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# New Histories in a Post-Colonial Society – Transformation in South African Museums since 1994

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During the last decade, museums in South Africa have been going through a period of massive change and upheaval. They have sought to transform their collections and exhibitions to reflect new ideas and become relevant to their diverse societies. In particular, spurred by the black rights movement in the United States of America and by indigenous nationalist struggles to remove colonial powers that had taken place elsewhere in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean since the Second World War, both the political and non-indigenous public sphere have shown greater acknowledgement towards indigenous African rights and the inequality they have suffered since European settlement. This has been the case particularly since the late 1970s.

For much of their histories, South African museums have collected indigenous culture, but by doing so, they have generally treated it as part of the natural history of the country, situating it in a timeless and static past and deeming it inferior to European civilisation and irrelevant in terms of the cultural development of the nation.[1] At the same time, especially from the 1950s, museums had begun to incorporate the history of settlement from Europe on a large scale, often displaying the triumph and superiority of white culture over black, and serving to give greater legitimacy to the prevailing system of apartheid. As Elizabeth Rankin so aptly describes it: "... antitheses were constructed, of primitive as opposed to civilised, of nature versus culture".[2] This is most clearly exemplified by the splitting in two of various museum collections in the 1960s, including in Cape Town, where white culture was

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1. For an examination of the earlier development of museums and an analysis of how this development mirrored changing historiography and ideas of nation and nationalism in South Africa, see J.M. Gore, "A Lack of Nation? The Evolution of History in South African Museums, c 1825-1945", *South African Historical Journal*, 51, 2005.
2. E. Rankin, "Recording the Canon: Towards Greater Representivity in South African Art Galleries", *Social Dynamics*, 21, 2, 1995, p 61.

presented in the South African Cultural History Museum, whilst black culture was coupled with natural history in the South African Museum.

The post-colonial climate, however, has led to many different groups asserting their fundamental rights, claiming control of their own cultures and histories, and calling for inclusion within representations of history and nation. Museums now at least acknowledge the need for the inclusion of the different types of history that constitute the societies which they represent. Of course, museums have attempted to address "transformation" in a number of varied ways, including changes in governance, staffing, policies, internal organisation, funding, new public programmes and even name changes.[3] Nevertheless, the most obvious and perhaps the most potent way they have attempted to respond to the new democratic South Africa, is through their exhibitions. This article explores some of these new exhibitions and initiatives, and considers how successful museums have been in responding to the challenge of becoming inclusive of not only previously neglected populations, but of all South Africans. It does not pretend to be an exhaustive examination of these developments. Rather it is designed as a useful broad survey to provide the reader with an overview of the main ways in which museums have attempted to transform, and to highlight the challenges and tensions they have faced (and often continue to face) amidst a growing conflict where new histories constantly challenge official and traditional histories and identities. The article draws attention to several specific museums as examples of the various ways in which museums are struggling to present conflicting histories at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Many of these, such as the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, the Robben Island Museum and the South African Museum in Cape Town, deserve more attention than they receive here. Each could indeed constitute a whole article in their own right. However, due to the general comprehensive nature of this article, a more detailed examination is not possible, and they are highlighted here as being critical areas deserving of further research and critique.

Museums, throughout their histories, have reflected the developing historiography of South Africa as a whole, from their neglect of black history and promotion of white history in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, to the current transformation process whereby a new historical culture, emphasising the contribution of indigenous and other ethnic cultures, is permeating so many different aspects of society. Consequently, despite the fact

3. Throughout this discussion, the definition of transformation is borrowed from one accepted by an Eastern Cape Museum Transformation Task Group in 1998: "Transformation – Changing how and what we do to accommodate and embrace the needs of all South Africans". See *South African Museums Association East Cape News Sheet*, 3, August 1998, p 1.

that the major changes in South African museums have occurred during the last decade, it is important to recognise that transformation had begun at an earlier stage. The rise of black consciousness and the hardening of political attitudes in the wake of the riots of 1976 "accelerated black questioning and repudiation as 'liberal' and 'Eurocentric' of that system of values rooted in Western history and culture".[4] Especially from the late 1970s, there was an awareness in many museums of the need to readdress their traditional roles and structures. During the 1980s, various museums began developing programmes that would enable them to reach traditionally marginalised communities. This was despite an atmosphere of repression, heightened by the 1983 Tricameral Constitution whereby museums were for the first time classified on an apartheid basis, and cultural history museums became "own affairs" museums under the control of the Department of Education and Culture – part of the "white" House of Assembly. Other museums, those that were deemed to serve audiences across the perceived racial divide, including natural history museums that generally still held material relating to indigenous Africans, were designated as "general affairs" under the control of the Department of National Education. It was these museums that were able to begin addressing the needs of the wider population. For example, the Natal Museum appointed an African education officer who developed a number of successful programmes with African schools in and around Pietermaritzburg,[5] while others began implementing more inclusive and less biased museum and collection policies that would focus on being more representative of different communities.

Nevertheless, any major public efforts to begin transforming museums from within were continually hampered by the restrictions and mindsets imposed by the prevailing system of apartheid. It was only with the dawning of the era of transition in February 1990, that museums could throw off their colonial shackles and truly begin to address the rights and needs of all South Africans. One illustration of this is the transfer of various indigenous African collections from their traditional place as "natural history" to finally constituting an important part of the rich cultural human history and development of South Africa. The Albany Museum in Grahamstown, for instance, transferred its Xhosa anthropological collection that was housed in the Natural Sciences Museum to the History Museum in 1991, soon followed by the mounting of a new modern display of Xhosa traditional dress.[6]

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4. A.R. de Villiers, "Museums and Universities", *South African Museums Association Bulletin* (*SAMAB*), 16, 8, December 1985, p 371.
5. G. Dominy, "Collecting the Material Culture of Apartheid and Resistance", *in* C.D. Ardouin and E. Arinze (eds), *Museums and History in West Africa* (Smithsonian, Washington, 2000), p 6.
6. Albany Museum, *Annual Report for the year ended March 1992* (Grahamstown, 1992), pp 25, 31.

South Africans are in the process of rediscovering and reinventing themselves. The 1990s saw the advent of transformation in every aspect of South African society, becoming the key platform by which a new nation is being built. In seeking to define a nation, people often look to their pasts in order to gain some understanding of numerous complex social and cultural questions and problems, and so museums have an important role to play in helping their people reconcile with their varied and often contentious pasts. This has led to numerous new museum exhibitions and projects aimed at reflecting and promoting the history and identity of all South Africans. In 1994, Carolyn Hamilton described how the challenge for South African museums "on the threshold of transformation is … to take the lead in accommodating diversity and encouraging the expression of different opinions and various identities".[7] As part of the transformation process, new museums and heritage institutions focusing on previously neglected topics have emerged, while older museums have attempted to refurbish their displays to provide a more balanced representation of South Africa's history.

