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Historical Overview Of The Establishment Of The Ghana Museums & Monuments Board

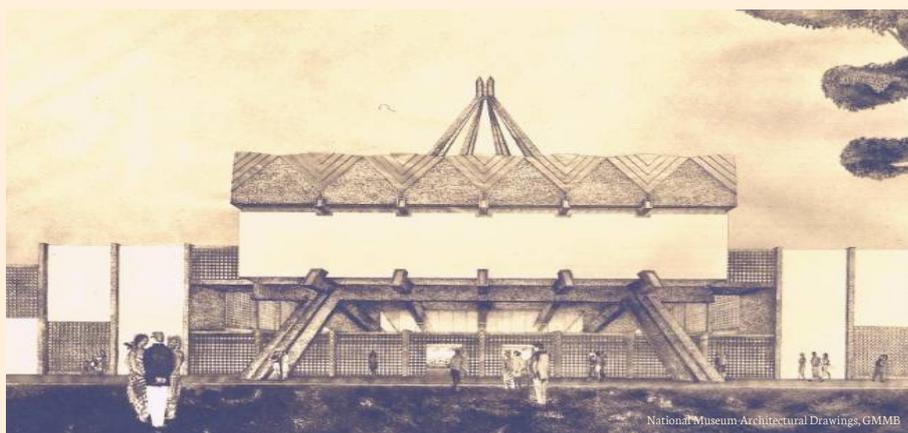
by William Nsuiban Gmayi

The National Museum lives under the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB), which was established with the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board Ordinance (no.20) of 1957, merging the Monuments and Relics Commission and the National Museum into a single unit as the governing board.

This new body was to be responsible for the protection and preservation of monuments, relics and objects of archaeological and historic interest. The duties and responsibilities of the GMMB were further described in the National Liberation Council Decree (NLCD) 387 of 1969 (now known as Act 387 of 1969), Executive Instrument 42 of 1972, and Executive Instrument 29 of 1973.

Historical and archival records at both the GMMB and the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra indicate that the notion of establishing a national museum began in 1943. By the following year, three individuals—Max Gluckman, Governor Alan Burns and Julian Huxley—were in regular correspondence about the museum idea. A proposal entitled Research and Development in Archaeology, Ethnography, African Art and Museums in West Africa was prepared by Huxley in 1944 and submitted to a government committee that was appointed to research the possibility of

developing a museum (GMMBAF 0045 and PRAAD 3/1/347). The proposal was aimed at the conservation and exhibition functions of a museum with the view that, if action was not taken, both material culture and local traditions were in danger of disappearing or degenerating. It stated that the museum should be closely associated with what was then the University College of the Gold Coast, and placed particular urgency on the issue of collecting gold weights that were being purchased by foreigners and melted down for their metal components without regard to their importance in Ghanaian history.



In 1946, the British Museum's ethnographer Hermann Justus Braunholtz was invited by the British government "to survey the position with regard to the preservation of West African antiquities, and to advise the governments concerned on such action as may appear to be necessary for their collection and display". Braunholtz, while in the Gold Coast for 12 days, visited the Achimota College, toured slave forts and markets, travelled to Cape Coast and Kumasi and emphasised the importance of preserving elements of material cultures as "an indispensable means of creating in the African a balanced perspective of his own past, from which will spring confidence in his future progress" (see Adedze;1995 and Agorsah; 1978).

Braunholtz outlined four primary needs for the preservation of material cultural heritage or ethnographic documentation in the Gold Coast: (1) a systematic archaeological survey; (2) the protection of ancient and historic monuments; (3) the collection of archaeological and historic monuments; and (4) the provision of museums as storehouses for conserving and exhibiting the collections (see McCarthy,

