

Merging Past and Present in the Museums of Harar, Ethiopia

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This research involves the fields of socio-cultural anthropology, material culture studies, and museology, and employs a multifaceted conceptual framework to view the nature of transactions between people and the objects in their environment. Specifically, this research documents the interactions among community members pertaining to the cultural objects managed by the museums of Harar, Ethiopia. In Harar, the multi-ethnic community has worked cooperatively and with limited resources to effectively manage tradition and modernity in the museum context. Based on case studies of four museums, the findings illustrate that the management of material culture in local African museums need not be storehouse practices, without intended goals, at both the individual and communal levels. The objects in Harar's collections are, in fact, catalysts through which people define and redefine themselves. The present analysis also demonstrates that not all African museum collections have been initiated or maintained with Western models in mind. Instead, the present study reveals that the formal and informal activities that were initiated indigenously and integrated into the custodianship of local museums in Harar exemplify contemporary adaptations of cultivating practices that were built upon indigenous aesthetic preferences and local systems of alliances.

Key words: museums, heritage, community participation, Harar, Ethiopia

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, studies of African museums have tended to focus on activities in national capitals, and in-depth studies of museums in smaller municipalities are infrequent and recent. The present article is based on research⁽¹⁾ that attempts to illustrate local-level cooperation between institutional, community, and individual actors involved in heritage management in Africa through the documentation of heritage conservation in publicly accessible museums in Harar, Ethiopia, located 525 km east of the capital Addis Ababa.

It is the author's premise that the collections of material culture in Harar's museums reflect aspects of a dynamic and significant urban culture. The relevance of these museums to their visitors is especially pronounced because of the perceived connection between the heritage collections and the contemporary culture of the city. Perhaps it is no coincidence that regional officials often promote Harar as "a living museum", giving voice to a view of the city as a cultural mosaic that merges past traditions with modern practices. In Harar, one finds a multi-ethnic community that holds in high regard both the traditional artifacts of the city and the innovative creations of contemporary artisans. Indeed, material heritage is typically reflective of the wider socio-cultural characteristics of its intended audience. Likewise, the esteem given to a variety of traditional arts in Harar, be they antiques maintained in a local museum or decorative and functional household objects in the city, reflects the community's

desire to maintain these objects and, to various degrees, the valuations associated with them. At the same time, the willingness of local artisans, curators, and administrators to adopt agendas that approach modernization and promote current cultural trends also reflect the community's desire to draw alongside competitors in the global arena, where the "economics of culture" invite participation. In essence, the museums of Harar have served, in part, as community-sanctioned forums of public memory and venues for the expression of contemporary aspirations.

In the course of this paper, the author will show ways in which local actors have worked cooperatively and with limited resources to effectively manage tradition and modernity in the museum context. Based on examples from Harar, this study will argue that national and international proposals for museum expansion or modification should take a cautious approach to introducing new schemes, and should not prioritize tourist-market preferences in creating new models for museums that mimic Western archetypes. Moreover, this study makes the claim that it is imperative that cultural development proposals incorporate sustainable programs that do not undermine indigenous systems of alliance, which have, heretofore, exemplified the grass-roots conservation of material culture in Africa.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This multidisciplinary research involves the fields of socio-cultural anthropology, material culture studies, and museology, and employs a multifaceted conceptual framework to view the nature of transactions between people and the objects in their environment.⁽²⁾ Rochberg-Halton's (1979, 1980) concept of *cultivation*, which concerns the modes of meaning that engage people with objects, is a central idea in this study, where subject matter disciplines (art history, material culture, anthropology), museum practices, and social organizations are all equally considered. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton have succinctly explained,

Cultivation involves both senses of the verb "to tend": to take care of or watch over ..., in other words, "to attend to"; and also to proceed or be directed on some course or inclination ..., that is "to intend" some aim. Indeed, cultivation—the improvement, development, refinement, or resultant expression of some object or habit of life due to care, training, or inquiry—comes closest to the original meaning of the term culture, although most contemporary theories of culture exclude this aspect in favor of a rather static "symbol system" approach ... (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 173)

The concept of cultivation is pertinent to this study of an urban African community because, contrary to popular misconceptions, conservation and management of material culture in local museums need not entail simple storehouse practices that have no intended goals at individual or communal levels. This said, neither have all African museum collections been initiated or maintained with Western models in mind. On the contrary, the educational programming, craft activities, and community involvement that have been indigenously initiated and integrated into custodianship at local museums in Harar exemplify contemporary adaptations to cultivating practices that are built upon indigenous systems of alliances and organizations. Similarly, the collections in Harar were gathered according to local aesthetic preferences, and traditional methods of arrangement and maintenance were employed in these facilities long before the intervention of international groups, who have recently influenced the management of the collections.

3. MUSEUMS IN AFRICA VS. MUSEUMS FOR AFRICANS

3.1. Background

The early establishment of museums in places like America, India, and Africa followed colonial visions of what constituted a museum and were based on the precedents set in the early museums of western and northern Europe. As such, their collections tended to reflect conventional Western art-historical assumptions.⁽³⁾ In fact, the historical role of museums in an African context is tied to notions of “collecting the other” for a selected, often elite audience. Indeed tropical Africa’s early public museums were formed during the colonial period and were very much reflective of a colonial mentality that objectified the exotic (or fantastic) otherness of peoples of the area, while serving as forums for justifying colonial prerogatives (Visonà et al. 2001, Gaugue 2001).