In a recent work, Annie Coombes identified four main areas that South African museums during the 1990s had concluded "needed attention in order to redress some of the imbalances and absences of the past",[8] and that were crucial components of any new national history. These included the township experiences of majority black cultures; labour, especially the working environment and conditions of employment for the black majority; slavery, which had been so important to the growth of white settler wealth; and the diversity and beauty of the natural environment and its flora and fauna, which had played an important role in promoting South Africa as an international tourist destination. A fifth area can be added to these, namely that of the political struggle against apartheid. All of these themes can be seen in the many different attempts to transform the museum scene in South Africa that will be discussed below.[9]

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7. C. Hamilton, "Against the Museum as Chameleon", *South African Historical Journal*, 31, November 1994, pp 189-190.
8. A.E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2003), p 153. In recent years various works have addressed the transformation of history in museums. Of particular note is Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, and various chapters in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), especially Patricia Davison, "Museums and the Reshaping of Memory", pp 143-160. A number of shorter articles have also been published during the last fifteen years or so in the *South African Museums Association Bulletin* (*SAMAB*).
9. The transformation of African history and culture has not been limited to the continent. In 1995, a large nation-wide exhibition of African art opened in the United

## New museums

Many of the new cultural institutions and projects that have been initiated during the last ten years have unsurprisingly focused on the "struggle" – specifically the liberation struggle that grew after the apartheid policy was put in place by the National Party after 1948. This can be seen to be promoting a new South African national history and identity based on the long fight against apartheid. One of the earliest and most prominent of these was the development of the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The Mayibuye Centre had its origins in 1987 when the then Rector of UWC, Professor Jakes Gerwel, set up a committee to investigate the idea of a type of "holocaust museum" for apartheid.[10] Doctor André Odendaal was subsequently asked to develop the idea and he spent 1988 and 1989 in England, visiting international heritage projects and working with the then banned ANC and the International Defence and Aid Fund. Upon his return to South Africa, Odendaal was asked by UWC to set up the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture, and the Centre soon built up a large collection of material on apartheid and the struggle. Through its conferences, exhibitions, publications and policy input, the Centre began to play an important role in the heritage and cultural sectors during the build-up to democracy.[11]

Beginning with an exhibition on Robben Island in 1993, called *Esiquithini* ("on the island" in Xhosa and Zulu) and developed in collaboration with the South African Museum in Cape Town,[12] the Mayibuye Centre produced numerous exhibitions during the next few years which travelled overseas, as well as to towns and cities throughout South Africa. The Mayibuye Centre was also asked by the government to help set up the new Robben Island Museum. In 1996, Cabinet recommended that the Centre's collections should be incorporated into the new museum. As a result the Centre was disbanded in April 2000.

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Kingdom. "Africa95" aimed in part to change the way people perceived African culture, and to help do away with old clichés of African art – such as masks and drums. It was a huge success both in the UK, and later in the United States of America. For more, see E. Barker (ed), *Contemporary Cultures on Display* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999), pp 147-173; "British Eyes View African Art", *Pretoria News*, 16 January 1996.

10. "Partnerships based on history", online at http://www.robbenisland.org.za/departments/heritage/mayibuye/partnerships.asp.
11. Representatives of the Centre were also actively involved in the cultural structures and planning processes of the new government – within the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) to develop new national policies, on committees for new heritage legislation and as advisers on special projects.
12. For more on "Esiqithini", see Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, pp 60-69.

Robben Island today is one of the premier tourist attractions in South Africa, receiving thousands of both local and overseas visitors each year. Its development as a museum dates back to 1993, when various reports were produced with recommendations as to the island's future,[13] and the South African Cabinet decided that the Department of Correctional Services should vacate the island by the end of 1996. Robben Island in some ways epitomises the attempts to interpret a "new" national history and identity based on struggle, not only the struggle against apartheid, but resistance against different ruling and colonising groups – Dutch, British or Afrikaner, throughout South Africa's history since European settlement. Robben Island can be seen as representing this entire period, through its long recorded history as a prison for both criminal and political prisoners, including leading Xhosa chiefs in the nineteenth century, as well as the prominent struggle leaders during the second half of the twentieth, as a naval station, as a leper colony and a lunatic asylum.[14] As Gerhard Lubbe explained in 1987, for many South Africans, Robben Island symbolises "the indestructibility of the spirit of resistance against colonialism, injustice and oppression".[15]

The debate over the island's future lasted for several years and was often controversial. Conflict arose over proposed commercialisation of the island and its impact on the environment, as well as the promotion thereof as an international tourist site. Central to the criticism was the sensitive issue of creating a museum and promoting tourism on the site of a prison with, as Annie Coombes states, its "complicated histories of collusion, complicity and betrayal".[16] This issue can also be seen in other debates that arose, such as between public history and the involvement of private enterprise, highlighted by the strenuous opposition to the use of the name Robben Island for commercial products.[17] Many saw this as the commodification of painful personal histories, raising other questions over the ownership of national histories when moral imperatives clash with economic necessity.

Problems also arose over which aspects of the island's history should actually be represented in exhibitions. It was decided that certain aspects should be

13. For a summary of these reports see A. Gouws, *Report of the Robben Island Political Feasibility Study as Commissioned by Peace Visions* (Cape Town, Peace Visions, 1994).
14. For a brief overview of Robben Island's history, see C. Anderson, "Robben Island: The End of an Era", *South African Encounter*, 4, 1, 1997, pp 13-16.
15. G. Lubbe, "Robben Island: The Early Years of Muslim Resistance", *Kronos*, 12, 1987, p 49.
16. Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, p 69. For a detailed study of the debate over Robben Island, see pp 54-115.
17. Davison, "Museums and the Reshaping of Memory", p 157.

prioritised, but in view of its long recorded history, it was not surprising that different interests emerged. Some felt that the leper period should be given precedence because of its inclusiveness, arguing that at that time, all lepers were treated equally as outcasts, regardless of gender or race, while others believed the Second World War period should be the first priority "because people involved in that period were old and dying and that stories that are held in their memories, if not recorded quickly, will die with them".[18] However, it was the more recent history of the island as a prison that was most popularly supported, and which ultimately succeeded in being given precedence. Robben Island, especially in regards to its recent history as a prison for anti-apartheid leaders, particularly Nelson Mandela, today figures strongly in the national memory and has become a symbol representing both the crimes of and victory over apartheid.[19]

In August 1995, the Cabinet appointed the Future of Robben Island Committee under Ahmed Kathrada, himself a noted struggle leader who spent eighteen years imprisoned on the island. After inviting public comment and reports on the future utilisation and development of the island, the Committee recommended in 1996 that Robben Island should become a World Heritage Site, National Monument and National Museum.[20] An action plan was compiled, based on a quadrate vision, namely that the island should become a lasting memorial to the struggle for freedom and democracy in South Africa; it should be developed as a dynamic "living" heritage project which can inspire and unite people in the process of nation-building in South Africa; its development should be based on a sustainable development and management plan involving the widest possible range of interest groups; and the universal symbolism of Robben Island must be retained by it becoming an internationally trend-setting historical and cultural heritage project for the twenty-first century.[21] The Cabinet approved the recommendations of the Future of Robben Island Committee in September 1996.[22] Management of Robben Island was subsequently transferred from the Department of Correctional Services to

18. N. Solani and K. ka Mpumlwana, "Memory, Identity and Representation: Possibilities of New Models of Representation in a Transforming Environment", SAMAB, 25, 2, March 2001, p 85.
19. H. Deacon, "Remembering Tragedy, Constructing Modernity: Robben Island as a National Monument", in Nuttall and Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past*, pp 164-165.
20. The island was gazetted as a National Monument on 10 May 1996 under the National Monuments Act (Act 28 of 1969) – ensuring that it would be legally protected as a heritage site.
21. National Cultural History Museum Director's Archive: A. Odendaal, "Action Plan for Robben Island", The Mayibuye Centre, 21 April 1996, D.3.4, Robben Island, I. For the present vision of the Robben Island Museum, quite similar to that developed in 1996, see www.robben-island.org.za/vision.asp.
22. "Robben Island's Fate Decided", *Pretoria News*, 10 September 1996.

the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. On 1 January 1997 the new dispensation started with the first visitors being ferried to the island at a rate of three hundred rand per day.[23]

Since that date, the Robben Island Museum has been developed on the basis that while the entire history of the island, its institutions and people should be taken into consideration, the prison period during the apartheid years should be in the foreground. Underlining this principle is the idea that the island should not just represent what had happened there, but that its past should be the foundational narrative of a new national history – a mark of a new "rainbow" nation of cultural plurality – and be interpreted as a universal symbol of the triumph of the spirit of freedom and dignity over repression. In 2002, Harriet Deacon explained this principle as follows:

