CHALLENGE THE MUSEUM

Sharing authority as a strategy to challenge the museum: a Congolese perspective

un-doing institutions
museum education

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Many museums in Africa are complex spaces, with layers of burdened histories of colonisation and post-independence nation building. They often are profiled on the one hand as a place of 'high culture' and on the other hand as a place of contested objects and displays, resulting in social exclusions. In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, as for other countries in Africa, the contradictions of being only partly operational, operating as 'half-life' are due to insufficient resources and the condition of the museum is marked by state failure. But it also signals the larger persistent crisis of African museums across the continent (Abungu 2006; Arinze 1998).

Theorists have been engaged in what can be described as an ongoing process of revaluation of museum identities in Africa beyond inherent western ideologies and problematic pasts. Towards the end of the 20th century the conviction that community engagement is the only way out of the 'western imposed model' and towards 'local relevancy' came radically to the fore. In this essay, I will relate this discourse to the critical literature of community work in international museum studies to identify some general concerns, as well as how this speaks to the understanding of museum and community work in the context of the museum in Congo.

Museums in postcolonial Africa and their search for local relevance

At the same time as museums in Europe, Latin America and former settler colonies such as Australia or Canada have been exploring transformative processes since the 1970s; in Africa, the postcolonial context gave rise to existentialist concerns about its museums. Informed by the concept of 'Africanisation' (Arinze 1998; Myles 1976) and of 'overcoming colonial legacy' (Arnoldi 1999; Fogelman 2008; Mawere and Mubaya 2015), the need to be responsive to the communities they serve has been also a central focus for African museums in order to break away from these imposed concepts and to become more locally relevant (Abungu 2006; Ardouin and Arinze 1995; Arinze 1998; Eyo 1994; Myles 1976).

Ghanaian museum practitioner Kwasi Addai Myles suggested as early as 1976 the need to "search for forms, methods and techniques of their own which are more closely related and suitable to their own conditions" (Myles 1976:196). He said the time had come for the African museum to be of 'greater benefit for its communities' and he reflected on the international approach focusing on the social role of museums. When in 1981 Alpha Oumar Konaré, at the time a consultant for UNESCO and later president of Mali, announced the new policy for the National Museum of Mali, he spoke about the 'birth' of the museum as a critical response to the former colonial museum policy (Arnoldi 1999:29). The Konaré policy did indeed have an impact on everything from the development and design of a new museum complex, in order to counter colonial architecture; to the revision of the museum's research agenda and collections policy, exhibitions and public programming. The policy spoke to issues of democratisation and decentralisation that dealt with how to get more people involved in the museum through public access, the use of regional languages and consultation with people's representatives and specialists in traditional cultures, and the creation of regional museums that would have a stronger local engagement. It was again Konaré on the cutting edge of the public discussion in 1991, a decade after the 'birth' of the Mali museum and subsequently president of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) who opened the annual encounter dedicated to the museum in Africa with the words that the "time was urgent to kill the western model of museum in Africa" (ICOM 1992).

Emmanuel Nnakenyi Arinze in African Museums: The Challenge of Change in 1998 said: "[Museums in Africa] need to break away from their colonial vestiges to create African-based museums that will be responsive to their communities. […] Africans expect museums to develop appropriate methods and strategies for interacting with the public, and to create innovative programmes that will involve it" (Arinze 1998:36). The concerns expressed in the texts about change, community engagement and the relevancy of the museum echo with the broader discussions, transformations and paradigm shifts for museums to become inclusive spaces of dialogue and encounter (Anderson 2004; Golding and Modest 2013; Knell, MacLeod, and Watson 2007; Sandell 2002; Witcomb 2003). The relationship between museum and community was the theme of the ICOM annual meeting in 1995 (ICOM 1995). Also in Africa, considerations about the involvement of communities are a focal point, as can be seen by the title of the International Council of African Museums meeting in Lusaka in 1999: Construire avec la communauté, un défi pour les musées africains (Building with the community, a challenge for African museums). After Lusaka, important initiatives had started on a practical level to professionalise the African heritage and museum sector, but expectations on the more philosophical aspects and orientations remain unfulfilled and the discourse continues.

