Adapting and Transforming Ethnographic Exhibits[1]

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Let me start with an observation from almost a decade ago: museums are not just a place or institution. Reproduced, adapted and transformed globally, they "have become a portable social technology, a set of museological processes through which... statements [about history, identity, value, and place] and claims [to recognition] are represented, embodied and debated" (Kratz and Karp 2006:4). Building on this, I consider here how such long-standing technologies are made new, even as they carry and counter earlier histories. Specifically, I consider how notions and practices associated with ethnographic exhibits are adapted, reinterpreted, and transformed in African museums and underline the multidirectional circulation and mediation of knowledge involved.

Exhibit design and its multi-media repertoires help produce different values and identities, as well as different exhibit genres and narratives – what I've called "rhetorics of value" (Kratz 2011). Elsewhere I considered "what makes exhibits ethnographic?" and how exhibit genres have blurred, with "a new canonical form... developing... that mixes design styles, emphasizes experimentation, and incorporates multiple perspectives and narratives as well as collaborative work with communities" (Kratz 2013:15). In the end, the question is "*WHO* makes exhibits ethnographic", because our understandings are produced through different histories, design choices, and an array of people that includes curators, communities, and visitors.

Much discussion has focused on ethnographic museums in Europe and the U.S. But to ask how the "ethnographic" is produced in exhibits, we need to historicize the notion and consider how interactions and meanings unfold in diverse contexts. Just as there were "different national responses to African art and culture across Europe" (Ibid.:24), museums in different colonial African settings were shaped by histories of over a hundred years, through colonialism, independence, and decades of postcolonial transformations. Elsewhere museums were established after independence, "increasingly... symbols of national unity" (Kusimba and Klehm 2013:228). "Looking at things on display is a cultural practice... imbedded in a field of social production" (McCarthy 2007:7), so the notion of the "ethnographic" in exhibits would be inflected through different histories, values, and aesthetics. What do contemporary African museums tell us about ethnographic exhibits, and what do ethnographic exhibits tell us about African museums?

The 1980s-1990s saw many new museums in Africa, as elsewhere (Kratz and Karp 2006:10). This burgeoning coincided with establishment of the West African Museums Programme (1982) and AFRICOM (1991). It also coincided with two conceptual shifts: 1) the global spread of notions and bureaucracies of world heritage (Turtinen 2000:11; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006:163-167); 2) critical trends in so-called new museology and questions about exhibition representation and community relations.

Greater attention to museums and heritage sites foregrounded their role in forging regional and national identities and histories (cf. Bennett 1995:128-162). Newer museums emphasized history and heritage, a valorizing concept that readily combines historical with sociocultural themes emphasized in ethnographic displays. I focus on the

ethnographic in <u>exhibitions</u> because there are relatively few ethnographic museums per se in Africa. Ethnographic displays are more common in natural history and national museums or incorporated into artisan programs (in Niger and Côte d'Ivoire) or local architectural displays (in Burkina Faso, Angola, and for many years Nairobi).

While the contrast between aesthetic and ethnographic display may be "false and pernicious" (Shelton 2000: 14-15), it has been prominent in Euro-American thinking about exhibit styles (Kratz 2013:6-7; Geismar i.p.:7). Another colonial legacy to note in Africa is that many countries have no separate art museums. Given different museum landscapes and histories in Africa, notions about ethnographic displays and design may vary too. They may also be intensely mediated through colonial and postcolonial lenses, giving notions of ethnography itself particular ideological and historical weightings and associations.

Interestingly, incorporating contemporary art and artists into ethnographic exhibits in Europe and North America has been a way to question older paradigms and recast expectations (Shelton 2001; Geismar i.p.). Yet Geismar notes the same critical sense is not turned on the frameworks, practices and histories of contemporary art itself (Geismar i.p.:30). How has this figured in African museums? Though contemporary art installation is one potential component, recent trends entail blurring design approaches across styles typically associated with art, ethnography and history exhibits. That mix plays out in many ways (Kratz 2013). While techniques associated with art exhibits are prominent in Europe and North America, historical dimensions have greater emphasis in a number of African exhibits. Both offer modes of valorization and revaluation, but may accentuate different narratives and address visitors in different ways. Considering how

elements of ethnographic exhibit design have been integrated and refigured recently in African museums may be suggestive.