> Like the death camps of the Holocaust, the island prison, a site of repression built by its inmates, is to be the first monument to the death of apartheid. Yet it is not constructed primarily as a place to commemorate martyrs … instead it is to be a place to celebrate victory, where South Africans mark the attainment of mass democratic rule and the demise of apartheid. It has become a symbol of the future of the new South Africa rather than its past. South Africans' understanding of the island as symbol is thus of vital importance in mediating an understanding of South Africa's past and hopes for its future. The significance of the island today lies not so much in what actually happened there as in how its history has been interpreted and represented.[24]

Similarly to Robben Island, in the use of a site of suffering and struggle for a museum, is the District Six Museum in Cape Town. The area of District Six was originally established as a mixed community of freed slaves, merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants in the late nineteenth century. Up to the 1970s, it was home to almost a tenth of Cape Town's population. In 1966, under the Group Areas Act of 1950, District Six was declared a "white area", and by 1982 over 60 000 people had been forcibly removed from there, with their houses bulldozed to the ground. They were taken to an outlying area of Cape Town known as the Cape Flats. Once the land had been flattened, only churches and mosques remained. The community refused to sell or deconsecrate their grounds and fierce battles were fought as the State and wealthy businesses tried to occupy and develop the land.[25]

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23. See "Robben Island: Domain of Culture Department", *Pretoria News*, 19 December 1996; S. Moti, "Robben Island Changes Hands", *Sowetan*, 27 December 1996. The historical significance of Robben Island led to its recognition as a World Heritage Site in 1999.
24. Deacon, "Remembering Tragedy", p 164.
25. S. Prosalendis, "The District Six Museum", *SAMAB*, 22, 2, July 1995, p 11.

The District Six Museum Foundation was established in 1989 as an offshoot of the Hands Off District Six (HODS) campaign, which was a semi-formal alliance of activists against the redevelopment of District Six.[26] The Foundation was formed in order to build a museum that would honour the memory of these campaigns and the struggle to fight forced removals as a whole. It was several years before a suitable location became available, as a site had to be found that was of historical significance. In 1994, the District Six Museum was finally launched in the Methodist Church in Buitenkant Street in District Six. For hundred and twenty years, this church had been involved in issues of social justice, as a mission for emancipated slaves, church, school and, during the time of removals, as a place of protest and sanctuary. The inaugural exhibition was entitled *Streets: Retracing District Six*. It was held inside a large space inside the church and was constructed out of materials, documents, memorabilia and residues from the District Six location. Central to the exhibition was an array of old street signs, which had actually been collected by the foreman of the demolition crews that had levelled District Six, as well as a giant map of the area on the floor of the museum with the original street names and grid.[27] The Museum was launched as an ongoing project to the general public, but specifically to the one-time residents of District Six and their descendants as a space for reflection and contemplation.

The *Streets* exhibition was the permanent core exhibition of the museum for most of its history, before being replaced by *Digging Deeper* in September 2000. The latter exhibition attempts to "dig deeper" into the museum's collections, processes and meanings. It endeavours to extend people's knowledge of District Six, and expresses the central intention of the museum, namely to enquire into the pasts of South African society and the workings of memory, "using memory as a vehicle of healing".[28] The form of the exhibition is varied, combining simple exhibition techniques with multi-media elements, but central to all are oral histories and the actual voices and stories of ex-residents of District Six as major resources and departure points of the exhibition's different themes.[29] Certain aspects of the old *Streets* exhibition, such as the floor-map and the street signs, remain permanent features of the

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26. See C. Soudien, "The First Few Years of the District Six Museum Foundation", *in* C. Rajool and S. Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community in Cape Town Creating and Curating the District Six Museum* (District Six Museum, Cape Town, 2001), pp 5-6.
27. See P. Delport, "Signposts for Retrieval: A Visual Framework for Enabling Memory of Place and Time", *in* Rajool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community*, p 34.
28. "The District Six Museum", publicity leaflet, s.a.. Also see http://www.d6.co.za/digging%20deeper.htm.
29. See P. Delport, "Digging Deeper in District Six: Features and Interfaces in a Curatorial Landscape", *in* Rajool and Prosalendis (eds), *Recalling Community*, pp 154-164.

Museum, but the idea is that the rest of the museum will continue to change and grow.

The District Six Museum is especially important in that, like Robben Island, its influence and meaning has extended beyond its locality and become of national importance. Annie Coombes mentioned how it has been taken "into the national league so that in a sense it has become metonymic of all those dehumanising instances of forced removals that were an integral part of apartheid's master plan from the 1950s onward".[30] The museum itself acknowledges this role, as one of its guiding principles is to serve the interests of not only the victims of the forced removals in District Six, but also of those throughout Cape Town and other parts of South Africa, while through its displays and public programmes it also addresses contemporary issues such as reconciliation, discrimination and resistance. In this way District Six, like Robben Island, has also become an iconic symbol of the suffering and triumph of the masses during apartheid. It is another example of a new heritage institution representing a national history and identity based on the struggle.

New museums have opened throughout South Africa including the three sites of the Nelson Mandela Museum in the Eastern Cape (2000), while large projects such as Freedom Park in Pretoria are ongoing. Once completed, Freedom Park aims to be "the leading national and international icon of humanity and freedom", envisaged as a one-stop heritage precinct that will "accommodate all of the emerging experiences and symbols which unfold to tell one coherent story of the struggle of humanity in South Africa".[31] Numerous smaller community museums have also appeared, such as the Mapoch Ndebele and KortKloof Cultural Villages in the North West Province,[32] and the Mgwali Community Museum in the Eastern Cape, which opened in 2002 with the mission "to resuscitate heritage and re-write history".[33] This kind of museum not only allows communities to present their own traditional cultures, so long neglected in major museums, but also helps to create jobs and alleviate poverty.

Other local museums have emerged in larger towns and cities as well. Of particular note is the Kwa Muhle Museum in Durban. Housed in the former office of the notorious Department of Native Affairs, it provides a link with the city's apartheid past, portraying the twentieth century processes of class

30. Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, p 117.
31. See the Freedom Park web site: www.freedompark.org.za.
32. See "Brave Old World", *Vuka SA*, 3, 4, October/November 1998, p 30; "Mapoch Ndebele Village: A Success Story", *Tswaing News*, 14, June 1999, p 1; V. Wessels and K. Petschi, "A Living Museum", *Pretoria News*, 25 July 1998, travel section.
33. *SAMA Eastern Cape News Sheet*, 3, July 2002.

formation, racism and ideological change, as well as the often turbulent daily experiences of township and working life, as well as the histories of political and trade union organisations. The museum was one of the first museums in South Africa to make active attempts to preserve and interpret twentieth century urban culture. As Professor Paul Maylam highlighted in 1991: "While some museums try to capture something of precolonial African culture (albeit in a rather crude fashion), there has been little attempt to preserve elements of African urban culture".[34] The Kwa Muhle Museum endeavours to respond to this need by focusing on township life and the impact of apartheid laws on residential and workplace experiences and struggles. With exhibitions on social aspects of everyday life, such as African Jazz in 2003, it ensures that the vibrancy that existed during the apartheid years is portrayed as thoroughly as is the misery.

The nation's first environmental museum, or eco-museum, was also begun during the 1990s. The Tswaing Crater Museum is centred around a large crater north of Pretoria. Created by a meteor over 200 000 years ago, the crater is covered by a shallow salt lake giving it the name "Tswaing" or "Saltpan" – both meaning "place of salt".[35] The crater is not only of geological importance, but is also a rich source of indigenous flora and fauna, and has a long human history. As far back as 120 000 years ago, Stone Age people, and later ancestors of the San, inhabited the area. They were followed a thousand years ago by Setswana- and Sotho-speaking peoples who lived close to the crater and collected salt from the crater floor. More recently, the salt and soda began to attract white settlers and between the 1850s and 1953, the area was leased by different governments to people and companies for salt-making, before it was taken over by the Department of Agriculture.[36]

In 1993 the National Cultural History Museum (NCHM) took over the farm and crater, in order to develop it into an "enviro" museum and a national and international destination for eco-tourism, environmental education, recreation and research.[37] Designed to be "an asset for the entire community as well as for the entire country", from the very start the museum invited local communities to participate in every aspect of its planning and development. In this way it also succeeded in promoting itself as part of the Reconstruction and

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34. Kwa Muhle Museum (Local History Museum, Durban, September 1991), p 15.
35. Sometimes spelt "Zoutpan" or "Soutpan".
36. S. Molobi, "The Star that Fell from the Sky", *Learn and Teach* (Pretoria), March 1994, p 17.
37. See R. de Jong, "Pretoria's First Eco-Museum", *Be My Guest*, 89, October 1993; C. Barron, "Giant Meteor Crater set to become a Haven for the World's Eco-tourists", *Sunday Times*, 13 February 1994, p 38; K. Sathekge, "Bridging the Cultural Gap", *Pretoria News*, 18 May 1995.

