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Heritage and Museums: scope, roles and responsibilities

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The question of what exactly constitutes 'Heritage' will be discussed. Is it simply community and identity affirmation through museum displays and job creation in the tourism sector or can it also play a role in skills development in museum based conservation? The latter was once an important element in museum practice but needs to be reintroduced formally into a strong and rigorous science- based program.

Introduction

We South Africans have this funny understanding that heritage is something that we are born into and inherit. Freeze-dried into spatial time, we believe that monuments, hero's and heroine's, our cultural practices, the places and narratives we are told or are shown as being important, are important, and that they provide us with a solid identity that we can trust in and use as South Africans. That is, until our political narrative changes, and we re-invent ourselves again. Within the fore-grounded conceptual framework, we tend to view 'heritage' within the following understanding: "The heritage we believe is important to us at a particular time is everything that is passed down to us". As a result, we believe that we should find a place or space which is either able to hold this particular inheritance or spaces and places which already holds this heritage for us. Hence, for example, the creation of new museums, festivals, literature, exhibitions, heritage sites and heritage centre's on the one hand to illustrate and

visualize our heritage for ourselves while at the same time encouraging the public to believe in what we believe we are – our heritage thereby ensuring that this heritage is preserved ‘for our future generations’. In this manner, we strive to ensure that how we define and manage our ‘heritage’ is on a par with international standards in terms of locating heritage as the full range of our inherited traditions, monuments, objects, and culture while also understanding that heritage is also the range of contemporary activities, meanings, and behaviours that we draw from them.

We follow national ideals in developing these, ‘our identities’. Under Nelson Mandela, we strove to ensure that we could all understand ourselves as ‘The Rainbow Nation’; under Thabo Mbeki we were meant to understand ourselves within the ‘African Renaissance’ framework, and now under President Jacob Zuma we seek to find ourselves within the framework of ‘South Africa Belongs to All who live in it’.

In developing and funding this, our ‘heritage’, Government is positioned and understood by ourselves to play a central role in supporting and developing this, our heritage, by providing funds for activities and embodiments, including:

- Museums
- Monuments
- Heritage Sites
- Theatres
- Festivals
- Cultural Organisations who ‘keep this heritage alive’
- Conferences
- Conservation,

In consuming this, our heritage, the average South African desires the ‘free t-shirt’ from the event, the feel good factor, and the understanding that our precious ‘inherited identity’ is protected for future generations. Those ‘in the know’ on the other hand, prefer to critically analyse what government is doing, or not doing, in terms of this conception of heritage, its funding or its lack of funding, its development or its lack of development.

When we like it, we use the National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999 to strengthen our arguments, and we don’t like it, we also use the aforementioned Act to strengthen our arguments. When things go wrong or when we disagree, we complain that our Act does not give

us enough guidelines, and as a result, that we, and government, struggle to 'protect and preserve' our heritage for 'future generations'.

A building is demolished, and we feel the need to picket. A museum's budget is cut, and we feel the need to lobby support. A new monument or museum or site is proposed, and we feel the need to ensure that everyone is consulted and that approval of everything from the theme, to the exhibits to the bathrooms, are universally consulted on and unanimously decided upon.

Just as the 2010 World Cup showed us that we are essentially a nation of 48 million football coaches, central to all of our developments in the 'Heritage Sector' is the fact that we South Africans, have taken ownership of this, 'our heritage'. While we shirk at first at new concepts, such as that of National Braai Day, being the good natured citizens we are, we also accept change. Or so we think.

And yet we continue to struggle to understand why we don't see the developments we desire in 'heritage'.

Why is it, after almost two decades of democracy that our museums generally are not improving? That generally only those museums and heritage sites and cultural villages and theatres and landmarks and monuments and individuals who are the 'flavour of the national identity discourse' seem to get everything while other museums struggle to show their relevance and get support? Why can't we get this heritage and tourism paradigm right? Why is it that after two decades we still sit with a museum and heritage worker skills problem? That no matter who is appointed as Director or Chief Curator to the museum or collection, they just can't seem to quite get it right and strengthen 'our heritage' or bring the change we desire?

Our questioning could go on and on, and we could call for many more conferences to keep on repeating the same questions. However, is it not time that we start looking at what we are questioning? How we are questioning rather?

What is "Heritage?"

To move from the debate of inheritance, these are the features that we need to look at in terms of shaping heritage.

Heritage is not what we have simply inherited, but is what we have invented for a particular purpose – whether for nation building, or even to provide protection to a community or cultural

group in the form of certain markers. South Africa has one of the most significant examples of the power of heritage in the example of Afrikaner heritage. From the invention of their language and through the revision of history to provide a basis for themselves as a cultural group, they 'found' their inheritance and as a result, were a 'heritage rich nation'.