Making a Museum: The Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum

Sometimes defined through a focus on cultural-historical difference, ethnographic approaches are used in familiar and exotic circumstances alike. They seek to understand participants' perspectives and the social structures and processes that shape settings and worlds. Ethnographic exhibits work from a conceptual dialectic, with cultural-historical difference and identity simultaneously, in a framework that is comparative, relational and translational (Kratz 2013:12; Karp 1991; Karp and Kratz 2000:194-199; Kratz 2002:94, 132-133). Thus the ethnographic can be found in all kinds of exhibits, sometimes in design aspects that draw little attention.

The earliest African museums were founded when typological ethnological exhibits were common, while early twentieth century colonial museums arose when ethnic and geographic displays were prevalent. Initially used in animal habitats, dioramas became associated with ethnographic exhibits in world fairs and museums alike through the twentieth century (Kratz 2013: 8-12). An adaptable, sometimes dramatic technique, dioramas have also been part of recent theatrical, experientially immersive exhibits. Africa's new museums and recent exhibit redesigns were done in a time with growing emphasis on multiple stories, plural perspectives, community collaboration, and designs that blur genres.

I turn now to some African museums to consider how "ethnographic" approaches and museological trends have been incorporated in recent decades. How are design

elements historically associated with ethnographic exhibitions adapted to local concepts and aesthetics? I focus on South Africa and Kenya, where I am most familiar with broader contexts. Recent books offer South African cases: Murray and Witz's (2014) *Hostels, Homes, Museum* on the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum (hereafter M&W), and Byala's (2013) *A Place That Matters Yet* (hereafter Byala) on Johannesburg's Africana Museum in the 1930s, transformed into MuseumAfrica in 1994. In 2008, the Nairobi National Museum opened new exhibits (Mirara 2006; Lagat 2008, 2009, 2014). Examples thus include renovations and transformations in museums with long colonial and apartheid histories as well as a newer museum.

Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum (LMLM) opened in 2000. Thirty miles from Cape Town, Lwandle was established in 1958 to house black migrant laborers in the fruit and canning industry (Witz 2006:123). Forty years later, when the museum opened, 40,000 people lived in Lwandle (M&W:1). With postapartheid programs to upgrade housing, two area residents determined to preserve one hostel as historical record. That became the core of the museum. Feeling its way towards what a township museum might be, the museum defined itself through a series of exhibitions,. These have raised questions about museum and exhibition categories and modes of representation through four major exhibits during its first twelve years.

When it opened, photos "depicting contemporary life in Lwandle were... displayed... in an arbitrary and rather makeshift manner...affixing photographs, photocopies and notices... with reusable putty" (M&W:55). This first display, called *Raising the Curtain*, also included sculptor Gavin Younge's *Workman's Compensation*: a semi-circle of glass-topped wheelbarrows, each with objects of daily life collected from

workers in 1979 (well-worn boots, enamel plates, etc.). It provided a concrete and haunting sense of workers' conditions.

The next year, exhibits became more systematic with *Unayo na Imephu?* (Do You Have a Map?) (2001). This largely followed history conventions, including copies, photos and texts related to migrant labour life. The historical mode of display directly countered apartheid-era erasures of history and visibility for the town and its residents (M&W:56). The exhibit was largely two-dimensional, created from documents "hastily photocopied..., sometimes crudely taped together" (M&W:57). History exhibits often assert claims to knowledge and gravitas with "authentic" objects and original documents, with provenance tied to the time, place, events and people presented (Kratz 2013:23-24). The solution was to create thematic graphic collages of photos and documents, turning ragtag materials into attractive exhibit panels that "juxtaposed planning and control [during apartheid] with personal stories" (M&W:57). Younge's installation also continued.

The next exhibit, *Iimbali zeKhaya (Stories from Home)* further developed this personal sense with oral histories, color portraits, and a spatial design extending into gallery floorspace. Murray and Witz emphasize the exhibit's relation to social history (Ibid.), but the move to develop context and emphasize personal stories and textured daily life experiences simultaneously constituted a more ethnographic portrayal of migrant labour life. Life histories are an intersection between ethnography and social history.