Development Plan (RDP),[38] gaining extra government funds by "creating jobs, providing health care centres, starting waste-recycling projects and, in general, by meeting the needs of local communities".[39] The Tswaing Crater Museum was officially opened in March 1996 by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Doctor Ben Ngubane, who declared the museum to be "revolutionary" and one which "will force us to re-examine how we think of our heritage and its worth".[40] The museum was to link culture and nature – to conserve, research and interpret the natural and cultural heritage of the crater and surrounding area in an integrated and holistic way. In this way, and by the heavy involvement of the local communities in its creation, it could also remove the Eurocentrism that had always been associated with South African museums. In 1994, Nomvuso Tembe stated that "research has shown that many African people don't visit museums because they don't feel part of them. They don't think that museums preserve their past."[41] The Tswaing Crater Museum tackles this problem by being a museum with local needs in mind, rather than one that takes Europe as its reference point, and by being a museum that is "of the people by the people".[42]

Another new museum of particular significance has been established in South Africa since 1994, namely the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. It is a return to the theme portrayed by the Robben Island, District Six and Kwa Muhle Museums – the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. A large museum, occupying around 6 000 square metres and costing over R80 million, it opened in 2001 and was assembled and organised by a multi-disciplinary team of curators, film-makers, historians and designers. As the name suggests, the museum illustrates the rise and fall of apartheid through the use of film footage, photographs, text panels and artefacts.[43] Through its dynamic architecture, expensive use of multi-media and dramatic experiential effects,

38. The RDP was a framework that endeavoured "to mobilise all our people and our country's resources toward the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future". See African National Congress, *The Reconstruction and Development Programme* (Johannesburg, 1994).
39. "Job Creation", *Tswaing Crater Museum Newsletter*, 1, 1994, p 1. Also see "Tswaing Crater to be Part of the RDP with a R1-m Funding Boost", *Pretoria News*, 19 December 1995; B. Jurasi, "Meteorite Crater could be Boost for RDP", *Star*, 14 December 1995; A. Milazi, "Crater will Benefit Community", *Sowetan*, 27 December 1995.
40. B. Ngubane, "For the People, by the People", *Vuka SA*, 1, 5, April 1996, p 9.
41. Molobi, "The Star", p 17. Also see M. Zondi, "A Museum with a Difference", *Sowetan*, 25 February 1994, p 9.
42. "A People's Museum", *Tswaing Crater Museum Newsletter*, 1, 1994, p 1.
43. See for example, "Forgive, don't Forget; South Africa's Past", *The Economist* (USA), November 2001; L. Davie, "The Powerful Apartheid Museum", 9 April 2003, at www.joburg.org.za/november/apartheid.stm.

such as each visitor being assigned a skin colour on arrival and made to enter through a "white" or "non-white" door, the museum in some ways is a powerful expression of struggle, hope and triumph over apartheid. As its Director, Christopher Till, explains: "It is not only important to tell the apartheid story, but it is also important to show the world how we have overcome apartheid."[44]

The museum has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in Johannesburg. However, there are problems. The museum came about as part of a bid for a new casino at Gold Reef City in Johannesburg in 1996. Bidders were obliged to indicate what social responsibility commitment they were prepared to get involved in, and the casino indicated that they would build a museum. The museum made virtually no attempt to involve outside communities in its design and development, relying instead on news and other reports to tell the story of apartheid, in stark contrast to most South African museums who now attempt to consult outside communities extensively and make use of personal stories.[45] More fundamental to this however, is whether a privately run museum owned by a casino is a suitable place to hold and display such an important part of the nation's history. This raises complicated issues that were also noted in the development of Robben Island, such as the clash of public history with private enterprise. It highlights questions of who owns the past and underlines the difficulties involved when prominent national histories are used for private economic gain.

## Other initiatives and museums

The existence of these new museums does not diminish the responsibility that the older established museums have to transform in order to represent the diverse South African people and their histories. In many ways, these museums are more important and can have a greater impact especially as, despite the previous use of them, many have extensive collections of pre- and post-colonial African culture, as well as of settler culture, and subsequently have a unique ability to represent different histories. In many cases, they are also often the largest and most prominent museums in any town or city, and represent wide and diverse communities. What follows is a brief examination of some of the ways in which these established museums have attempted to transform their exhibitions and roles since 1994.

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44. Quoted in L. Davie, "The Powerful Apartheid Museum", 9 April 2003, at www.joburg.org.za/november/apartheid.stm.
45. J. O'Reilly, "Truth and Reconciliation", *Museums Journal*, 104, 8, August 2004, p 30. However, as O'Reilly points out, the Apartheid Museum has now begun building links with outside communities with an educational outreach programme and temporary exhibition space for community projects.

One of the first museums to transform its exhibits, was the Africana Museum in Johannesburg. It also moved premises and changed its name to MuseumAfrica and so, to an extent, can actually be called a new museum. The Africana Museum had opened in 1935 and was the vision of Doctor J.G. Gubbins, who agreed in 1933 to donate half of his substantial collection of Africana to the city of Johannesburg to form the nucleus of a museum. "Africana" was seen as a fairly generic term denoting everything pertaining to Africa, and the essential aim of the museum was "to represent every phase and factor of South African life".[46] Despite these grand ideas, the museum for most of its existence collected and displayed white culture with little regard for majority black races. This traditional colonial practice continued until the 1970s and during the 1980s, in spite of the growth of different historiographies in South Africa and the transformation that was slowly taking hold in other museums.[47]

In 1976, the museum took possession of the old Market Building in Newtown, Johannesburg. This was to become its permanent home, though economics meant that the construction of the museum was severely delayed.[48] Finally in August 1994 the new MuseumAfrica opened as a "people's museum", particularly concerned with representing the lives of ordinary people, notably those of the black majority, and designed through extensive consultation with communities. MuseumAfrica was "a product of its time",[49] fitting the changing political climate in 1994 and appropriately the opening exhibitions were positioned within the broad theme entitled *Johannesburg Transformations*.[50]

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46. Quoted by R.F. Kennedy, "The Africana Museum", *SAMAB*, 2, 10, September 1941, p 239. For more on the early development of the Africana Museum, see W.R. Morrison, "The Africana Museum, Johannesburg", *SAMAB*, 1, 5, September 1937, pp 103-104; R.F. Kennedy, "J.G. Gubbins and the Foundation of the Africana Museum", *Africana Notes and News*, 26, 6, June 1985, pp 201-203; H.G. Oliver, "The Importance of Preserving and Recording Africana", *SAMAB*, 2, 10, September 1941, pp 241-248.
47. The chronological history gallery, for example, told the story of Southern Africa from the viewpoint of the white population, beginning with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1488, giving prominence to Jan van Riebeeck, and running through the Cape Governors, the abolition of slavery, the arrival of the 1820 Settlers, the Great Trek, and ending with the Anglo-Boer War. See D. van Tonder, "From Mausoleum to Museum: Revisiting Public History at the Inauguration of MuseumAfrica, Newtown", *South African Historical Journal*, 31, November 1994, p 171. Also see J. Louw, "New Africana for new SA", *Saturday Star*, 11 July 1992, p 5.
48. For more on the early development of the new MuseumAfrica, see H.J. Bruce, "A New Museum for a New South Africa", *Africana Notes and News*, 30, 3, September 1992, pp 89-96.
49. Hamilton, "Against the Museum", p 186.
50. MuseumAfrica also houses the Bensusan Museum of Photography, the Geological Museum and the South African Rock Art Museum.