One of the key issues that Act 25 therefore needed to address was that of ensuring that heritage is non-sectarian and not-for-political gain. Further, that heritage is a conceptual basis, and that our resources are significant in terms of socio-economic developments. Act 25 is however often misunderstood, and possibly misinterpreted in the light of the above. In the management guidelines, Act 25 makes it clear that the management of heritage is a multi-faceted industry and that as concept we choose certain resources to embody and interpret it. Act 25 further provides guidelines as to who should establish what and how this could be done. The problem with Act 25 is therefore not the Act itself, but the interpretation thereof. Light travels faster than sound, which is why some people who interpret the Act seem brighter before they speak.

So what is the role of heritage then?

Act 25 provides the understanding that heritage is not homogenous, that it is heterogeneous in terms of it being classified as national, provincial and local and even individual or personal. This means that heritage should be open to debate and contestations. It is through these debates and contestations that heritage shapes identities.

Heritage can play a role in redress, especially in situations where histories have been suppressed, distorted or silenced. If a particular framework is used, such as that of IKS, it opens and generates either a different understanding that would challenge past and present prejudices while also allowing for an acceptance of diversity.

Because heritage is not homogenous, its role is also to encourage people to accept diversity as the wealth of a nation. Like culture and like identity, people can assume diverse cultural practices and can obviously also assume diverse identities. So too can they assume and accept the diverse forms of heritage.

A significant issue which is almost entirely overlooked in terms of Act 25 is that heritage should be factored into disputes that arise across a variety of situations including land, environmental and governance issues. The Act therefore recognizes the centrality of heritage as a manifestation that can assist and contribute to nation building in all its spheres, whether

economic, political, social, and cultural. Globally, we are told that knowledge is the new resource. Heritage is knowledge. The heritage resources we choose are the embodiments of our knowledge.

Heritage also acts as the economic catalyst for a number of industries such as clothing, food, tourism, art, music, etc. It provides templates for the development of these sectors and as such has enormous economic value and power with special reference to individual arts and crafts businesses and represents far more than a “soft” sector such as culture.

Therefore, how do we deal with knowledge, and in essence ‘our heritage’ when still haven’t found/articulated the key concepts of our nation? Western Philosophy is known for three key concepts or movements which underpin the way in which nations provide them with identity:

1. “We understand knowledge through reason” = Rationality
2. This then shifted to, “we understand knowledge through experience” = Empiricism
3. This then shifted to, “no, we understand knowledge through language” = Semiotics

What is Africa’s identity, philosophically? Have we deduced it yet? No. This lack also contributes significantly to why we struggle to interpret and manage the basis of heritage in Act 25. Therefore, despite Act 25 providing us with an overall guideline, which is ours to interpret, our conceptual framework is not in place and therefore we are not able to understand the Act, nor heritage.

What is the impact of this?

In the mid 1990s, given the push to address issues around reconstruction and development, and because of the then understanding of heritage and the inability to insert heritage into job creation and the industrial economic framework resulted in tourism taking on the persona of heritage. Whereas our 1996 White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage could have been expanded to indicate the inter-relationship between heritage and a range of sectors in terms of innovation, job creation and social cohesion. This ability was pushed onto that of the Tourism sector. As a result, the heritage sector became the clever-but-poor-orphan-cousin, and was split. The impact was as follows:

- The economics and perceived industrial capacity of heritage was pushed to tourism;
- The cultural dynamic was pushed to Arts and Culture and Museums,
- While the innovation and scientific element was couched within the Science and Technological aspect of DACST, with specific reference to IKS.

The 1990s also saw immense focus being placed on the need to address the education and training skills shortages. This was done to address the backlogs of the country and the need to develop these issues rapidly in order to ensure socio-economic development and prosperity.

Although Museums were ideologically placed with Arts and Culture, its skills needs were placed into Tourism. This is clear from the Sector Industry Codes (SIC) allocated to the different SETA's. THETA, or the Tourism Hospitality Education Training Authority, was as a result put in charge of museums skills. In turn, THETA did not know where to start, and placed Museums under the Conservation category, together with nature. Those museums that paid their skills levies did not however pay them to THETA, but rather, as a result of Museums essentially being government funded institutions, to the Local Government SETA. In effect, the skills demand issues of museums and heritage were nullified.

In 2002, these issues were picked up and a drive to consolidate the needs of museums and that of the heritage sector took place through a body called CreateSA, a National Skills Fund Strategic Project and which was aligned to the MAPPP SETA. The first national registered qualification, which through intelligent interpretation could be utilized both by the museum as well as by the heritage sectors, was developed and registered on the NQF in 2004. Statistics show, however, that museums did not take advantage of this qualification, nor of the others which were to follow.

The impact of all of the above issues has been:

1. The conceptual basis of the heritage sector is still not articulate, and as a result, heritage is still misconstrued. When the Act set out that the Heritage Sector needs to be understood not only in terms of its ability to develop nation-ness, ensure a form of social cohesion and implement redress, but also that it has economic development as a core, neither has been able to be understood effectively yet.