The fashion exhibit that followed, *Lwandle Designers* (2009), can be related to recent art exhibits on fashion as well as folk art exhibits of dress. In the South African

context, there were also connections to cultural history museums (M&W:63). Working with local designers and spanning matric gowns to neo-traditional Xhosa heritage outfits (M&W:64), the exhibit questioned standard notions of fashion and designers, and capitalized on popular school fashion shows.

While these exhibitions developed as a series, they all continue or have been incorporated into new exhibits. When I was there in March 2014, the fashion exhibit occupied the left entry, *Stories from Home* continued on the main floor and *Workman's Compensation* was to the right. Photo-text boards from *Unayo na Impehu* are now an "Introduction to Lwandle" entry and also part of the most recent exhibit, *Hostel 33*. LMLM has indeed constructed itself as a museum through its exhibitions.

Hostel 33 restored the former hostel building and created an exhibit on hostel life. They recreated three hostel living spaces combined with narratives, along the model of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. While grounded in ethnographic attention to daily hostel life, this simultaneously downplayed the mode of ethnographic display associated with dioramas. LMLM wanted to work against notions of fixed ethnic traditions and identities central in apartheid thinking (M&W:63, 68). Avoiding the full-blown diorama approach and working instead with something diorama-ish (Kratz 2013:10-11) maintained that distance.

The other display genre that *Hostel 33* evoked was the period room, which has been to decorative arts displays what the diorama has been to ethnographic ones. Museums in the past decade have problematized period rooms through installations that highlight their fictional aspects and narrative and dramatic potential, as in the Met's *Dangerous Liaisons* (2004) or Brooklyn Museum's *Alternative Histories* (2013) (Vogel

2014). By drawing on social history to recreate hostel settings, *Hostel 33* brought another critical angle on this mode of display through stark contrasts with the opulent upper class rooms commonly presented.

Through its exhibits, the LMLM has been defining a museum not only *in* Lwandle but about and *for* Lwandle. In the absence of an imposing building, extensive collection, or much in the way of resources, creating exhibitions was a core museum practice that could establish the institution and try out different exhibit styles. Social history remained a foundation in topics, intellectual orientation, and a potent means of political intervention. But exhibits moved from two-dimensional text and photo display to personalize and texture migrant labour life. They moved in an ethnographic direction, working with residents through oral histories, photographs, and eventually recreating their former homes as the "period rooms" of *Hostel 33*. Yet the museum's curators and advisors – well versed in critical museum studies – maintained a thoughtful stance towards potential ethnic emphases associated with ethnographic styles and previously so pernicious in South Africa in order to develop a kind of ethnographically inflected social history.

From the Africana Museum to MuseumAfrica

Byala recounts the very different story of the Africana Museum. Founded in 1935 in Johannesburg, it arose from the collecting vision of John Gubbins, who emigrated from England in 1902. It was intended to display material from all South African communities so as to show their entwined histories and enhance understanding across divisions (Byala:92). Gubbins died just after the museum opened, so his display ideas

were never fully implemented (Byala:108).

Byala does not describe the initial displays, but a 1938 reorganization moved more in line with categories of the emerging apartheid system (Byala:119). Retaining a central display on Johannesburg, a North Gallery would focus on white history, society and politics while the South Gallery would show "'Prehistoric Archaeology', 'Ethnology' and 'Agriculture and Industry'", bifurcating "black and white, and history and tradition" (Byala:120, 124).

From 1977-1994 the museum faced major political transformations. It "determined to be relevant" (Byala:150). They expanded into an old building needing refurbishment with part of the collection – the black South African objects – and younger, energetic staff. Characterized as the Africana Museum in Progress, temporary exhibits showed work in progress. A new building opened in 1994.