The opening exhibitions – which are still in place today – are centred around the often previously neglected social themes of work, home, politics and leisure. After brief introductory displays on the earliest history of the area, the geology and early peopling of the area, as well as a display on the global monetary and decorative value of gold, the exhibitions then concentrate on urban life in Johannesburg since the discovery of gold in the 1880s. The exhibits attempt to provide insight into the lives and history of "real" South Africans, including domestic workers, jazz singers, migrant workers and township dwellers, through a range of media including real shacks of squatters and recreations of a migrant workers' hostel, domestic parlours and a shebeen. The section entitled *What About the Workers?* examines the lives of early mineworkers and the conditions on the mines, before moving on to other sections on the organised labour movement, manufacturing industries and domestic work. *Birds in a Cornfield* concentrates on African housing and attempts to highlight that "although homelessness is a remnant of the political past, Johannesburg still faces a massive housing crisis, with over three million people living in informal dwellings".[51] By taking visitors through actual shacks, it tries to show how human creativity can make something out of almost nothing. Further on, *Sounds of the City* traces the development of South African music from the marabi music of the 1920s to the township jazz of Sophiatown in the 1950s and later protest music. The exhibition is centred around a reconstructed shebeen, its walls covered in memorabilia and the covers of editions of *Drum*, a publication inextricably linked to Sophiatown (a township later destroyed by the apartheid government). Finally, *Road to Democracy* celebrates South Africa's first democratic elections and Johannesburg's role in this regard. Exhibiting a range of posters and photographs, it examines the history of voting in South Africa up to the election of April 1994.[52]

All of the displays were developed through a process of consultation with relevant communities, academics and experts. Also, in an attempt to be accountable to the wider community, the curators aimed to show that "objective" history was not possible,[53] and subsequently at the beginning of each exhibit the curator's authorship is acknowledged and the different bodies that were consulted are recorded. This has been done to show that the displays are personal responses to particular themes.

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51. Van Tonder, "From Mausoleum", p 179.
52. For more detailed descriptions of MuseumAfrica's opening exhibitions see Van Tonder, "From Mausoleum", pp 177-181; M. Herbst, "The Permanent Exhibits at MuseumAfrica", *African Arts*, 29, 1, Winter 1996, pp 66-70; V. Proctor, "MuseumAfrica: The People's Museum", *AirTales*, 2, 1, February/March 1995, pp 27-29.
53. Van Tonder, "From Mausoleum", p 177.

These exhibitions continue to form the nucleus of MuseumAfrica. In 1996, however, another major exhibition opened that again contributes to a version of South African history based on the struggle against oppression. *Tried for Treason* describes the Treason Trial of 1956-1961, when 156 people involved in the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955 were charged with treason, on the grounds that they were promoting revolution. The trial dragged on, and the remaining accused were finally acquitted in 1961, after the State had failed to establish any revolutionary intent behind their actions. The exhibition is largely a mixture of different audio-visual material and includes sections on the South African Police, the different resistance organisations, how the press viewed the trial, and of course the main players in the trial, including the accused, the defence counsel, the prosecution and the presiding judges.[54] As with the other exhibitions in MuseumAfrica, the curators of *Tried for Treason* are quick to point out that the exhibition does not represent the final word on the subject: "'Tried for Treason' is not a completed display. Because it is intended to be a growth point, it may never be finished".[55]

Few South African museums have succeeded in transforming to the extent of MuseumAfrica, largely due to lack of funding and staff. Nevertheless, other museums have also moved forward towards rejuvenating their displays to represent the "new" South Africa. Those museums that had split in two during the 1960s to become separate museums either representing the indigenous African races as "natural history" or cultural history museums representing the white cultures of South Africa, for example the South African Museum, Albany Museum and earlier the Transvaal Museum, began restructuring and transferring their indigenous African material to their cultural history sections. The South African Cultural History Museum in Cape Town, which previously concentrated almost solely on the cultural history of the white races of South Africa and elsewhere, as part of Iziko Museums of Cape Town has now split into eight satellite museums, and the building that previously formed its base now draws attention to its own history as a slave lodge.[56] Meanwhile, within the South African Museum itself, while its African Cultures Gallery has largely remained the same, the museum now acknowledges its flaws and asks visitors to consider if the displays show people in static, idealised rural settings.[57] It now also has photographs on the glass cases depicting the modern, often harsh, realities of urban life for these "cultures": "African culture is not

54. For more on the development and opening of the exhibition see S. de Wet, "Tried for Treason: The 1956 Treason Trial Exhibition at MuseumAfrica", *SAMAB*, 23, 2, April 1996, pp 35-39; "Treason!", *Vuka SA*, 1, 4, March 1996, p 53.
55. "Tried for Treason" (exhibition text).
56. See, for example, Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, pp 201-205.
57. See, for example, D.H. Ross, "On Art and Museums in South Africa before the Elections", *African Arts*, 27, 1, January 1994, p 1.

static: Why then are many labels in the gallery written in the present tense, as if time has stood still?"[58]

Since the late 1980s, the emphasis within the Albany Museum has been on the contact and interaction between different population groups within a contextual framework, ensuring that any one group of people will no longer be viewed in isolation. In 1991, the Xhosa anthropological collection housed in the Natural Sciences Museum was finally transferred to the History Museum, making it clear that indigenous Africans were no longer seen as part of the natural history of the country, but instead constituted an important part of the rich cultural history and development of South Africa. Early in 1992, a new exhibition, entitled *amaXhosa Traditional Dress*, was installed in the foyer of the 1820 Settlers' Museum, the first highly visible example of the Museum's commitment to collect and represent the history of all the peoples of the Eastern Cape.[59] This was soon followed by the change of the museum's name to the Albany History Museum and the unveiling of a larger exhibition, *Contact and Conflict*, which provides a summary of the complex history of the Eastern Cape between 1780 and 1910.[60]

Moving to Kwa-Zulu Natal, the Voortrekker Museum in Pietermaritzburg produced a small exhibition, *Birth of Democracy*, which is an attempt to present the twentieth century history of South Africa, and particularly the development of the African National Congress. The Natal Museum, also in Pietermaritzburg, has also made some progress to develop its human history galleries. In its Hall of Natal History, it maintains a recreated settler street in Pietermaritzburg in the second half of the nineteenth century, but there are also displays on the changing landscape including how different areas played a role in the emergence of African urban culture, and how transport has developed from ox-wagons to the minibus taxi system that dominates the transport landscape today. A dated exhibition on the Anglo-Boer War has also been extended with a display on *New Facets of the Anglo-Boer War*, acknowledging that while in the past it has been portrayed exclusively as a "white man's war", various other population groups were also involved. Finally, in another gallery, *Sisonke: Symbols and Identity* is an exhibition on the concepts of symbols and identity in material culture. The gallery consists of functional objects worn or carried by the Nguni-speaking people of Kwa-Zulu Natal between the 1890s and 1994.

58. South African Museum (exhibition text).
59. Albany Museum, *Annual Report for the year 1991–1992*, Grahamstown, 1992, p 27.
60. Also in the Eastern Cape, in March 2001, the East London Museum opened a display called *Playing the Game*. It was designed to focus on the history of sport in a divided society, "to recognise the achievements of the so-called 'non white' sportsmen and women". See *Playing the Game A History of Sport in Greater East London and Mdantsane* (East London Museum, 2002), p 1.