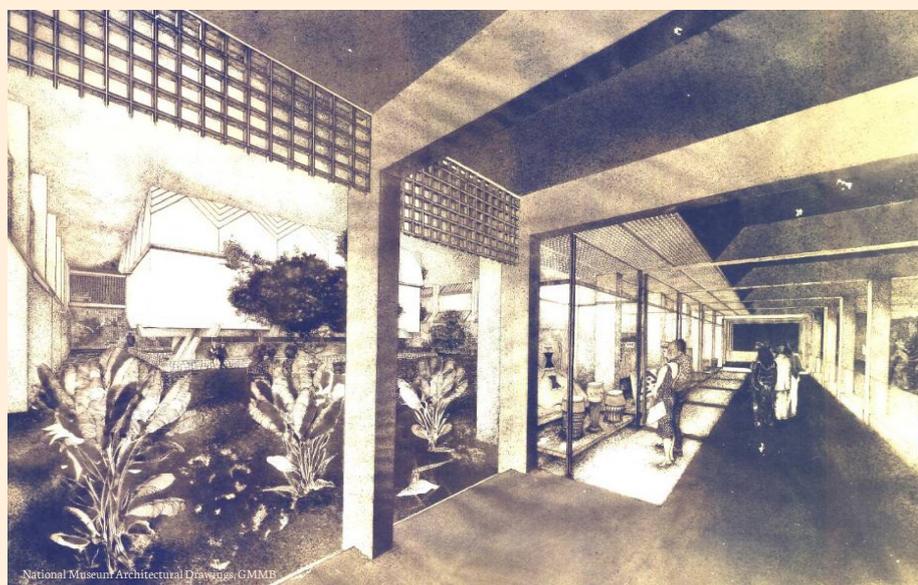
Leslie to Officer Administering the Government. 11 May 1949. PRAAD 3/1/347 and Wilkins to Chairman, Monuments and Relics Commission. 14 December 1949. PRAAD 3/1/347)

The recommendation on the provision of museums as storehouses played a significant role in the formation of the Ghana National Museum. Braunholtz suggested one central museum in Accra and three regional museums to be opened in successive years with a strong connection between the emerging National Museum and the established University College of the Gold Coast (see Lawrence, AW to DA Chapman. 8 March 1957. GMMBAF 0045 and Lawrence, AW to Mr. Nightingale, Museums Association. 8 March 1957. GMMBAF 0045)

In 1949, a four-member committee consisting of Sir Leslie McCarthy, Professor W.V. Variey, Mr. Seale (an architect with the Public Works Department) and David Mowbray Balme (then-principal of the University College of the Gold Coast), was appointed by the Monuments and Relics Committee to examine Braunholtz's report and write another proposal for the formation of a museum. The committee endorsed Braunholtz's

four recommendations, adding a fifth on the establishment of an archive for the collection and preservation of the history of the colony, which later became Public Records Archives and Administrative Department (PRAAD CSO 21/9/23 #4247). Two years later, in 1951, the government voted to allocate money to the University College of the Gold Coast to start a museum, which was incorporated into the Engineering Department, later transferred to the Archaeology Department, and largely stocked with the 1953 donation of the Achimota museum collection, consisting of some 10,000 objects and 29 showcases (GMMB 1973, National Museum of the Gold Coast 1953). That same year, an Interim Council for the National Museum was inaugurated, composed of representatives of national, regional and educational interests. At its first meeting on 10 March 1953 it was resolved that there should be an exhibition gallery built in Accra as soon as possible. Reminiscent of the recommendations made by Huxley and later by Braunholtz, the new exhibition space and National Museum was not to be an independent institution, but integrally tied to the university.

By 1954, a permanent site at the corner of Barnes and Castle Roads in Accra had been obtained for building an exhibition gallery; construction began that same year (University College of the Gold Coast 1954). The contractors completed their work on 25 January 1957, and the Ghana National Museum opened to the public weeks later on 5 March. The University College transferred ownership of the land acquired at the corner of Barnes and Castle roads and buildings of the National Museum to the Museums and Monuments



National Museum Architectural Drawings, GMMB

Board in 1958.

The National Museum was therefore founded with the same general aims of preserving the material cultural heritage of the Gold Coast, and under the same sort of arrangements as governs a number of institutions such as the University College of the Gold Coast. The National Museum was self-governing. It was created by an Ordinance of the Gold Coast Government, passed by the Legislative Council. The Ordinance was designed as a temporary measure for the purpose of getting the National Museum started and enabling it to work out its own methods.

The Ordinance was replaced by a more permanent and detailed legislation (NLCD 387), now known as Act 387 of 1969. This act also merged the National Museum and the Monuments and Relics Commission into one unit as the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB). Under this current legislation, the GMMB is administered by a Board of Directors consisting of not more than 10 people appointed by the Minister.

Impact of the National Museum on Ghana

The GMMB and the National Museum were adequately supported from their opening in 1957 through to the 1970s, and actively engaged in collection and education. Beginning in 1962, the Museum undertook an extensive national tour to raise awareness on national cultural heritage in communities across the country. As a part of this project, local collectors were appointed to keep track of and amass material cultural heritage. This collection experiment was described in

the publication *Museum as an example for other museums in developing countries to follow* (Agorsah; 1978 and Amelor 1996). The Ghana National Museum, the publication recalls, selected a series of candidates for regional areas and then interviewed and selected from that pool its regional collectors. The project added significantly to the Museum's collections.

Ghana ratified the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and was among the first state parties to inscribe sites (Forts and Castles of Ghana) under the convention onto the world heritage list in 1979. In 1980, the ten Asante Traditional Buildings (ATBs) were also inscribed.