The early curators of museums in Africa were European, and only occasional, rudimentary museum work was assigned to indigenous persons. Later, with the independence of African states in the 20th century, the museums were transferred to indigenous management, the agents of which lacked museum administrative and curatorial experience. As a result, even decades after independence, visitors to African museums continued to be elite persons, and the style of exhibitions and captions for displayed objects retained references to the “tribalism” of the material heritage. It appeared that African museums were destined to inherit the forms of institutional presentations of artifacts, as well as colonial constructs of which items were appropriate for a museum context.

3.2. Post-colonial Trends

There have been efforts made to transform Africa’s colonial era museums into centers that promote research into national customs and cultures and, in recent decades, Africans have established entirely new museums at the national level, opting to promote patriotism or national agendas. As Anne Gaugue explains:

Following the independence of African states, their leaders used museums as instruments to promote African unity, or in most cases, national unity, to serve their geopolitical plans. The history museum became an idea of nationhood. However, the description of events after independence was usually limited to the actions of the president or the party in power at the time of inauguration. Museums thus became places devoted to the self-legitimization of power and instruments of political propaganda. (Gaugue 2001: 26)

Of late, changes have been introduced, albeit slowly, aimed at breaking away from an emphasis on a *cabinet of curiosities* and initiating, instead, a shift toward presenting regional and local perspectives in the museum context. With this important restructuring in native African museology, and with a long history of complex association between vernacular arts and communities in Africa, it is no wonder that contemporary African museums now often have collections that are endowed with a range of such cultural craft objects. Although the collections themselves were often built upon the early colonially-influenced compilation of artifacts, the post-colonial trend has increasingly favored alternative indigenous presentations of museum holdings.

Certainly, by the last two decades of the 20th century, African museum specialists (on the continent and around the world) had expanded the question of how to recreate African collections in order to move beyond the colonial legacy. In the early 21st century, African museum specialists continue the initiative to authenticate the intellectual complexity of African forms, recognizing what Csiksentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) have articulated, that cultural objects, especially those that are intentionally displayed, constitute emotionally-laden and important aspects of social behavior and that, “The things with which people interact are not simply tools for survival, or for making survival easier and more comfortable. Things embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users” (Csiksentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 1).

3.3. *Imminent Challenges*

Despite recent advances in African museology discourse, persistent misconceptions and mistaken evaluations remain regarding the current nature, missions, and concerns of museums in Africa, especially among social scientists. But, as Irvine (1999: 54) has aptly noted, “The worldwide museum community is relatively small. The common concerns and issues are often widespread while the conditions in which they exist may be very different.” Likewise, many topics of interest in the worldwide museum community are simultaneously being debated among African museologists; African museum specialists are actively contributing to these global debates, as well as initiating their own continent-relevant discourses among themselves.

Not only are today’s African museum specialists shunning colonial models and expanding educational programs (Irvine 1999; Ginsburgh & Mairesse 1997) they are also aiming for community-relevant displays. Constructive attempts are being made within Africa and from the international community of museums to help facilitate situations in which African curators, educators, and community members can work toward developing indigenous expressions that are inclusive of living traditions, in a dynamic museum context that reflects the outstanding, but also the everyday experiences, of the community. In short, African museums, like their counterparts around the world, are questioning the social relevance of museums and museology as an academic discipline in the local and global context. They are asking, what *is* and what *should be* the role of the museum in the community?

4. EMERGENCE OF PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS OF ART IN ETHIOPIA

When considering the more recent 20th century developments in African museums, it is important to point out how Ethiopia differs from its African neighbors in some important respects in order to avoid overgeneralizations that might result from a too-general supposition of commonalities. As a case in point, Ethiopia has maintained notable exceptions to African patterns, which (granting temporary occupations by Egyptians, Italians, and others, as well as waves of immigration from contiguous lands) has allowed for the *relatively* undisturbed cultivation and transformation of indigenous cultural features among its plethora of ethno-linguistic groups, which to this day display a wealth of unique cultural clusters throughout the country. Yet, despite Ethiopia being the exception to colonization by western powers in Africa, early Ethiopian museum collections in the former imperial capitals still reflected an elitist mentality.⁽⁴⁾

Of course, aesthetic appreciation of vernacular arts by Ethiopians is not new. Indeed, the diversity of art forms in Ethiopia represents the creative materialization of culture, serving as tangible expressions of ideas held by individuals and communities. Moreover, these artistic materializations are closely linked with intangible manifestations of heritage. For centuries, these arts have been crafted by men and women who have dynamically applied their skills, learned via formal and informal apprenticeships, to provide functional and symbolic objects to their community. Various informed communities have appraised these works and afforded higher or lower status to both the objects and their makers. Thus, the artisan as “producer” and the community as “consumer” have traditionally been joint custodians of material heritage.⁽⁵⁾ As customary custodians, the artisans and the community chose to “store” vernacular arts within the private settings of homes or religious buildings when they were not in use for routine or ceremonial activities.