Museums throughout the continent have attempted to be relevant by adopting strategies that aim to boost local development by promoting local heritage and which materialised in a burgeoning of community-based museum initiatives such as ecomuseums[1] or community-run museums (Ardouin and Arinze 1995; Keita 2007). In 'conventional museums' (Eyo 1994) with colonial legacies, however, it often remained unclear how the process of revaluation and strategies of inclusion were reflected in museum practice.

Second wave of new museology: undermining the museum authority

In the larger international discourse about museum developments, the practical process and impact of theoretical repositioning of museums were also reconsidered at the turn of the 21st century. The 'educational turn' that had characterised new museology had meant in practice that the authority had been shifting inside the museum[2] instead of being put into question (Boast 2011; Trofanenko 2006). In other words, after 30 years of new museology, a discrepancy had been created between what museums advocated for and real implementation and change, which led to a 'second wave' of new museology since the 2000s (MacDonald 2006; Boast 2011).

Historian and anthropologist James Clifford's 1997 critical essay, Museums as contact zones, raised potential ways ethnographic museums could be relevant. They need to address their colonial collections within the museum as well as with the communities they represented, while at the same time bearing in mind that communities are not homogeneous and have their own agendas (Clifford 1997)[3]. Museum anthropologist Robin Boast (2011) explored the 'dark underbelly' of Clifford's contact zone as neo-colonial collaborations: Boast points out that "the new museum, the museum as contact zone, is and continues to be used instrumentally as a means of masking far more fundamental asymmetries, appropriations, and biases" (Boast 2011:67). According to Boast, "dialogue and collaboration are foregrounded, but the ultimate suppression of oppositional discourse is always effected" (Boast 2011:64). Boast proposes a way out

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[1] The definition of the ecomuseum according to *Key concepts of Museology*, is "a museal institution which, for the development of a community, combines conservation, display and explanation of the cultural and natural heritage held by this same community; the ecomuseum represents a living and working environment on a given territory, and the research associated with it." (Desvallées & Maraisse 2010:59).

[2] According to Boast, new museology "has introduced a regime where the educator and the marketing manager […] control the voices of the museum's presentations" (Boast 2011:58).

[3] The complexities of a series of notions commonly used in the new museum paradigms have increasingly been addressed, such as 'relevance' (Nielsen 2015), 'engagement' (Onciul 2013; Schorch, McCarthy, and Hakiwai 2016), 'the community' (Crooke 2007; Golding and Modest 2013; Peers and Brown 2003; Schorch 2017; Watson 2007), including the problematic supposition that communities tend to be associated with radical democracy and resistance to dominant culture (Witcomb 2003:79).

with Clifford's own words where he warned about this restricted application of the 'contact zone' and suggested a more engaged interpretation: "Contact work in a museum thus goes beyond consultation and sensitivity, though these are very important. It becomes active collaboration and a sharing of authority" (Clifford cited in Boast 2011:67). Boast argues that the museum in the 20th century has to confront its deeper neocolonial legacy and requires museums "to learn to let go of their resources, even at times of the objects, for the benefit and use of communities and agendas far beyond its knowledge and control" (Boast 2011:67).

