificial presentation and reconstruction in the modern society<sup>14</sup> Tourist enjoy the comforts of home whilst they are able to view and have a sense of the primitive world. This is all constructed in the tourist gaze.

### **How do we address the situation?**

Museum scientists and curators should not pretend as if what they are trying to tell is an absolute truth. Exhibits are neither neutral nor objective and do not always represent reality. They are informed by

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<sup>12</sup> Steven D. Lavin and Ivan Karp, *Exhibiting Cultures: The poetics and politics of museum display*, Smithsonian Institution, 1991, p.16

<sup>13</sup> Dean McCannell, in Shelley Butler, *Contested Representation revisiting Into the Heart of Africa*, Gordon and Breach Publishers, Amsterdam 1996

<sup>14</sup> Dean McCannell in Shelley Ruth Butler, *Contested Representation revisiting Into the Heart of Africa*, Gordon and Breach Publishers, Amsterdam 1996, p.16

cultural, historical, institutional and political contexts that they operate in. They should let intellectual and ethical issues relating to the purpose of a museum guide them. They should be aware of the fact that historical narratives are always selective and always involve interpretation and reinterpretation.

This section is not trying to come up with any answers. Some of the suggestions that will be given work and sometimes they do not work. These sometimes depend on how they are implemented. Here are few suggestions:

- Create exhibits that recontextualize objects instead of just celebrating African tribal art and crafts
- Academic and scholarly discussion must be encouraged
- Participation and consultation of the owners of the heritage
- Always engage in critical reflective exhibitions
- Define all terms and define the context
- Should condemn colonialism explicitly
- Use irony in a critical and reflective stance
- Juxtapose contemporary Africa with colonial period
- Highlight controversies
- Can create different themes for traveling exhibitions

The most important thing before people could even think of doing exhibitions is changing the mindset of the African people in how they think about heritage. Some of these people never got proper guidance as to how important their heritage is to them. In the past, subjects on heritage in South African schools were never included in the school curriculum, as a result pupils never dreamt of being heritage practitioners. That was not because they did not want to but because there was lack of information at their disposal. University of Fort Hare should pioneer and facilitate teaching of such subjects.

Intensive training at tertiary level on the heritage issues is needed. This should be a direct response to the fact that there are few African curators and conservators. Even when people are trained, they are made to feel inferior to the White curators, because they are seen as lacking experience and are not capable of running museums. Heritage training should not only focus on technical skills and discourses around heritage issues. Practical management skills have to be incorporated so that students are better equipped when they go to work.

This country should not only be celebrating success stories whilst in the mean time its history is being sabotaged. Museums collections and exhibitions should redress the imbalances of cultural representations and seek to empower and transform our societies.

## **Conclusion**

This collection is another chance to ponder the meaning of being an African university, An African gallery – what does it mean to be an African gallery – how to depict indigenous collections in a fitting manner? How to allocate resources in a way that takes into account the significance of these collections? The department of arts and culture, Fort Hare and all other people who are working with heritage in the country should be critical about issues involved in representation of heritage material. These processes are very important in the way the South Africa or rather Africa presents itself to the world and that in turn will have implications on how these country look and view Africa. Africa needs to stamp her feet down and show the world what she stands for.

Museums have come to a point where they no longer just preserve and conserve artifacts, but have moved to another role of informing, educating and empowering. Museums of indigenous collections should do away with stereotypes and tell the real truth about Africa. To redress these imbalances, we need good investment in heritage training and that has budgetary implications. So far, NAHECS is still struggling and that can be costly.

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