However, the institutional presentation of art, both antique and contemporary, in Ethiopian museums and public places only began in the last half-century. As Silverman makes clear:

The concept of “art” is a recent introduction to Ethiopia even though objects of exceptional aesthetic quality have been produced in all Ethiopian societies for a long time. The reason that “art” has appeared in Ethiopia only recently is because prior to the present century there were no traditions that isolated specific things to serve primarily as objects of aesthetic contemplation. (Silverman 1999: 5)

Regardless of the innovation involved in the institutional housing of arts in Ethiopia, this new form of display has taken root and is being mimicked throughout the country by community groups, individuals, and government bodies. Currently, there are attempts to integrate contemporary and historical aspects of material heritage in venues accessible to community members living outside of the nation's capital. In the city of Harar, the latest trend in Ethiopian museums is thriving, i.e., everyday arts found in local communities are the focus of many collections, reflecting the interests of the local community, curators, and museum visitors. Harar's four museums illustrate Ethiopia's new mode: local museums that allow regional communities to express their own agency in heritage management.

5. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN MUSEUM ACTIVITIES: CASE STUDIES FROM HARAR

5.1. *Ada Gar, Harari Culture House*⁽⁶⁾

In the late 1970s, local mosques took on the task of arranging celebrations of Harari cultural activities as part of their charitable contribution (*Wakf*). According to Ahmed Zekaria (n.d.), initially, a provisional *Wakf* committee solicited financial and material endowments from the community to contribute to an exhibition of Harari material culture, music, and dance, which traveled between Harar, Dire Dawa, and Jijiga and coincided with the anniversary of the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie I on 12 September 1974. These traveling cultural tours were so successful that the organizing committee decided, by 1980, that a permanent display based on this traveling exhibit should be established within the town itself, so that Harari culture might be publicly celebrated throughout the year. Thus, a permanent community-run cultural project was founded in the former home of a religious judge (*qadi*) of Harar, whose office dated back to c. 1865–1899.⁽⁷⁾

Much of the responsibility for the research into traditional Harari architecture and material culture required for the establishment of this permanent collection fell to local historian and Harari scholar Abdulmuhaymin Abdulnasir, who spent six months drawing up a plan for renovating the building, located just east of the *Jami Mosque* on the main road to the *Argo Beri* gate. After thorough research and six months of renovation, the historic residence was transformed into “Ada Gar”⁽⁸⁾ (Harari culture house), which was dedicated to exhibiting the material culture of the Harari ethnic group. Mr. Abdulmuhaymin's commitment to this project went beyond his interest as a scholar; for several years he served as dedicated curator to this, Harar's first, community-run public museum.

By all accounts, although men and women, young people and elders were active in organizing and participating in these Harari cultural shows, the *afocha* (voluntary women's associations) were the largest contributors of material support to the collection. Women's *afocha* donated not only intricately designed antique textile items and jewelry belonging to the Harari elite, they also contributed to a stockpile of everyday items ranging from baskets and wooden bowls (Fig. 1) to gourd containers and woodwork (see Table 1).

Upon visiting the Ada Gar museum soon after its completion, Ahmed Zekaria (n.d.) took note of the museum's commitment to education and its role as a community and tourist center. One can certainly still observe these functions at work today. The grand hall in the Ada Gar compound has periodically served as a venue for lectures, such as that by Sheikh Abdullah al-Harari in 2003; the museum compound is used for the presentation of Harari dances during community celebrations; the staff office doubles as an informal basket weaving workspace for female employees; and the entire compound is used for wedding promenades and photography sessions for Harari brides. Today, it is during occasional activities like those above that local community members are most likely to engage in touring the museum collection itself.

Despite the early enthusiasm for community participation in the museum, over the years the community-run aspect of this museum faded, leading to the withdrawal of its long-time curator and organizer, Mr. Abdulmuhaymin. After the establishment of the Harari regional administra-



Fig. 1. Basketry and wooden bowls cover the walls of Ada Gar museum

tion under ethnic federalism, Ada Gar was transferred to the administration of the Harari People's National Regional State's Office of the Bureau of Culture,⁽⁹⁾ which continues to arrange contemporary activities there, including gatherings for public festivals (Shawwal Eid and Ashura) and community seminars, as well as landscape renovation designed to bolster interest in the museum milieu. Still, programs that engage visitors are scarce. As a case in point, Ethiopian language-speaking visitors can learn about the contents of the collection from the two Harari women museum workers. However, because many of the labels (which largely consist of local names without further explanations) are written exclusively in the Harari language, using Ethiopic script, most foreign visitors must rely on the assistance of a hired local guide.⁽¹⁰⁾ In addition, while community activities still frequently take place upon the premises, the current administration faces the challenge of reviving interest in what has become a static, though historically valuable collection. It is also important that the Bureau of Culture find creative means to expand community engagement with the collection itself, balancing the interface among visitors, the architecture, and the museum's material/historical contents, perhaps through expanding explanatory labels or creating multi-lingual pamphlets.

5.2. Harar National Museum

In 1991, a second public museum, the Harar National Museum (HNM), was established by the local government administration and built on property held by the former government in the years following the 1974 revolution. The museum is located in the complex of the Harari Bureau of Culture, just east of *Feres Magala*, the central square of the city.