Developing new exhibits foregrounded debates between two approaches to ethnographic exhibits, with younger staff embracing critical museum trends (Byala:181-182, 193). Nonetheless, the initial exhibit proposal largely replicated the old organization: a chronological macro-history and a cultural section with micro-histories (Byala:179-180). Staff deadlocked until a new acting director in 1993 galvanized the process (Byala:192). No longer attempting an encyclopedic South African display, a new plan focused on local themes. Curators were determined to do things differently, to "allow controversy, ..allow questions... and confusions" (Byala:194, 198). The museum reopened in 1994, a year of historic democratic transformation, with the name MuseumAfrica.

Social history was key to the exhibits, but presented with distinctly ethnographic

approaches that highlighted living spaces, social scenes, and individual lives. Four themes illuminated the city's past and present through ordinary workers' lives. Recreating black South African life settings incorporated specificity, history, and topics not typical in exhibits at the time. In another departure, exhibits used multilingual labels and identified curatorial authors (Byala:198). MuseumAfrica's new displays were important interventions at the time, declaring a change of focus both in exhibit topics and in visitors addressed. After two decades the exhibits are still up, well-known. The topics have become far more common in exhibits.

Yet according to Byala, regardless of the approbation that met MuseumAfrica's new exhibits and efforts, it is still part of the "old guard", unable to overcome its history virtually by definition (Byala:218). The curators recognized that "a museum is *always* a work in progress" (quoted in Byala:194, original emphasis) but Byala characterizes the museum as "sullied" by ethnographic items (Byala:219). It is not clear who she speaks for in this assessment when she also describes South Africans consulted in the 1980s as deeply engaged in getting ethnographic details right (Byala:158). It is important to recognize that museums are semi-autonomous institutions, not fully determined by prior histories (Morphy i.p.; Moore 1973).

But these differing attitudes do indicate the contested nature of notions and practices of "ethnography" in postcolonial, and particularly postapartheid settings. Museum histories and visitors' viewing histories can continue to call up ideological obstacles, whether or not exhibits and practice have changed. MuseumAfrica's displays also show, much like Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, that a turn to social history (and more recently notions of heritage) can reframe topics, perspectives, and forms of

address in exhibits. This not only has room for, but in some ways relies on updating design approaches associated with ethnographic displays that particularize and personalize narratives and emphasize cross-temporal relations and comparisons.

New Galleries at Nairobi National Museum

The Nairobi National Museum (NNM) offers an interesting counterpoint, with similar concerns in redesigning permanent exhibits but different contested areas and attitudes towards ethnographic collections. Like the Africana Museum, it began early, founded in 1909 by "colonial natural history enthusiasts" (Lagat 2009). In 1964, after independence, the National Museums of Kenya was formed. A natural history museum, the Nairobi museum is its flagship, but NMK includes over two dozen regional museums. Outside that structure, the last two decades have seen new community museums and peace museums in Kenya.

According to curator Kiprop Lagat, a meeting of African museum directors in the 1990s provided the impetus to transform from colonial origins. The permanent ethnographic exhibits had been unchanged since the 1970s. To account for Kenya's forty-four ethnic communities, they were arranged by functional categories -- agriculture, pastoralism, ornaments, metalwork (Lagat 2009:2-3). This emphasized commonalities in the new nation and representation across communities. In 1999 international experts reviewed museum operations. Displays seemed dated and static, lacking contemporary material. In 2001 NMK received European Union support for a comprehensive reorganization and new permanent exhibitions (National Museum of Kenya n.d.; Lagat 2008:199). Kenyans were invited to think through exhibit themes in workshops, public meetings and radio call-in shows. A visitor survey identified recent history as a significant gap. Staff visits to other museums, many

with life-size models and dioramas, were an "eye-opener".

From extensive planning three overall themes were distilled: nature, culture and history (Mirara 2006:6; 2007:8). The first phase – four of thirteen planned galleries – opened in 2008.The *Hall of Kenya* showcased signature objects from all three themes and there was one additional gallery for each of them: the *Great Hall of Mammals*, the *Cradle of Humankind,* and the *Cycle of Life* ethnographic display. A *Contemporary Art* section has been added and, in 2010, a *History of Kenya* gallery (Karega-Munene 2011:227).