The idea is to show that culture is dynamic rather than static. For example, both early and modern Zulu spears are displayed, along with a description of how supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party used these "traditional weapons" to emphasise their Zulu identity in clashes with the ANC leading up to the first democratic elections.

The National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria, which grew from the history section of the Transvaal Museum, has succeeded in developing many strong community programmes (including the Tswaing Crater Museum). Since 1992, when a long search for new accommodation succeeded with the acquisition of the Old Mint Building in Pretoria, the museum has slowly developed a series of temporary exhibitions that focus strongly on previously neglected communities. These have included *Access to Power*, an exhibition that examines San rock art; *Creating Hananwa: People of the Blue Mountain*, which tries to reflect the history of South Africa through the history and development of the Hananwa people; *Motho ke motho ka batho* (a person is a person because of other people), examining indigenous culture and identity in the Limpopo Province; and *Marabastad*, which tries to reflect the multicultural history of an area of Pretoria that began as a blend of African, Chinese and Indian residents. Permanent displays are currently being planned for the museum, while it also manages a number of satellite museums.

Of particular note is the Amathole Museum, formerly the Kaffrarian Museum, in King William's Town. Moves to change the name of the Kaffrarian Museum started after it was agreed that the name was offensive to many South Africans.[61] Various alternatives were put forward, including the "Amathole Museum", the "Bisho Museum", the "King William's Town Museum", the "Huberta Museum" (after the famous mounted hippo in the museum) and the "eQonce Museum" (meaning "at [the place of] the Buffalo River"). After extensive discussions, it was recommended to the Eastern Cape Department of Sport, Art and Culture that the name "Kaffrarian" be replaced with "Amathole", after the nearby mountain range that had been the scene of various historic events in the nineteenth century.[62] The name change was formally approved in January 1999.[63]

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61. "Transformation Issue: Museum's Name Changes", *Imvubu Amathole Museum Newsletter*, 10, 3, December 1998, p 1.
62. For more discussion of the museum's name change, see *Imvubu Amathole Museum Newsletter*, 10, 3, December 1998, pp 1, 6-8; "A Rose by Any Other Name", *Samantics*, 31, November 1998, pp 14, 16.
63. "Amathole Museum – Official at Last!", *Samantics*, 32, March 1999, p 3. Also see "Press Release: Museum Name Change", *Imvubu Amathole Museum Newsletter*, 11, 1, April 1999.

In 2002 the museum opened a completely new history exhibition entitled *Across the Frontier*. As early as 1993, plans had begun to create a new history exhibition,[64] but these did not gain impetus until 1998. In March 1998 the museum held a History Display Workshop attended by historians, archaeologists and anthropologists from different museums and universities in the province. Numerous suggestions were put forward for exhibition themes, leading to an appeal to the public to come and speak to the museum about the ideas and what they would like to see in the museum.[65] Subsequently the museum engaged the services of a consultant who conducted a series of community meetings, sample surveys and polls in and around King William's Town.[66] It was decided that the exhibition, mainly funded by the Eastern Cape Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture, should be divided into two phases. The first would concentrate largely on local nineteenth century history, while the second would focus on the contemporary, predominantly post-1948 history of political resistance. The first phase, *Across the Frontier*, was finally opened in March 2002 as a thematic exhibition focusing on the development of King William's Town during the nineteenth century from a cross-cultural perspective. As Stephanie Pienaar outlined in a paper presented at the SAMA National Conference of 2002:

> Across the Frontier attempts to promote an understanding of local history and culture by focusing on the Victorian world-view, reactions to colonial conquest, such as the westernisation of the Xhosa and the Cattle Killing Movement, and ultimately traces the twentieth-century struggle to its colonial roots.[67]

The underlying themes of the exhibition included King William's Town's archaeological debris, as well as the military, missionary and colonial influences on the town. Included is a large satellite image of the area, facts and

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64. "Changes in History Displays", *Imvubu Kaffrarian Museum Newsletter*, 5, 2, August 1993, p 2.
65. Amathole Museum, "History Exhibition Meeting, 20 March 1998". Unpublished proceedings of the meeting held at the Amathole Museum, 20 March 1998. Thanks to Stephanie Victor, Curator of History at the Albany Museum, for providing a copy of the discussions and proceedings of this meeting. Also see "Crossing the Cultural Frontier: the New History Exhibition", *Imvubu Kaffrarian Museum Newsletter*, 19, 1, April 1998, p 6.
66. See "King Museum to Consult on Future", *Daily Dispatch*, 18 July 2000; "Communicating with the Community", *SAMA Eastern Cape News Sheet*, 3, September 2000, p 2.
67. S. Pienaar, "'Across the Frontier': A New History Exhibition". Unpublished paper presented at the SAMA National Conference in 2002. Thanks again to Stephanie Victor for providing a copy of her paper. The second phase of the Amathole Museum's new history exhibition – concentrating on the twentieth century – is still a work in progress.

figures on the 1856-1857 Cattle Killing, as well as various social themes such as *Pastimes and Pleasures*; *Dress: The Silent Language*; *Health Healing*; and *Divine Worship*. As should be evident from the concentration by other museums on the twentieth century struggle, *Across the Frontier* is one of the few attempts in a South African museum to produce a revamped nineteenth century history – one that concentrates more on culture and lifestyle, than on military conflict and that tries to be equally representative of white and black culture.

It is important to be aware that transformation in museums is not entirely centred on the representation of majority black cultures. There have also been attempts to portray the role of smaller ethnic groups who have also been neglected in the past. Various exhibitions (often temporary ones) that reflect different cultural groups, have been produced. For example, in 1994 the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town opened an exhibition entitled *300 Years: The Making of Cape Muslim Culture*, while in 1998 the Albany Museum produced *Shadows of India*, which travelled to museums throughout the Eastern Cape.[68] The Voortrekker Museum in Pietermaritzburg has an exhibition on the French presence in South Africa, while the Natal Museum's exhibition *Threads of Time* reflects upon aspects of the history and origins of the local Indian community. In Simon's Town in the Western Cape, a Heritage Museum was begun in 1998 by the Noorul Islam Historical Society, and includes displays on the local coloured Muslim community of over seven thousand people who were forcibly removed during the apartheid era.

It is often easy to forget about different ethnic groups in South Africa, when everything seems to centre on the black indigenous populations versus white European settler culture, yet those other diverse groups have also played important parts in the nation's history. As Tarisayi Madondo wrote in 1995:

> Museums should help to promote positive models of cooperation and show all ethnic groups that it is not necessary to devalue another's culture in order to elevate one's own. People need to be made to understand that nature did not bestow all knowledge and wisdom in one pot. No one has a monopoly over knowledge. Every ethnic group, however small, has a positive contribution to make towards the development of the national culture of South Africa.[69]

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68. See K. Ward, "The '300 Years: The Making of Cape Muslim Culture' Exhibition, Cape Town, April 1994: Liberating the Castle?", *Social Dynamics*, 21, 1, 1995, pp 96-131; "Travelling Exhibitions", *Imvubu Kaffrarian Museum Newsletter*, 10, 1, April 1998, p 2.
69. T. Madondo, "Harmonising Cultural Diversity in South Africa – the Role of Museums", *SAMAB*, 22, 2, July 1995, p 17.

## Shortcomings with the process

Despite the great deal of worthwhile hard work that many museums have put into the transformation process, it remains a complex issue full of pitfalls and barriers – highlighting the highly emotive political and social state of South Africa today. As has been shown earlier, conflict has arisen over which kind of history to present, especially when personal histories are interpreted as national history and private memories clash with the demands of international tourism. Debate over contested views of the past should be welcomed, as it reflects the prominent role of the museum in society. It is only by exploring and debating the many diverse pasts that constitute a nation's history, that a coherent and comprehensive discourse on national identity can begin. In conclusion, attention will be drawn to some of the possible shortcomings in the transformation process in South African museums that are potential areas for further critical examination.