The HNM collection consists of examples of vernacular arts (see Table 1) produced by the diverse ethnic groups in the region, with collections representing Harari, Oromo, Somali, Argobba, Afar, and Amhara groups. Under the administration of the regional Bureau of Culture, since its founding as a public space, the museum collection has grown with sporadic purchases from the local community. In an attempt to stem the trafficking of precious heritage items in the tourist market, the regional Bureau of Culture has intervened with community members. For example, in cases where a third party or someone in actual possession of rare cultural items makes known the intention to sell an item outside of the community, the Bureau tries to negotiate the transfer of the object to the museum instead. However, the Bureau's budget does not always allow for adequate compensation, compared to what a tourist might offer, and individuals have been known to sell to the highest bidder, usually the tourist. As part of the effort to deter the tourist trade in heritage objects, the Bureau of Culture also works with local postal and customs officials to curb the illicit export of "precious" cultural items such as traditional basketry and manuscripts (Asante 2005: 1012).

Unlike at Ada Gar, the HNM employs its own guides who speak local and foreign languages. Moreover, simple labels accompany most of the items in the collection (Fig. 2), with the native names in Ethiopic script and English translations, facilitating general understanding of the objects' utilitar-

ian and decorative functions. However, fewer visitors have been observed at this museum, perhaps owing to the fact that the museum is not advertised and is located in a building that, from street-level, is only identifiable as a regional administrative complex.

5.3. *Sherif Private Museum*

Since the early 1990s, some of the most precious examples of Harari tangible and oral cultural heritage have been collected and preserved in a private home-cum-museum located in a traditional private house southeast of *Gidir Magala* market on *Aw Merkeba Uga* street. Quinquagenarian Abdulahi (Abdela) Ali Sherif is a self-taught conservator and curator of his self-named museum. He is recognized locally as the person most responsible for the preservation and storage of the most varied collection of cultural artifacts in the town.

In 1991, Mr. Sherif began collecting reel and cassette tapes of songs for the celebration of the 25th anniversary of *Haywan Mugad*, a musical association of young Harari men who gathered to sing together in their leisure-time and especially during wedding celebrations. Sherif borrowed tapes from his friends and made recordings himself. After the *Hayway Mugad* celebration, he continued collecting and within a few years he had gathered more than 600 recorded songs. With the encouragement of many Hararis, Sherif soon started widening the extent of his interests. He began collecting a variety of musical repertoires, old manuscripts, and other cultural artifacts. Over the years, his reputation for collecting and preservation became well known, and in May 1996, the regional government granted him official “permission for collecting”. Two year later, in 1998, he was granted permission to have a museum, and his residence became the first private citizen’s museum in Ethiopia.

While Abdela Sherif is often viewed a one-man-inspiration in heritage preservation, Sherif himself is quick to point out that, although his collection was individually initiated, it soon became a family-supported museum project. In fact, he has received invaluable assistance and support from his wife, children, relatives, and neighbors in the city. Undoubtedly, maintaining Harar’s largest multi-cultural collection (see Table 1) of ceremonial clothing, jewelry, manuscripts, and coinage requires the constant dedication and physical labor of many local actors (Fig. 3).

By 2006, the Sherif Private Museum exemplified the great potential of indigenous resourcefulness in creating opportunities not only for the preservation but also for the public presentation of folk customs in a locale that is easily accessible to, and frequently accessed by, the local community. Mr. Sherif’s knowledge of the history of the region, religion, languages and his unconventional but effective, needs-based conservation strategies have earned him much respect in his community and abroad. The Sherif Private Museum is much more than a collection of antiques, because informal contemporary activities are integrated in the structure of venue itself, which is an occupied home. In fact contemporary traditions are brought to life in his home museum, where, on any given day, a visitor might share tea over stimulating conversations about the history of the collection (Fig. 4) and even



Fig. 2. Simple white labels are affixed to most of the objects in the HNM collection



Fig. 3. Clothing, jewelry and furniture are included in Abdela Sherif’s collection

observe Sherif working on museum objects as he (the last bookbinder in Harar) binds a book in the traditional manner. The informal but invaluable exchanges between community members and local and foreign scholars have occurred daily in the context of this museum which, until 2007, was not only open to the public but was the only museum in Harar with free admission, although donations were welcomed and often received.⁽¹¹⁾

5.4. Rimbaud Culture Center

Finally we come to the most recent museum in the city. The Rimbaud Culture Center (RCC) is administered by the regional Bureau of Culture, which is responsible for its organization and financial management. This Center, housed in a c.1890 residence⁽¹²⁾ located in the middle of the walled city, between *Makina Girgir* and *Amir Uga* streets, underwent restoration in 1999 and remains an excellent example of the influence of Indian craftsmanship on local architecture (Fig. 5). Although the building itself was originally constructed a few years after the French poet Arthur Rimbaud's departure from the town in 1891, the residence, locally referred to as *Rimbaud Gar* (Rimbaud's house), has been designated as a memorial to this poet. In 2000, the house was transformed into a museum with the help of the national Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage and the regional government (Harar Culture & Sports Bureau, n.d.).

In the immediate post-renovation stage, this memorial-cum-museum contained photographs and photocopies of items related to Rimbaud himself or to life in the city during the late 19th century. A limited library was also established on the premises. In the intervening years, the photographs, copies, and bibliographical resources have been expanded through cooperation with the French Embassy and local and foreign scholars. In addition, temporary exhibits of paintings and drawings by contemporary artists⁽¹³⁾ have been arranged in the building, which is now referred to as the Arthur Rimbaud Culture Center.