Like the earlier display, *Cycle of Life* uses a cross-ethnic approach to underline "inclusiveness" and unity in diversity. In the 1970s this approach encouraged nationalist identities. It was again foregrounded in the wake of ethnic-based post-election violence in 2007-2008 (Karp and Kratz 2014:61; Mirara 2006:8). The life cycle theme was felt to introduce more dynamism. Yet while it offers a sense of time in relation to individual life stages, the display treats conceptions of life stages themselves and related ceremonies as unchanging traditions (Kratz 1993). Contemporary circumstances are addressed with minor additions (e.g. school uniforms in a case on education). Rather than develop an interpretive framework that integrates social and cultural history and wider international connections in the way each topic is presented, there are to be separate galleries on *Creativity*, *Cultural Dynamism*, and *History of Kenya* (Lagat 2009:5-10). *Cultural Dynamism*, for instance, will include diorama-like installations of a Kenyan sitting room and a matatu to represent contemporary urban life.

The new *History of Kenya* gallery marked a departure and involved attempting to navigate minefields surrounding memories and representations of the independence struggle. NMK's experience with history exhibits had been limited and haunted by "bad memories" (Mirara 2006:9). National history had not been addressed earlier. It had not

been seen as the purview of a natural history museum, and just after independence divisions were still too raw (Lagat 2014, Karega-Munene 2011:232-233).[2] A 1970s photographic exhibit marked the tenth anniversary of independence. Politically sensitive at the time, parts remained on view for twenty years (Mirara 2006:9; Karega-Munene 2011:234-235; Lagat 2014).

While addressing a recognized absence and public interest, therefore, the new gallery had to maneuver the terrain created by "four decades of orchestrated silence about the movement known as Mau Mau" (Hughes 2011:182). Some sections reportedly offer nuanced histories and a Uganda Railway reconstruction is a hit with children (Hughes 2014:207). However, politically difficult topics such as Mau Mau and post-independence political assassinations receive anodyne interpretations or remain unexplained.

The history exhibit begins with a section on "Identity" that reproduces problems from older ethnographic displays. It pairs undated colonial photographs of individuals, generic ethnic captions (e.g. "'Turkana man''), and mostly unexplained and undated artifacts associated with the ethnic group. "In... the centre of the room, stands a life-size model of a 'Kuria elder in 'traditional dress' ... a colobus monkey fur cloak" (Hughes 2014:200-201). This is part of the precolonial history section, along with an interactive map of early migration routes for Kenya's ethnic communities. The presentations play into notions of ethnic identity as fixed and essentialized, rather than underlining varied historical geneses of contemporary identities (plural) and interactions among Kenyan communities over time.

Striking contrasts to the South African examples are the overwhelming emphasis

on *national* history and a reversal in the most contested types of knowledge. In Kenya, skittishness around national history seems to extend to social history in the new displays. Ethnic identities and histories, a major topic for ethnographic presentations, are taken for granted. In South Africa, apartheid-era policies and legacies rendered reified ethnic divisions as a third rail. Robust social history scholarship helped deconstruct those categories. This is not to say that national history is uncontested in South Africa, but the broad contrast is striking. If Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum's and MuseumAfrica's postapartheid exhibits moved to social history presented ethnographically, with "history" standing in for "culture", Hughes argues that "'culture' and 'cultural heritage' have come to stand for 'history' in contemporary Kenya" (2014:185).

Nearly half the new Nairobi exhibits are still in progress, so it is hard to know how it will all come out. But the redesign has faced the problem common to natural history museums of how to differentiate ethnographic and historical exhibits from evolutionary and scientific ones. Ethnographic portrayals in the *History* gallery seem like much critiqued older approaches, but it is worth noting that Kenyans who formed new community and peace museums have been recreating, recasting and renarrating such displays (Coombes, Hughes and Karega-Munene 2014). While *Cycle of Life* seeks a more diachronic account, the categories and practices seem relatively static and broader interactions have been largely consigned to the future *Cultural Dynamism* gallery. Similarly, the *Contemporary Art* section seems a straightforward display where Kenyan artists can sell their work. I have not heard of contemporary art being used reflexively to raise questions about exhibit categories and approaches or for evocative

experiential connections, as common elsewhere.