Collaborative practices and sharing authority: towards a glossary

Collaborative curating, as a group process, is a curatorial practice interested in the plurality of voices and perspectives, sometimes in a search of bringing them together in a single voice, sometimes in a search of keeping the multivocality of the authorial voices (Arriola 2009). In this way, the 'sacrosanct autonomy' of a singular curatorial vision is challenged (Macdonald and Basu 2007:10). It has been argued that little research touches on the curatorial aspects of the process and impact of collaborative practice (Golding and Modest 2013:1–3), which leaves blind spots in the understanding on a very practical basis, as well about the responsibilities of the expertise that has been brought into the process, leading to new questions about authorial renunciation (Bishop 2005) or curatorial integrity (Golding 2013). Also, concepts and theories about how museum change through collective curatorial practices are largely developed in spaces in a context of cultural heritage politicisation, such as colonial museums in former metropoles that establish relationships with the diasporas of the source communities of their collections, or in settler societies such as Australia, New Zealand or Canada, activated by new indigenous activism (Peers & Brown 2003, Basu 2015). Anthropologist Paul Basu questions what the responsibilities are for museums without a pressure group community challenging it to transform its policies and practices (Basu 2015:338), which is, until now, the case for most museums in Congo.

The notion of 'a shared authority' has been coined by oral and public historian Michael Frisch in his seminal work A shared authority: Essays on the craft and meaning of oral and public history in 1990 in the USA[4] (Frisch 1990). It describes the interaction between the oral historian and the narrator as a shared process of authorship and interpretative authority. In other words, both the academic historian and the person who contributes to historical understanding through his lived experience contribute to the development of

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[4] By oral history is meant the process of historical research through interviews with informants. Public history is the discipline where history, and in the context of Frisch's work specifically oral history, is used publicly; such as in the development of a history exhibition, a popular history book, a public programme, a documentary. Public history as a discipline was professionalised in the late 1970s, first in the USA and Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

the interview; they both interpret, orient and decide content generation. According to Frisch, oral historians should acknowledge this collaborative production between academic authority and authority based on culture or experience. Instead, he argues, this moment of sharing is most commonly masked in finished products, with only the authority of the academic represented. Frisch suggests the dialogue between different bases of authority might more deeply characterise the experience of the finished product (Frisch 1990:XXIII, own emphasis). According to Australian public historian Mary Hutchison, shared authority in the practice of exhibition making requires attention be paid to the agency of both the curatorial voices as well as those of the participants. This agency and an egalitarian form of interaction should be of central concern in all stages of the exhibition production process, from the development and management of elements to their design and fabric. From this perspective, not only the outcome but also the process is important, and the interactions ought to be made visible in the outcomes (Hutchison 2013:143). In other words, through collaborative exhibition creation, Hutchison argues for a shift from the authoritarian, often anonymous and institutional 'museological voice' in cultural historical exhibitions towards a transparent and more democratic attitude, made perceptible in the exhibition itself. Furthermore, what shared authority in collaborative exhibition practice does so forcefully, she argues, is making visible the voice of each individual participant instead of an abstract representation of "the community" by rendering the "personal complexity and what that reveals in contrast to representative simplicity and what that obscures" (Hutchison 2013: 145). Shared authority in this perspective is a useful tool to understand how the 'unheard voice' can be brought effectively inside the museum space and, simultaneously, how authority is played out within processes of exhibition-making. At the same time, it speaks to Clifford's call for sharing authority in institutions where 'asymmetrical relations of power' are at work (Clifford 1997:191–92).

The question now is if shared authority in the process can be defined as sharing authority, as has been called for by Clifford (Clifford 1997:191–92), which is mostly the understanding picked up in museums that refer to this notion. A tendency can be noted to refer to Frisch's resonant phrase, using 'shared authority', but actually the understanding of sharing authority as a practice of long-term collaborative endeavours lies closer to James Clifford's. When this reflection is brought into the practice of exhibition-making, there seems to be a limitation in the concept; for shared authority in exhibition-making goes beyond recognition but needs to be activated first by bringing people together in a collaborative practice (the same way oral history as an approach is a collaborative discipline by inviting informants for interviews) – which would be called sharing authority. Briefly said, for shared authority to happen, there must be sharing of the practice first. However, every step in the project of exhibition-making, contrarily to the interview in oral history, is a moment on its own and can be decided if it is happening in a shared approach or not. Sharing, in other words, can be switched on and off. What does this then say about author-ship and author-ity? Even though shared

authority has limitations when applied to practical exhibition work, it offers some valuable approaches to collaborative work, and at the same time some key ways to point out its own limitations.