Very few material objects related to the life of the city are displayed at RCC (Table 1). The few items of pottery and basketry on display in the documentation room are on loan from the collection of the Harar National Museum; this is an easy arrangement, as a single curator manages all three Bureau-administered museums in Harar. The dearth of older vernacular arts at this museum is more than compensated for by the on-site presentation of contemporary cultural practices: the *Enayasia* women's weaving association (Fig. 6) gives daily demonstrations of traditional basketry (Asante 2004: 61) in the annex to the museum, and their gift shop offers a variety of jewelry, textiles, and basketry. The on-site presence of the weaver's guild not only entices tourists to RCC, but their mercantile activity, namely buying and selling baskets, does much to entice locals to occasionally visit the property.

Because of its association with the celebrated French poet, this is the most highly publicized mu-



Fig. 4. Abdela Sherif (center) discusses a manuscript's contents with visitors to his old museum



Fig. 5. The façade of the Rimbaud Culture Center



Fig. 6. A member of *Enayasia* weaver's guild creates a basket in the museum's annex

seum in Harar, if not in all of Ethiopia. Especially since 2000, with the cooperation and donations of international organizations (UNESCO, French Embassy in Addis Ababa, the city of Charleville-Mézières, and others), regional administrators and scholars have worked to diversify the activities of the Culture Center. Contemporary activities ranging from craft workshops to community lectures and government-sponsored celebrations all take place on the premises. In addition, the museum entered the new millennium I.T.-advanced when the UNESCO-sponsored telecommunication center was inaugurated on the first floor of the Cultural Center in August of 2005, offering access to five internet-connected personal computers at highly competitive rates.

Certainly the management of RCC has been commendable, having turned a dilapidated building into a memorial space and a thriving arena of activity. Also noteworthy are the museum guides of this establishment, who are knowledgeable and articulate in connecting the divergent activities found at the Center. Nevertheless, more effort is needed to link the cultural resources in a meaningful, interactive way. This could be achieved by arranging the library resources in digital format, along with details about the art and architecture found in the museum, information on the history of the city, and information about Rimbaud himself. Once digitized, the information could then be readily accessed via the computers that are already available on-site.

6. VERNACULAR ARTS IN LOCAL MUSEUMS REFLECT PROMINENCE IN COMMUNITY

The tradition of objects as symbolic representations has existed throughout modern human history and among peoples the world over. All through history, objects have been tangible manifestations of human beliefs and cultures, as well as functional and symbolic elements that have changed over time. Comparative studies of cultures, and even chronological studies within the same culture, have informed researchers of the complex cultural interactions that have yielded creations that express, on the one hand, a permanence of skill in vernacular arts and, on the other, the dynamism and re-interpretive ability of artisans who, over generations, have adopted and adapted craft techniques and forms to match their developing socio-cultural realities. Indeed, this idea of durability of skill and creative variety in forms and meaning can be identified in comparisons of archaeological finds with contemporary traditions around the continent of Africa. Thus, in isolated as well as well-connected communities in Africa, we find a seemingly unlimited variety of crafts involving ivory, bone, horn, clay, fiber, metal, wood, hide, stone, and other materials, fashioned into personal adornments, buildings, weaponry, and icons. These arts have been used for millennia, not only as decorative objects for ceremonial occasions but also for daily activities.

The international community is familiar with some of the more famous aspects of Ethiopian tangi-

ble heritage, like the World Heritage list's monumental obelisks of Axum or the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. The ancient monumental architecture and archaeological relics have been appropriately recognized as important not only to Ethiopian, but also to humankind's cultural heritage. Unfortunately, the international community is less familiar with the variety of other aspects of Ethiopian material culture,⁽¹⁴⁾ especially vernacular arts. Nonetheless, a wealth of significance can be found in the more common expressions of material culture, which remain a vital part of the living heritage of communities throughout Ethiopia.

Notwithstanding the social politics that have historically constrained the position of many artisans, aesthetic appreciation of vernacular arts by Ethiopians is not a new phenomenon. This appreciation can be linked to the many dimensions that characterize the vernacular arts: a combination of functionality (everyday utility, as well as ceremonial purpose), form (shape and pattern), and symbolism (formalized embodiment of values). In sum, indigenous admiration for cultural objects can be said to flow from an appreciation of the combination of form with context, i.e., the tangible and the intangible aspects of culture, as can be found in the collections in Harar.

In Harar, the women's craft guilds and *afocha*⁽¹⁵⁾ are undoubtedly the major contributors to the current knowledge base regarding vernacular arts in the walled city, particularly as regards the ceremonial uses of that art. These organizations have historically been crucial to producing, arranging, and promoting the vernacular arts in Harar's museums, a fact that should be considered in any restructuring plans. As we have seen in the previous case studies, the community in Harar, especially as represented by women's groups, has been instrumental in contributing objects to the collections of local museums. Moreover, curators have displayed these objects with the intention of showing them to be representative of various cultures of the city. Upon closer inspection, it is clear that these locally donated and locally arranged collections are strongly based on vernacular arts, as is shown in Table 1.⁽¹⁶⁾

While the collection data presented here show the strong presence of vernacular arts, objects in other categories could be similarly reclassified based on their folk craft characteristics. For example, the manuscripts, with their calligraphy, leather binding, embossing, and parchments, illustrate the variety of craft skills used in their creation. Furthermore, a perusal of the museum spaces shows that these objects are not simply present in large numbers, they are also displayed prominently, becoming the visual focal point in all of the museums (Figs. 1–3), with the exception of the Rimbaud Culture Center. It is reasonable to assume that the prominence of these folk crafts collections in publicly accessible museums does indeed reflect the high value given to such objects within the community, as well as the community's resourcefulness and self-reliance in establishing cultural displays in which they choose to represent themselves and their lives (to themselves as well as to others).