One contention – perhaps a controversial one – is that some museums have actually transformed too far and can be accused of marginalising and neglecting the non-indigenous South African population in much the same way as they did the indigenous population for most of their histories. The understandable focus of South African museums is on addressing the previous neglect of black South Africans. The Voortrekker Museum in Pietermaritzburg, for example, apart from its continuing display of the Church of the Vow commemorating the nineteenth century Voortrekkers, has little in its main displays which is of any relevance to non-indigenous South Africans. Similarly, there is no significant representation of the non-indigenous population in the recent temporary exhibitions of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria, though new permanent exhibitions are currently being planned.

Such a situation is in many ways understandable in South Africa, and one that is not as much in evidence in other post-colonial societies such as Australia and New Zealand, which in many other ways mirror museum development in South Africa.[70] The main difference between these countries, of course, is the size of

70. Museums in each of these three countries, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, have often developed in a similar manner. Each have their origins in the nineteenth century as colonial institutions, illustrating the progress of Western civilisation, emphasising the dominant colonial power, and neglecting the presence and contributions of minority cultures, especially that of the indigenous populations, often relegating them to a place in the natural history of the country. During the twentieth century, this comparable development continued, as they began to focus on their own countries' white history, as opposed to British or European history, while still marginalising the contribution of other races. More recently, as the post-colonial climate has been ushered in, the museums in all three countries have had to become more professional and especially confront the growing claims of other histories for

their respective indigenous and non-indigenous populations, and it is only natural that in South Africa, where indigenous people form the vast majority of the population, their histories and culture have begun to dominate everywhere. The non-indigenous part of the population, however, still constitutes an important part of the nation's history and, like the indigenous cultures and histories that were for so long neglected, have a fundamental right to be represented in depictions of South Africa's past. In fact, this was acknowledged during a debate over the transformation of the No. 7 Castle Hill Museum in Port Elizabeth, where "it was generally agreed that the English-speaking community have a right to this museum and that No.7 is important for the furtherance of better understanding among all citizens. To deny this museum is to deny an aspect of history that impinges on everyone".[71]

The contention that South African museums have actually been transforming too slowly, is more prominent. Speaking at the formal opening of the Robben Island Museum in 1997, President Nelson Mandela stressed that South Africa's cultural institutions, and particularly its museums, were still portraying black Africans in a demeaning manner and that "we have to acknowledge that the redressing of this situation has barely begun".[72] Several years later, Gerard Corsane agreed that the situation had been slow to change: "Although the call for change has been heard, there are still some in the sector who have been slow to recognise the urgency for transformation and who desperately hold on to a now outdated museological paradigm".[73]

Many parts of the South African Museum in Cape Town, for example, have hardly changed. The African Cultures Gallery, as discussed earlier, has remained largely the same since the 1970s. Though it now consists of text

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their inclusion within representations of the past. In particular, in regards to their indigenous populations, each country has had to confront the similar, but also quite unique experiences of reconciliation, biculturalism and transformation. It would be useful to provide a comprehensive comparative examination of these three countries, though the scale required for such a work is clearly impractical here. However, for a detailed comparative examination of the experiences of Australia and New Zealand, see this author's doctoral thesis: J.M. Gore, "Representations of History and Nation in Museums in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand – the National Museum of Australia and the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa". PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, March 2002. Available online at http://eprints.unimelb.edu.au/archive/00000320/.

71. "Transformation of No 7 Castle Hill", *SAMA Eastern Cape News Sheet*, 2, March 2001, p 2.
72. "Mandela Slams SA Museums", *The Citizen*, 25 September 1997, pp 1-2. Also see J. Rantao, "Call for Monument to Live in People's Hearts", *The Star*, 25 September 1997, p 6.
73. G. Corsane, "What can South African Museums Learn from the Work of the French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu", *SAMAB*, 24, 1, March 2000, p 26.

panels highlighting the stereotypes and misrepresentation in the gallery, visitors are more likely to be drawn to the large dioramas that the space largely consists of, than the newer text accompanying them. Elsewhere in the museum, there is an exhibition on the history of the museum. Clearly erected for the museum's 150th anniversary in 1975, it is unaltered and still describes how *all* cultural history collections were transferred to the South African Cultural History Museum in 1964, when in fact it was only those collections relating to white culture. In other museums around the country, many exhibitions remain which depict white settler culture, especially of the nineteenth century. Most noticeable is the continued presence of reconstructed "streets" from the Victorian era. The Durban Local History Museum, for example, still gives prominence to the "Bulwer Pharmacy", "Miss Fann's Fancy Repository", "Clairmont Sugar Mill" and "Henry Francis Fynn's Cottage",[74] while the Natal Museum also has various reconstructed nineteenth century stores including a wagon builder, an apothecary, a haberdashery and a pawnbroker.

In some regards, it also appears that while South African museums have gone some way to redress the imbalances of the past in terms of their indigenous representation during the last decade, they do not seem to have transformed in other ways. Internationally, museums elsewhere have sought to address other imbalances too. This is best illustrated by the representation of women's history, but can also be extended to smaller ethnic communities, as well as the working-class and more recent past.

Women have largely been ignored within historical representations of the past in museums around the world. During the nineteenth century, the isolated historical collections that did exist, were generally associated with early pioneers, settlers, explorers and heroes, while during the twentieth century museums were constructed through the generally male topics of war and maritime life. The situation has gradually improved during the last few decades. The impetus was primarily the women's movement, which gained momentum in the early 1970s, and the subsequent recognition that half of the population was substantially invisible in mainstream historical representations, as well as literature. Subsequently, there has been distinct recognition outside South Africa during the last two decades of the need to acknowledge, and to rectify, much of the criticism regarding the lack of representation of women in museums. For example, many museums have now put into effect internal policies with the aim of remedying masculine biases in museum practice, while many others have moved towards greater inclusion of women within

74. It should be noted, however, that Henry Francis Fynn's Cottage was erected in recognition of his great-grandson, Morris Fynn, an anti-apartheid legislation campaigner.

exhibitions. Such progress, while apparent through schemes surrounding events such as International Women's Day, appears to have been slow in South Africa.

Another problem is that when women are found in historical exhibitions depicting the nineteenth century, they are represented mainly in the home.[75] In other words they are divorced or absent from any kind of trade or work, other than what might arise in the domestic setting such as needlework. In the Eastern Cape Province, examples hereof can be seen in the German Settler exhibitions in both the Amathole and East London Museums. The message being conveyed is that in the past, women did not work outside the home at all,[76] and while this may generally be true in terms of conventional employment, their roles surely extended beyond the stove and the bedroom. Such misrepresentation obviously restricts any kind of realistic meaning concerning the history of women being derived by the visitor. The progress and development of this type of history in museums continues to be slow, despite a high proportion of female museum staff.

Museums continue to be haunted by the legacies of their own colonial history. They are hampered by their collections, which remain largely Eurocentric, their often old palatial-like museum buildings, but most importantly by the ideas that still pervade them. South African museums are not African institutions. Their structures, exhibits and values are still cast mainly in established Western moulds, reflecting white perceptions and white interests. For this reason, it is the new museums, those that have been created during the last decade, such as the Robben Island and District Six Museums, which have become amongst the most popular. However, it is the very concept of a museum that is alien to so many South Africans. Museums are something strange to the black majority, regarded as places reserved for white people's entertainment. They need to be "of Africa and need to be imbued with African qualities and African values and to reflect African experience".[77] Consequently, a continuing lack of public interest in museums is clearly evident, as they continue to appear irrelevant, exclusive, and even offensive to a large part of the population.

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75. M. Anderson and K. Winkworth, "Museums and Gender: An Australian Critique", *Museum Focus on Women'*, 171, 3, 1991, p 148. Also see G. Porter, "Putting your House in Order: Representations of Women and Domestic Life", *in* R. Lumley (ed), *The Museum Time-Machine Putting Cultures on Display* (Routledge, London, 1988), p 107.
76. S. Jones, "The Female Perspective", *Museums Journal*, 91, 2, February 1991, p 24.
77. "Towards Transformation", *SAMA Eastern Cape News Sheet*, 3, August 1998, p 2.