Christina Kreps, an American anthropologist specialising in cross-cultural museum models, speaks about 'museum-mindedness' when she points out that people in non-western contexts interact with their museums according to their "own means of interpretation and appropriation of museological concepts to fit into their own cultural patterns" (Kreps 2003:42). Kreps develops the idea further into the notion of 'appropriate museology', a "bottom-up, community-based approach that combines local knowledge and resources with those of professional museum work to better meet the needs and interests of a particular museum and its community" (Kreps 2008:23).

Shared authority in the African museum context

How is shared authority applied to a context where the museum occupies a position of cultural authority, but in practice, the museum lacks agency in its missions and operations? What does shared authority mean in the step-by-step process of collaborative exposures?

The notion of shared authority is challenged in the African museum context in a series of questions: how does shared authority apply to a context where the museum occupies a position of cultural authority, but where in practice, the museum lacks agency over its missions and operations? What does shared authority mean in the step-by-step process of making exhibitions collaboratively? How can shared authority contribute to a larger understanding of Kreps's museum-mindedness and appropriate museology?

In my research "From collective curating to sharing curatorial authority: Collaborative practices as strategies of democratisation in exhibition making in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo", I analyse concepts of collective curating and shared authority in exhibition-making in relation to two case studies, Ukumbusho (2000) and Waza Chumba Wazi (2014), which I will summarise here to illustrate the practical application of shared authority in the context of exhibition making in Congo. The first, Ukumbusho, meaning 'memory' in Swahili was the first iteration of the University of Lubumbashi's oral and public history research

project Mémoires de Lubumbashi[5]. The second, Waza Chumba Wazi, Swahili for 'imagine the empty room', was an exhibition of Lubumbashi's contemporary art centre Waza. What Ukumbusho and Waza Chumba Wazi have in common is that they employed applied strategies of collaborative practices (through bringing together researchers, artists, community participants and cultural practitioners) and collective knowledge production (such as collecting life histories, testimonies and objects linked to popular culture). The two community-based art and heritage projects were conducted in association with the National Museum of Lubumbashi (Musée National de Lubumbashi, MNL) and so provide an apt framework to examine the way smaller and experimental projects speak to aspects of museum work.

Although the Ukumbusho and Waza Chumba Wazi case studies were not initiated with 'shared authority' as a starting point, nor was it an objective of either project; the research adopted a shared authority theoretical framework from which to examine their collective practice. This framework was used as an analytic tool for a better understanding and a suggestion as an operational tool for a more efficient approach to collective practices. It aims to clarify the moments of tension in collaborative projects, between intentions and practicalities; and at the same time proposing an effective work model for an alternative approach.

Ukumbusho / Mémoires de Lubumbashi

The aim of the oral history project Mémoires de Lubumbashi was to present at the MNL the research conducted by Lubumbashi University (UNILU) on memories of recent history and daily urban life in the mining city of Lubumbashi. The project involved international research institutions whose academics were present during the event. Local partners included university researchers, artists, musicians and actors. The project issued a collection of objects linked to the popular culture of the city, which today is part of the museum's collection.

The core of the research for Ukumbusho consisted of fieldwork through interviewing and collecting. A selection of people was asked to share their 'live accounts' (récits de vie) and to bring a memory-object they commented on with a testimony. One of the involved professors, Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, considers the population as co-creators of history, holders of history (détentrice de l'histoire) and proprietors of the cultural heritage. The informants of the project, for Dibwe dia Mwembu 'popular intellectuals' (intellectuels populaires), are the people who have knowledge by experience: their own lived experience, but also indirect experience, as holders of the

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[5] As an ongoing project, *Mémoires de Lubumbashi* has, since 2000, organised five editions on themes related to the industrial history of the city, which culminated in public activities, publications and exhibitions. The iterations consist of a research component and a form of restitution to the public with activities, round tables, performances, an exhibition, and a subsequent publication.

collective memory. For Dibwe dia Mwembu, the approach redresses the omissions one can observe in the written history of Lubumbashi and Congo in general - mostly written by non-Africans – and to 'complete' the African perspective.