Table 1. Number of heritage objects on display in Harar's museums, 2005/2006

	Ada Gar	Harar National Museum	Sherif Private Museum	Rimbaud Culture Center
Folk crafts	605	296	726	81
Historical objects	55 (includes 21 manuscripts)	258 (includes 71 manuscripts)	4,104 (includes 950 manuscripts)	36
Farming instruments	0	14	7	0
Archaeological objects	0	1	(unknown fraction of folk/historical objects)	0
(Fine) Art objects	2	1	0	49
Photos	9	0	0	111
Total objects	671	570	4,837	277
Percentage of folk crafts	91%	53%	15%	29%

7. WHO BENEFITS FROM LOCAL MUSEUMS IN HARAR?

The previous section's discussion of the volume and variety of folk arts housed in local collections shows the preferences of the collectors and donators. But who are the visitors to local museum exhibits, and what are their reactions?

Fig. 7 provides the most detailed statistics on museum visitors available in August 2006.⁽¹⁷⁾ Although extensive statistics were only available for the Harar National Museum, from these it is possible to extrapolate some important visitor trends within a diachronic perspective. These numbers show that Ethiopian nationals⁽¹⁸⁾ account for about half of all visitors to this museum. Furthermore, interviews with staff of Ada Gar and the Rimbaud Culture Center indicated that about half of all visitors to those museums are Ethiopian, while Mr. Sherif reported that visitors to Sherif's Private Museum are predominantly Ethiopian.

In order to supplement the formal data on museum visitors, further insights were gleaned from guestbook entries, which were available for every museum in Harar.⁽¹⁹⁾ Table 2 lends support to the predominance of Ethiopians among visitors to local museums. In addition, the content of the entries themselves revealed that Ethiopian expatriates wrote a significant portion of the foreign language entries.

But the guestbook entries reveal much more than who is visiting; they also reveal visitors' reactions and help us to understand the extent to which these museums are relevant to the local community. In the more than 4,000 guestbook entries, there is minimal criticism; negative comments are usually

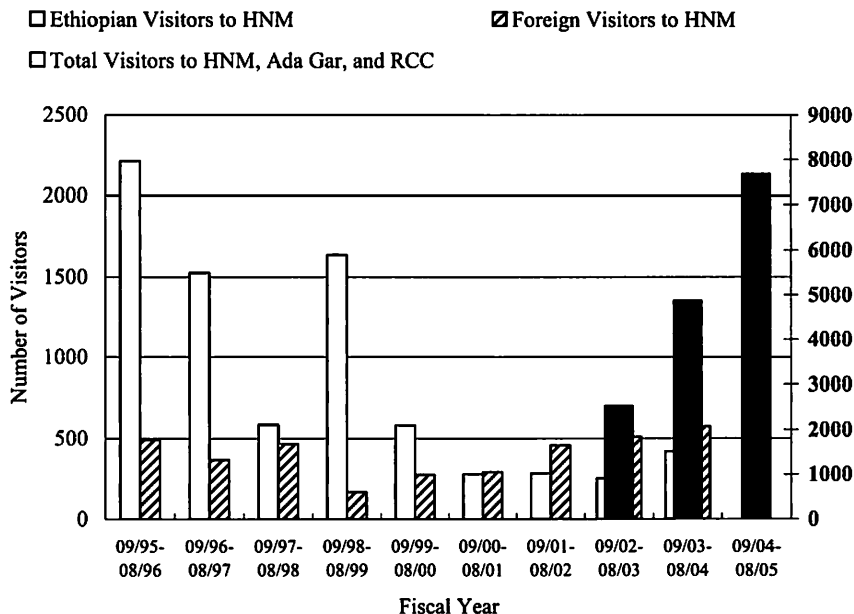


Fig. 7. Visitors to Harar National Museum (HNM)

Table 2. Guestbook entries from the museums of Harar

	Range of dates	Ethiopian language	Foreign language
Ada Gar	1998–2006	174	79
Harar National Museum	1991–2006	283	124
Sherif Private Museum	1997–2006	1,736	455
Rimbaud Culture Center	2000–2006	752	1,045

limited to calls for the creation of more systematic explanations and more organized displays. However, predominant themes throughout all of the entries include an overwhelming emotional response to the objects and their historical and contemporary significance, as well as reflections on how objects relate to the diversity of Ethiopia's ethnic groups, and similarities between museum holdings and a variety of international folk customs.