## The need for a firm commitment

There is still a long road to travel if museums are to be seen as being fully representative of their communities. Slow transformation has often been through no fault of their own, as many are constantly faced with chronic funding problems, frozen staff positions and strangling bureaucracy. During the 1990s in particular, South Africa's museums saw a progression of decreased funding, leading to decreased building maintenance, loss of security, the deterioration of collections and the eventual closure of museums.[78] The government's transformation policy, and especially the programme of affirmative action, has also posed challenges, forcing many experienced and expert staff to resign or take early retirement.[79]

The lack of funding and experienced staff have made it difficult for many museums to transform their exhibitions and collections. For example, the Albany Museum, the second oldest in the country, almost closed in 1999. Its main history display, *Contact and Conflict*, erected in 1997 as a temporary exhibition, remains in place with no change in sight. In fact, due to frozen positions, the museum had no display staff between 1998 and 2004, and in 2003 only 37 posts out of a total complement of 68 were occupied.[80] The East London Museum too, has been unable to revamp almost any of its permanent exhibitions and its transformation has been largely limited to the mounting of temporary exhibits such as *Playing the Game* – on the history of sport in a divided society. Even MuseumAfrica in Johannesburg, which completely transformed itself in 1994, has been unable to significantly update or add to its exhibitions since the opening of *Tried for Treason* in 1996.

In South Africa there seems to be a general lethargy or lack of understanding towards museums in terms of their potential uses within a new nation, by the public but especially also by the government. As one observer remarked of the ANC government in 1999: "It has never really grasped what culture means as an institution or a political project. It has never taken seriously, despite lip service, the idea that a nation can invent itself through the imaginative deployment of heritage".[81] This is in sharp contrast to other new nations that have emerged from the shadow of colonial rule. In 1983, Patrick Boylan explained how for many of the hundred or more nations who had gained

78. See H. Friedman, "Beggared Museums at a Standstill", *Sunday Independent*, 1 November 1998, p 8; U. Küsel, "President's Column", *Samantics*, 26, March 1997, p 3.
79. See, for example, O. Gon, "The History of Marine Fish Systematics in South Africa". MA dissertation, Rhodes University, 2002, pp 196-197.
80. See L. Webley, "The Albany Museum", *Samantics*, 45, March 2003, pp 5-6.
81. Quoted by J. Steinberg, "When Heritage Becomes a Thing of the Past", *Business Day*, 25 / 27 June 1999.

independence since the Second World War, the four most vital instruments for social cohesion and nation formation were a national defence force, a national broadcasting service, a national museum, and a national university.[82] For many of these new nations, the establishment of new museums with the distinct purpose of proclaiming a unified nation and identity, was high on the agenda.

Such notions are now even more pronounced in post-colonial societies. This is illustrated, for instance, by the fact that since they have become fully aware of the value of history and culture in society, both Australia and New Zealand have committed considerable amounts of funding and support to numerous museum and heritage projects. Both governments have also injected massive amounts of money into building new national cultural history museums. The importance they hold in such projects is highlighted by the highly public and much debated reviews of both museums that the governments initiated during the last few years (New Zealand in 2000 and Australia in 2003).

In South Africa there is little evidence of such a commitment towards museums, despite the very gradual refurbishment of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria. Of course, there are other important issues to which funding must be committed, such as unemployment, housing, crime and welfare, but if the South African government seeks to find and construct a new coherent nation and identity, they have to understand the need for people to reconcile with their pasts, and the important role which museums can play in achieving this. Through the museum, the nation is implicitly and explicitly articulated. Museums have the capacity to accommodate and represent diverse contents and ideas, and by displaying objects and so forth, a museum can imply a shared history.

Despite the many obstacles, there is no doubt that museums throughout South Africa have made very real efforts, often successful, to transform themselves, adopt new museological methods, and broadly become more representative and accountable to their publics. There should be no relaxation of this process. As long ago as 1968, the Convention of the UNESCO General Conference declared, "that cultural treasures are the result and manifestation of various cultural traditions and that they therefore represent one of the fundamental factors which determine the specific identity of a given people".[83] In South Africa, this has never been more important than at the beginning of the twenty-first century, where the legacy of colonialism means that history and identity hold a particularly prominent political and cultural role. Cultural

82. P. Boylan, "Museums and Cultural Identity", *Museums Journal*, 90, 10, 1983, p 30.
83. Quoted by J. Herrman, "World Archaeology – the World's Cultural Heritage", *in* H. Cleere (ed), *Archaeological Heritage Management in the Modern World* (Unwin Hyman, London, 1989), p 35.

industries and activities of whichever kind, create meaning. They therefore embody and are concerned with the identity and values of a country. Museums in particular can play an important role as people seek to reconcile themselves with their pasts. They can communicate both the history of South Africa, as well as the idea of what it means to be South African after ten years of democracy. Museums can therefore provide an important avenue for creating a South African identity that is essential for political and social reconciliation, as well as for nation-building.


## Abstract

In 2004, South Africa celebrated ten years of democracy. During the last decade, the country has been struggling to address the inequalities of the apartheid era, in order to create a new and unified identity and nation where people of all races can live within a stable political and social environment. Museums can play an important role in this process. Since 1994, South African museums have been forced to transform their structures and exhibitions, and to acknowledge their own histories and traditional roles that perpetuated notions such as the superiority of the white race and gave legitimacy to the apartheid regime.

This article examines some of the new initiatives museums have taken and considers just how far museums have gone to cast off their colonial legacies to become representative of all the diverse peoples that live in the "new" South Africa. It is designed to provide the reader with a general overview of the main ways in which museums have attempted to transform, and to highlight the challenges and tensions they have faced, and often continue to face, amidst a growing conflict where new histories constantly challenge official and traditional histories and identities.



## Opsomming

### Nuwe Geskiedenisse in 'n Post-Koloniale Gemeenskap – Transformasie in Suid-Afrikaanse Museums sedert 1994

In 2004 het Suid-Afrika tien jaar van demokrasie gevier. Gedurende die afgelope dekade was die land in 'n stryd gewikkel om die ongelykhede van die apartheidsera aan te spreek, asook om 'n nuwe en verenigde identiteit en nasie te skep, waarin mense van alle rasse in 'n stabiele politieke en sosiale omgewing kan leef. Museums kan 'n belangrike rol in hierdie proses speel. Sedert 1994 is Suid-Afrikaanse museums gedwing om hulle strukture en uitstallings te transformeer, en om hulle eie geskiedenisse en tradisionele rolle

te erken in die versterking van sienings (soos oor wit superioriteit) wat legitimiteit aan die apartheidsregering verleen het.

Hierdie artikel ondersoek sommige van die nuwe inisiatiewe wat museums onderneem het en hoe ver hulle gegaan het om hulle koloniale nalatenskappe af te skud ten einde verteenwoordigend te word van al die diverse mense wat in die nuwe Suid-Afrika leef. Dit is saamgestel om aan die leser 'n algemene oorsig te bied oor die vernaamste maniere waarop museums probeer transformeer het, en om te beklemtoon watter spanninge en uitdagings hulle beleef het te midde van 'n groeiende konflik waarin nuwe geskiedenisse amptelike en tradisionele geskiedenisse en identiteite voortdurend uitdaag.

**Key words**

South African museums, post-apartheid, transformation, identity, nationalism, historiography, Robben Island Museum, Apartheid Museum, District Six Museum, Tswaing Museum, MuseumAfrica, Amathole Museum.

**Sleutelwoorde**

Suid-Afrikaanse museums, post-apartheid, transformasie, identiteit, nasionalisme, historiografie, Robbeneiland Museum, Apartheid Museum, Distrik Ses Museum, Tswaing Museum, MuseumAfrica, Amathole Museum.