2. Heritage is still seen as Culture and culture in the South African context is viewed as something sacred, not to be tampered with, as it is our identity. On Heritage Day 2010, Woolworths, one of the supposedly most progressive chain stores in South Africa, provided a classic understanding of this. In terms of attempting to show that they understand and reflect the heritage of a nation, Woolworths celebrated Heritage Day with us by encouraging all staff to wear their native language Cultural attire i.e., what we have inherited.

3. Museums are generally viewed as the custodians of this 'Our Culture', and hence, our identity, and hence 'Our Heritage'. Museums are generally established within and are carried

through on the basis of them being 'Not-for-Profit' and as a result, any talk of how resources could be utilized within an industrial framework is seen as problematic.

4. The identification and protection of 'Our Heritage Resources' is managed by Government at National level in line with the understanding of the power of heritage to build a nation. Act 25, however, states that in terms of making this work across both social and economic contexts that Provinces are meant to establish independent, non-sectarian bodies who can work with and grow the heritage concept. This has not happened, with heritage being managed at government level in provinces, and hence a large inability to interpret the concept effectively. Local government in turn, takes strain.

5. A conceptual problem exists between the skills needs in terms of the heritage sector, those in terms of the museums sector, and those in terms of the tourism sector. It is essentially when we look at the skills needs of the sectors, which we can begin to see what the roles and responsibilities of the heritage and the museums sectors really are. It is not a situation of the one being better than the other, as has been perceived for so long now, but it should rather be a situation of understanding their symbiosis within industrial as well as cultural frameworks.

Museums and heritage.

Museum core functions are research, outreach and collection management. Most museums carry out original research in the human and natural sciences and outreach in the form of displays and educational programs but, above all, museums house collections many a century or older that hopefully will survive into the next millennium or beyond. These collections constitute the memory of individuals, communities and the nation and consist of both tangible and intangible objects, both the everyday and the rare, the strong and the fragile, the good and the bad, of local and national importance. These therefore must be preserved for future generations in their original form. Thus museums embody the scientific issues of conservation. If there is no money for research or displays, there still has to be collection management and conservation. This requires a specific type of skills intervention that must be appropriately designed to capture the different levels of conservation relevant to the sector.

For example, all staff of a museum or heritage site should be equipped with the basics of conservation knowledge, including those working in the reception/ticket office being able to understand at which point we stop entry to a museum/site in alignment with footfall and its potential damage, through to housekeeping and museum/site attendants/guides who should be equipped with the basics of what to do when something happens to a site or object or artefact.

The type of education and training required at this level is far different to the level required for the technician who has a diploma or first degree and carries out routine maintenance and rescue work or the professional conservator who carries out research and experimentation into local conservation problems and who should in fact have a PhD in chemistry or allied subject. However, these differentiations are what are important in order to promote success and career development.

Where the heritage sector comes in is to partner with the museums sector in terms of workers acquiring this conservation knowledge. Conservation is both an art and a science. We can liken the conservator to a plastic surgeon. The surgeon needs to be medically trained but also needs sensitive and artistic hands in order to rebuild a shattered face. It is also no coincidence that some of the best plastic surgeons are also artists. Both conservators and the arts and crafts sector would benefit from the same training. The basis of a good conservator is not only a rigorous scientific training in chemistry but also a thorough knowledge of how objects of material culture were made. In order to know how to restore or conserve an item (or even simply store it or put it on display) it is necessary to understand how the object was made or previously conserved, what materials were used and how they react with each other and the environment in addition to understanding the (chemical) effects of the materials used on each other. This type of training would benefit the craftsman as well as it would encourage the production of a quality, long lasting product. There is a need to interact with older crafters in order to document how they worked, what materials they used, etc and we need a clear philosophy about why one conserves and for what purpose. For example, does one conserve in order to maintain an object in its original, authentic composition or does one use more modern materials in order for the object to be used?

Where the museums sector would benefit from the heritage sector is for museum workers to understand the issues of business and economic development. Museums are seen as not-for-profit organizations yet their collections hold enormous value. This does not mean that collections should be sold, rather that they can be used as models for commercial products.

In conclusion

Heritage is bigger than just museums. It encompasses economic development such as tourism and arts and crafts, it defines cultural groups who choose what aspects of their heritage they wish to be known by and it even drives scientific research into IKS. The main role of museums is the documenting, storage and conservation of heritage. It follows then that heritage needs its

own dedicated SETA so that standards can be set and funds accessed for training but, importantly for museums, conservation as a discipline needs to be fully professionalized.

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Education, Opportunities and Educational Resources

Time Travel

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Bridging Ages is an International Organisation and the 'mother body' controlling Time Travels. The National body will endeavour to introduce this concept throughout the Country.

This paper will give a small introduction to the origins of Time Travel, where Time Travel is in South Africa today and then concentrate on guiding interested persons who wish to introduce this concept into their Museums.