Moreover, the entries give evidence of how vernacular arts, when made easily accessible in local museums, can prompt positive emotional responses from the intended audience. Even more, the exhibition of these folk arts actively engages and stimulates the community in their quest to (re-)define/refine themselves, as the following examples illustrate:

I, myself, am a Harari. My knowledge, however, of my own community is very shallow. Today is a day which has great significance in my whole life. All the things that I have seen are arresting, dramatic, and incredible.... This museum should be given all possible attention by the region and by the people themselves.—M.Z.Y. (11 May 2002)

I have seen a lot [of] places and some historic places in my country, but today holds the greatest value. My visit with my [family to this museum] has the greatest value of all. Words could not express how much we are happy to come back here and [are] proud of being Ethiopian.... What I have seen should be preserved with the highest prestige.—F.N.M., Bahir Dar (30 July 2005)

Heritages that [are] collected and transferred to generations like Harari will be exemplary for Siltie people. [This is] not only history about Hararis, it is really a history of Islam in Ethiopia and a lesson which teaches [us] the resemblance of [our] ancestors.—A.K., Siltie Zone (January 2006)

The above examples and the plethora of others demonstrate that objects in Harar's collections are not static artifacts; they are a catalyst through which people define and redefine themselves. This research suggests the need to further evaluate visitors' feedback, which has not previously been considered a goal in cultural development practices in Ethiopia. Visitor responses need to be taken into account in order to create exhibitions and public programming that combine heritage and living cultural practices to create engaging, locally-based museums.

8. VULNERABILITY OF INDIGENOUS AGENCY IN PRESERVATION ENTERPRISES

Finally, we must take into account the fact that in July 2006 the city of Harar was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In conjunction with this recognition, several changes are imminent. Among them, UNESCO, along with Norwegian Funds-in-Trust, the Harari regional government, and Abdela Sherif, signed an agreement leasing Sherif's collection to a new city museum, thus effectively transferring the private collection to government administration for the next fifty years. Of course there are potential benefits arising from this project: new equipment in the form of storage shelves were delivered to the regional administrators in September 2006; the Centre for Heritage Development in Africa (CHDA) has provided training in inventory and documentation to local curators, including Mr. Sherif; and plans to produce catalogues of the collection have begun.⁽²⁰⁾ Without question, these are all important steps aimed at raising standards in local museums.

However, some recent developments suggest a cautionary addendum to the present study. In July 2007, the Sherif Harar City Museum was officially opened in the former home of Ras Tafari (Haile Selassie) in the center of the city (Fig. 8). Although construction of another building had already begun to house the new "city museum", the celebration of the Harar Millennium in July 2007 forced the Bureau of Culture to find another accommodation quickly. At present, the Tafari house offers a



Fig. 8. The façade of the Ras Tefari house, home of the new Sherif City Museum

spacious alternative to Sherif's own private home. On the other hand, the addition of an armed guard and new entrance fees that are the highest of any museum in Ethiopia have added a troubling note: the welcoming feel of a home-cum-museum has certainly been lost, along with the exceptional and inviting quality of "free access for all."⁽²¹⁾ It is unclear what instigated the recent dramatic changes. Was it the international recognition brought on by the World Heritage Site designation? Was it the competition between cosignatories for rights to a significant share of proceeds? Perhaps it was a combination of these factors and others, including the ambiguity of both ownership and management entitlements between the regional government and the private citizen.

While the future of community participation in Harar's museums remains uncertain, one can only hope that sustainable programs will be developed that do not undermine the indigenous systems of alliances that have been integral to the development of these institutions. For example, previously, as much as forty percent of Sherif's collection was given to him in trust. Certainly that "trust" was a special accolade, acknowledging the integrity and dedication of an esteemed private citizen, who was entrusted with the maintenance of the objects. In some cases, like that of precious manuscripts or music recordings, the items were not given but lent to Sherif, with the resultant expectation that they would remain the property of the donor. This special relationship that Sherif built up with his community helped his museum collection grow when other collections like that of Ada Gar suffered from stagnation after the initial large donations of *afocha* groups. There is no certainty that such a trust will remain after the official change in the management of these local collections. Equally important, the future autonomy of private custodians of material heritage may now be compromised. Is it impossible for international donors and regional officials to give significant incentives to private collectors that do not involve the conditional wholesale transfer of collections from the private domain?

9. CONCLUSION: LINKING PAST AND PRESENT THROUGH COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS WITH MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

In studying the opportunities for community interaction with objects in museum settings, a chance to investigate the motivations behind individual and community appraisals of the works, by exploring local residents' perceptions of the historical significance of the museums and the future aspirations of the group, emerges. That is to say, investigating how an individual or community uses objects to tell a story of the past, and to contextualize the self (or group) in the present, can contribute significantly to future comparative anthropological studies dealing with notions of communal and national cultural identity. For this reason, this study attempts to understand material objects within the framework of cultural institutions, community organizations, and administrative organs of the state, all of which are influential actors in material heritage preservation in Ethiopia.

I suggest that local participation in Harar's museums has been facilitated by a high degree of community cultivating activity, that is, the intended accumulation and presentation of, and engagement with, material culture through collective effort. In Harar, community cultivation of heritage has been facilitated by 1) **social alliances** that support the inclusion of established indigenous networks in heritage management initiatives, and 2) a **commitment of resources** which, given the limited availability of material and monetary sources, has required collective ingenuity to create presentations of historical objects in a context that is relevant for contemporary communities. As these case studies have shown, local awareness of the importance of community engagement in local museum projects has not been an imported strategy; it constitutes an indigenous methodology that may serve as a prototype for similar enterprises in Ethiopia and beyond.