The GMMB has successfully equipped, maintained and managed two regional museums (the Upper East and Volta Regional Museums). Meanwhile, the National Museum undertook some didactic exhibitions in the country, which sought to educate the citizenry on major government policies. For example, in the 1960s, it led the Akosombo Dam Travelling Exhibition across the country to educate the Ghanaian people on the hydroelectric dam project on the Volta River. Similarly, in 2008, the Museum of Science and Technology under the National Museum worked with Nubuke Foundation for another didactic exhibition that toured the then-ten regional capitals across a five-year period to educate Ghanaians on oil formation, exploration and the impact of the by-products, as an oil and gas producing country.

Challenges

The Museum's initial collection, as passed on from Achimota via the University College to the Ghana National Museum, was an eclectic mix of archaeological and ethnographic artefacts amassed largely by foreigners. The colonial collections were at best unrepresentative of the territories under their administration. The collections were transferred directly to the Ghana National Museum and most of their biases and nuances have not been corrected post-independence by Ghanaian curators.

Collecting for the National Museum slowed significantly after independence in 1957, save additions by archaeologists who were required by law to deposit any discovered artefacts in the National Museum. General donations slowed due, in part, to a decrease in colonial administrators collecting "curiosities" and also to an increase in the presence of antiques dealers who were willing to pay for the objects the museum asked for as donations, which were then sold for great profit overseas.

Even at the very beginning, it was evident that the building would need to be expanded; in his speech at the museum's grand opening in 1957, the Minister of Education was already mentioning the need for more space. The requests for increased storage, exhibition space and offices are continuously referenced throughout the GMMB's annual reports. The situation led to collaboration with UNESCO in 1963 to expand the museum to include three large galleries, a conference hall, cinema facilities, a library and a museum school service department. Renowned museum architect Dr. Franco Minissi was invited to the facilities in 1964, with final consultation in



1965. Construction works began and were slated to be completed in 1969. But, although plans were submitted and construction begun, the expansions never materialised; a coup overthrew the Nkrumah regime in 1966 and the UNESCO aid disappeared.

Political instability, a worldwide economic downturn in the late 1970s and the resulting International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment stipulations further hampered government interest in, or ability to support, cultural heritage and the arts. The economic and political climate under which the promising Ghanaian Cultural Resource Management (CRM) programmes existed changed rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s. Global economic crises, and especially the structural adjustment packages mandated by foreign lenders from 1981 onward, severely damaged the ability of the state to support the infrastructure developments needed by the GMMB.

After 63 years of efforts to preserve the material cultural heritage of Ghana, the National Museum itself has become a relic. The problems facing the institution are widespread. The structures of the

museum are dilapidated following years of neglect. Storage facilities are overcrowded with rarely registered or otherwise un-accessioned collections kept within them, generally unrepresentative of the nation's material cultural wealth.

Good practices and approaches in heritage management require protective legislation to ensure effective management of cultural and natural heritage resources. However, the current cultural resource management legislation is largely restricting definitions of material heritage to antiques, and is lacking enforcement mechanisms to ensure effective management of cultural and natural heritage resources. There is therefore an urgent need to review and update the national heritage legislation that protects heritage, so as to align it to good practices and approaches in heritage management as explored by Maame Mensa-Bonsu in this report, in the essay "Revamping Ghana's Museums and Monuments: The Legal Dimension".

The Ghana National Museum has been internally and externally described as outdated, neo-colonial in its presentation of culture and problematic in its operations. This has led to seven attempts at

restructuring plans over the past 27 years (GMMB 1993, GMMB 1996, Cooper 1998, GMMB 1998, Riccerca 2002, GMMB 2013, GMMB 2016, GMMBAF 0080).

Museum managers have often placed blame for such situations of stagnation and underdevelopment on colonial legacy; however, the GMMB as an institution has itself suffered from basic re-alignment issues with its continuous transfers between government agencies and ministries. For example, in a period of three years between 1989 and 1992, the GMMB has been reshuffled between four different government ministries and departments, and the new leaders were unable to create a sustainable financing regime for the GMMB.

Similar to these challenges is the leadership crisis that has rocked the GMMB and the National Museum. In a 2019 report, a World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS/ICCROM Advisory Mission to Ghana identified governance as one of the issues with the GMMB. From a governance and leadership perspective, the GMMB lacks a visionary leader for the effective management, conservation and presentation of the property. This is aggravated by the partisan political interference that has led to the appointment of four Acting Executive Directors between March 2017 and September 2020. Without an integrated and harmonised strategic framework, each of these leaders acted predominantly without any policy guidelines.



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