The exhibition Ukumbusho applied a practice of multivocal display where the distinct expertise was put as evidence on an equal level, but sharing authority was not extended into the process of exhibition-making itself. The collaborative aspect of the project remained a separate organisation of the multiple tasks and stayed more at the stage of bringing together different expertise within the project. Ukumbusho's collective approach worked as an oral and public history project in terms of generating a collection of individual academic outcomes, but not as an initiative that generates change within society or within the museum, where collaborative practices are prerequisites throughout the process. Analysing this oral and public history project in Lubumbashi through the scope of shared authority revealed how effective it has been when applied to the rewriting of African history and challenging hegemonies on a global level, but doesn't automatically challenge hegemonies and inequalities on a local level.

Waza Chumba Wazi / Revolution Room

The exhibition project Waza Chumba Wazi, organised in 2014 by Art Centre Waza in Lubumbashi, formed part of a larger project that explored participatory art practices, called Revolution Room[6]. The project builds on the 2000 Ukumbusho project by revisiting its research methods and the physical collection. Waza Chumba Wazi and Revolution Room are grounded in theories and practices of contemporary art methods, and have been conceived as process-centred, collaborative and experimental projects. According to the art centre the museum in the African context fails to give expression to the artistic and cultural life of societies involved in processes of rapid and complex change. Through the project, it wanted to question if a cultural infrastructure based on buildings and physical edifices has the potential agility to do so, and if the whole concept of cultural infrastructure needs to be reconceived in ways that are predicated on people and networks, following urbanist AbdouMaliq Simones's resonant concept of 'people as infrastructure' and wanted to propose a project that intends to explore ways in which museums might project themselves more forcefully and imaginatively into the public realm through greater and deeper engagement with the invisible (but in certain senses, more 'real') cultural infrastructure constituted by networks, relationships and social structures.

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[6] A joint project between VANSA (Visual Arts Network of South Africa) and Waza, *Revolution Room* explored from 2013 to 2016 how artists and residents create and assume collective responsibility of creative projects that mediate and reflect the concerns of people (Revolution Room publication 2017). It focused on three locations in the DRC (Lubumbashi, Fungurume and Moba), and on Cosmo City, a post-apartheid urban development on the outskirts of the city of Johannesburg, South Africa. For the focus of this research, only the Lubumbashi section is taken into consideration.

The idea for Waza Chumba Wazi as an exhibition project outside the walls of the traditional museum, came from this desire to go out of the cultural infrastructure and into 'people and networks'. An empty house was rented in "Cité Gécamines", a popular neighbourhood in Lubumbashi, and for a whole month it transformed into a meeting place, an exhibition space and a site for events. Waza chumba wazi or 'imagine the empty room' was an invitation to members of a particular community of former workers of the national mining company to fill the place, physically and imaginatively, through their bodies, memories, words and objects. It was a call for new interpretations of history, where subjectivities could exist. The process was certainly about becoming familiar with heritage and cultural practice and to create a kind of museum-work literacy or museum-mindedness, but was also about building relations, within and across the communities taking part. The house functioned first as a domestic space, and only later as the exhibition space and place of public events. Once the exhibition was installed, people were invited to share their life stories. As French urbanist Tristan Guilloux, who participated in the project, noted: this strategy of separating the project from traditional cultural institutions located in the city centre such as MNL, but also from the Waza Art Centre, and setting up the project in a working class district, constituted a type of spatial measure. This demonstrated the desire to revive the memory of the residents in a more effective way than in classic memory spaces such as museums, while producing and reflecting an artistic approach more involved with the residents than would have been possible in a typical art centre context (Guilloux 2017:52–53).