While the commendable efforts of the community have been recorded here, an imminent challenge still faces the community, administrators, and donor organizations with regard to collectively managing these venues in the rapidly developing cultural market of a city whose new World Heritage Site status will surely influence cultural commodities and the institutions that house them. The question for the future is: Can indigenous praxes and international standards of material heritage management merge in Africa without negating the agency of local custodians when it comes to managing local collections?

NOTES

- (1) This paper is part of a doctoral dissertation that contextualizes the management and conservation of vernacular arts in Ethiopia from a historical and socio-political perspective, while introducing the artistic heritage and custodianship of material culture in Harar. Research for this article was carried out with generous support from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS); Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology; the Kyoto University Foundation; and the ASAFAS 21st Century COE Program.
- (2) Several methods were employed for data collection in this study. For data on material culture, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional artisans in Harar; elder groups of women belonging to local neighborhood associations (*afocha*) were consulted for their knowledge of traditions involving folk crafts. Information on museums was obtained from interviews with personnel of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES); the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCCH); and museum owners, curators, and visitors.
- (3) Even in the latter half of the 20th century, museums created that were not directly influenced by colonial paradigms, were often still modeled on American or European standards.
- (4) Certainly, the socio-political history and oscillating hegemonic tendencies of Ethiopia's ruling parties have contributed to the nature of heritage conservation. Further discussions on this topic can be found in Asante (2008), Alemseged Abbay (2004), and Aleme Eshete (1982).
- (5) While local communities may maintain de facto custodianship of the arts of Ethiopia, the legal mandate for cultural custodianship lies with the federal government (FDRE 1994, 1997; Negarit Gazeta *Proclamation No. 36/1989*).
- (6) Historical data on *Ada Gar* is from personal communication with Abdulmuhymin Abdulnasir in 2006.
- (7) According to Ahmed Zekaria (n.d.), the home was previously named after its owner, Faqih Abdullahi ibn Faqih Abdulrahman, a local *qadi* (whose office Ahmed Zekaria assigns to c. 1870–1897).
- (8) Alternatively referred to as Harari National Cultural Center.
- (9) The regional government has managed cultural activities under various administrative departments, which are referred to as the "Bureau of Culture" throughout this paper. In post-election (2005) restructuring, the Harari office of cultural affairs officially became a section of the Regional Bureau of Culture and Tourism, which was replace by the current Culture, Tourism and Information Bureau.
- (10) In 2004 the regional Tourism Commission and the National Tourism Commission in Addis Ababa, offered a 2-week training program for local tour guides at the Rimbaud Culture Center.
- (11) In 2007, Sheik Mohammed Hussein Al-Amoudi donated one million birr (\$112,000 US) to Abdela Sherif for his private museum work.

- (12) According to Revault and Santelli (2004: 229), this late 19th century house is the most remarkable example of Indian type architecture in Ethiopia and was built by the Indian trader Jivagee Nazarela.
- (13) Recent exhibits included the artwork of Kerima Ahmed, Carlos Marine, and Mesfin Tadesse.
- (14) General introductions to the variety of handicrafts and artisanal activities in Ethiopia are beyond the scope of this study, but may be found elsewhere in several publications (e.g., Pankhurst, R. 1992; Henze 2000; Karsten 1972; Silverman (ed.) 1999; Silverman & Sobania 2003).
- (15) The particulars of the variety of religious, secular, traditional, and recent social organizations in Harar have been dealt with elsewhere by Waldron (1975), Koehn & Waldron (1978), Gibb (1996), Carmichael (2001), Asante (2004) Desplat (2005), and Tarsitani (2006).
- (16) Data reflect items on display in the museums in 2005/2006. Objects kept in storage were not counted, but may account for a significant additional portion of the collections. Items are categorized as follows: Folk crafts are applied arts including textiles, basketry, art tools, etc.; Historical objects are connected to famous past events and include items from famous persons, historic weapons, currency, and manuscripts of past times; Archaeological objects relate to buried items and buildings from previous eras; (Fine) Art objects have to do with what would be considered art in an academic context, including paintings, sculptures, and printmaking. The distinction between folk arts and fine arts does not reflect the author's preference, but serves as a tool with which to do comparative analysis of the collection of the National Museum in Addis Ababa, whose categories are similarly divided.
- (17) Source: Harari People National Regional State, Office of the Bureau of Culture, August 2006.
- (18) Ethiopian expatriates are counted as "Ethiopian Visitors" by museum staff.
- (19) Ahmed Zekaria (n.d.) noted that the first guestbook of the *Ada Gar* museum contained more than one thousand entries, all accumulated in less than two years. Guestbooks prior to 1998 could not be located.
- (20) Source: http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=32729&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (accessed on 15 January 2009)
- (21) Since 2005, the Harar National Museum, Rimbaud Culture Center, and Ada Gar have charged 1 to 3 birr for Ethiopians and 3 to 10 birr for foreigners. With the opening of the Sherif Harar City Museum, access to Abdela Sherif's collection, which was previously free, now costs 5 to 10 birr for Ethiopians and 30 birr for foreigners, with an additional 10 birr fee for camera or video use. Even the well-known IES Museum in Addis Ababa charges a relatively modest rate of 3 birr for Ethiopian adults and 20 birr for foreign adults.

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