As described, the new displays do not seem to blur genres as much as in other museums. In fact the NNM ethnography displays seem relatively conservative in design, though the history section blends towards ethnography in its opening and recreated scenes. Perhaps the display that most blurs display approaches is the *Hall of Kenya* entry, where nature, culture, and history are all showcased through striking objects, aesthetically displayed. Whether it's an ivory ceremonial horn (*siwa*), photographs of Kenya's animals, or a striking sculptural installation of calabashes from across the nation, they are treated as objects of wonder (Greenblatt 1991).

Conclusion: Adapting the Ethnographic

To return to the earlier question, what do these new exhibits in contemporary African museums tell us about ethnographic exhibits, and what do ethnographic displays tell us about African museums? First, common issues in exhibit design and approaches underline global connections across museum practice. Each of the three cases involved international partnerships, consultations, or training opportunities, all ways that expertise, experience and knowledge in the field circulate in multiple directions (Kratz and Karp 2006). Such global connections are not new, but relations shift in postcolonial contexts. The extent to which global influences figure as a topic or theme in exhibits, however, continues to vary across museums in Africa and elsewhere.

If notions and practices associated with ethnographic display are adapted, reinterpreted, and transformed, this occurs in ways related to particular circumstances and the histories and expectations that curators, designers, visitors and communities

bring to exhibits, shaping the way they make displays "ethnographic" or "historical".

These three cases show notions and practices related to ethnography and history

bound together in a varying dynamic – combining, contrasting, compensating for or

reinforcing different weaknesses or blindspots. In African museums, contemporary

notions of nationalism and ethnicity are part of this mix, framing the way visitors are

addressed and interpret exhibits.

In postcolonial and postapartheid contexts, recasting historical understandings

has been essential in reclaiming self-determination, recognizing trajectories of influence

and exchange, and redefining identities. There are various modes of recounting and

remembering "complicated and detailed histories" that "accommodate the many voices,

perspectives, and contested discourses of the... past" (Roberts 2008:176). Histories can

range from genealogical accounts to migration stories, to life histories, to political and

social histories. How can and should they be presented in exhibits, enriched with

ethnographic approaches that bring them to life and offer diverse perspectives? In

Kenya, national history contains fraught disagreements and difficult chapters. "Safe"

histories turn to prehistory, early migrations, and local histories (Hughes 2014).

If blurring ethnography and art paradigms has been prominent in recasting

ethnographic exhibits in Europe and the US, the challenges of ethnography/history

combinations seem more salient in these African examples – though that doesn't mean

art approaches are absent. The *Hall of Kenya* in Nairobi draws on aesthetically-oriented

techniques. At NNM contemporary art is treated on its own terms, in a separate gallery.

Recent exhibits at MuseumAfrica take a more integrative approach, mixing work and

curation by contemporary artists with material from the collections, while the Lwandle

Museum has from the beginning included Younge's sculpture to evoke migrant labour experience through telling details of daily life. Ethnography-history-art combinations also seem important in the diorama-like spaces that shade into period room presentations. These figure in each exhibit considered – Hostel 33 in Lwandle, the homes, mine and shebeen at MuseumAfrica, and the planned living room and matatu at the Nairobi museum.

These are ways that exhibit design helps communicate rhetorics of value and can shift expectations and understandings (Kratz 2011). The different ways that display genres blur, combine and jostle can simultaneously carry associations with previous uses and paradigms yet also counter and recast them, informing new visitor histories and meanings. Rather than take "ethnographic" as a fixed, given concept connected to a limited set of design techniques, it is useful to historicize and contextualize the "ethnographic" to see how it is unpacked and recombined in exhibits in Africa and elsewhere, and how its associations, connotations and combinations may vary.

Notes

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2. Divisions among those who joined the Mau Mau freedom fighters, those seen as loyalists, and other stances associated with different ethnic communities have remained, with issues of reparations, land and more continuing to fuel them (Hughes 2011; Karega-Munene 2011; Atieno Odhiambo 1991; Atieno Odhiambo and Lonsdale 2003; Lonsdale 1990; Branch 2009).

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