The project also engaged with the traditional understanding of museum work. A key preparatory activity towards the making of the exhibition in the house consisted of a visit to MNL; for some, it was their first visit. After the public spaces, the group went up to the storerooms to see the Ukumbusho collection. Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu was also present, and for him this was a rediscovery of the objects after more than a decade. The group members started to comment on the objects and spontaneously took a decision to record these conversations more formally as testimonies: everyone picked out an object from the collection and commented it: through this revisitation of the collection and the Ukumbusho methodology (the capture of stories evoked by objects), a new layer of interpretation was added to the collection. The moment became very powerful and unexpectedly also photogenic and turned into a photo-shoot of every group member with a collection object – the material issued out of this improvised moment would finally be the fundamental exhibition objects in the Gécamines house.

The art project Waza Chumba Wazi emphasised the intention of sharing authority throughout its process, but for the exhibition, the shared authority was not acknowledged, with only the voice of the lived expertise on display; even though the curators made the final decisions concerning content and presentation, their voice was withheld. For the group participants, the fact that they were excluded during the last

stages of the project and 'discovered' the final exhibition at the opening event, wasn't an issue. "Chacun son domaine" (Everyone, his or her expertise), I heard repeatedly during the interviews of my research. However, when I tried to find out if they would have liked to participate if the professionals had shared their knowledge (by showing for example pictures of exhibition lay-outs), they all agreed it would have been a nice thing to do together. Sharing authority, in other words, doesn't have to be one extreme or the other; as Frisch noted (2011), sharing authority is not about 'letting go' the authority or expertise, but putting distinct expertise in dialogue. Change in the curatorial work on the level of co-management and co-ownership needs arrangements that have time and budget implications, as museum curator Trudy Nicks states (Nicks 2003). For the Waza Chumba Wazi workshop, this insight came with the experience. However, making all steps of the process collectively in shared moments – even if it can be considered as a creative exercise, isn't either what shared authority is about. More than an imperative technique, it's about an attitude, about demystifying the knowledge production throughout the process. As an initiative of an arts centre connected with the global contemporary art scene, Waza produced and signed off a 'grassroots but contemporary artistic' exhibition, that spoke at the same time to a local audience.

Conclusion

Ukumbusho and Waza Chumba Wazi, both collaborative projects grounded in oral history practices, intended to contribute to the making of Congolese history and collective memory through its knowledge production and exhibitionary practices. Stretching the notion of shared authority in all the complexities of practice, my reading of how different aspects of a project have been managed - ranging from the ways the distinct contributions in knowledge production are made visible, to the practical and philosophical questioning of shareability in each step of the way – became more multifaceted. The analysis of the experiences in Lubumbashi has explored the potential of introducing the methodologies of smaller and experimental projects of a university and an arts centre into museum practice. It revealed mostly bottlenecks, but also showed the beginning of possibilities.

This last finding brings me to the consideration of shared authority on the level of the museum institution itself. Reflecting through the lens of shared authority enables a reconsideration of what museum authority means in the context of Congo. It underpins the need and potential of collaborations on an institutional level and starts a reflection of how collaborative projects bring together the different expertise of institutions and how these can be put into dialogue. The history of MNL had, due to its concept and architecture, defined it as a western museum, but it doesn't operate in the same way as a museum in the west. The relationship between MNL and the communities of Lubumbashi is complex, but potentially vibrant. However, the gap between the museum and the communities is big, defined by colonial legacies and MNL's scarce financial and

human resources, despite the latent interest of the Lushois. The consequences of these complexities create the specific context in which MNL has to navigate. The notion of shared authority creates perspectives where discourse on the democratisation and decolonisation of museums in Africa has often stagnated in theories and intentions and resulted in the naïve or laconic acceptance of a situation, rather than the development of practical solutions. As such, strategies of shared authority could be an efficient way of creating new paths of democratisation of African postcolonial museum practices.

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