

Building a Museum, Building a Nation

The Case of the National Museum of Ghana

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Introduction

In December 2015, I received a newsletter containing a press release of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB).¹ It explained the temporary closing of the National Museum of Ghana due to emergency repairs: “We have to act immediately to prevent any risks to our collection of historical objects. This will be the first time since the building was commissioned in March 1957, that such comprehensive repair works will be undertaken. While the National Gallery is shutdown, the Museum of Science and Technology will host a number of exhibitions in 2016 to ensure that public interest in our arts and heritage is catered for.”² For me, the most appealing part of this release was the statement by the Board Chairman Fritz Baffour, saying that the closure would allow for the curators to develop a new collection presentation: “When reopening, the Museum will explore and present the dynamic diversity of Ghana as a nation, our role and place in the sub-region, the continent and in the world. This will revolve around our core focus of Art, Ethnography, Archaeology and History.”³

After Ghana became independent in 1957, with Dr. Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972) as its first elected Prime Minister, a large campaign was started in order to advance nationalism and to raise awareness among the people that they were now a unified nation under the leadership of Nkrumah. He installed a Central Bank, national currency, national flag, shipping line and a Navy and Air Force. More symbolically, he introduced stamps, statues, coins and bank notes showing his own image to make sure that every inhabitant of the new nation became familiar with their leader. For this particular research, it is not relevant to look closely at the artworks and symbols that were produced in the independence era as part of Nkrumah’s ‘marketing campaign’. Rather, it is important to realize that there has been such a large program of propaganda for the new nation, of which the National Museum was a part.

Every capital city in West Africa today has a national museum. Not surprisingly, one of the main reasons for this increase in museums has been the rise of tourism. Additionally, a greater awareness has been raised that cultural heritage, material as well as immaterial, can play an important role in educating the local community and

¹ From now on referred to as GMMB.

² <http://www.ghanamuseums.org/index.php>

³ *Ibidem*.

also add to a sense of common and national agreement and identity.⁴ The National Museum of Ghana opened its doors in 1957, shortly after the country was declared independent. The museum was part of a wider project of nation-state building in Ghana, which was the first of the once-colonized African countries to gain independence. Since the modern concept of the nation-state is based on a homogeneous society, the need for a sense of national consciousness inevitably grows when planning a national museum for a newly independent country.⁵ Evidently, – based on the original statements of Kwame Nkrumah – the aim of the museum was to show the ‘unity of Ghana as a nation’. The reason why this process is so intriguing is that the national entity that it wished to symbolize was founded only in the same year that the museum was opened. In Africa the countries’ borders, as we know them today, have been constructed by colonial rulers during their rule and officially confirmed during the Berlin Conference of 1885.⁶ Within the new national borders a number of different ethnic groups were living – and still live– and some of which are overlapping with neighboring countries.⁷ In Ghana, and in all once-colonized nations, it would therefore not be an overstatement to say that the concept of nationalism is fluid.

If the African nation-state is a conflictive concept itself, how then does the National Museum define itself? Or, to put it otherwise, to what degree does the National Museum of Ghana play a role in the development of national consciousness and the creation of a national identity in Ghana since its independence in 1957? In order to answer this central question, it is important for me to keep three sub-questions in mind: 1. What is the main message that the board of the National Museum of Ghana wants to convey? 2. What means do they use to convey these messages, and lastly, were they successful? I will investigate the historical foundation and the contemporary condition of the collections and displays at The National Museum of Ghana. Another reason why it is important to keep considering these questions is to avoid any kind of ‘postcolonial gaze’. This, first identified in a systematic, politically aware manner by Edward Said as ‘orientalism’, would be placing the colonized – or, once colonized – in a position of the ‘other’ and therefore establishing a subject/object

⁴ Crinson, 2001: p. 231.

⁵ McLeod, 2000: p. 6.

⁶ Apter, 1972: p. 23.

⁷ Crinson, 2001, p. 232.

relationship.⁸ In order not to let my own frame of reference interfere with what is actually happening, the questions outlined here will help me keep my research objective. Hence I do not aim to provide any advice to national museums in general. My aim is to explore these issues, investigating the nation-building policies of the National Museum of Ghana in the 1950's and today.

The study of national identity within the field of museum studies is relatively new. In the early 1980s, nations and nationalism became a popular and established field of research, but the study of nationalism in the context of museums remains a largely untapped area of study.⁹ In his influential work, 'Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism' (1983), Benedict Anderson (1936-2015) touches upon the relation between nationalism and museums very briefly. Today, more has been written about this relation, although these texts appear to be mostly confirming and problematizing.

The first chapter is dedicated to the theoretical foundations and is set up to explore the ideas and concepts around nationalism and identity formation by influential thinkers such as Benedict Anderson, Homi K. Bhabha and the concept of *Négritude*, with Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor as its most prominent representatives. These theories will serve as a foundation for my thesis, and provide explanations for complex definitions and concepts such as national identity. Anderson's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) will be one of the main sources that I will use in regard to the concept of national identity. It is a publication that has very much formed my thinking with regard to nationalism and I am convinced that in relation to this particular research Anderson's definitions and theories will be very helpful. Also, Bhabha's essay 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation' (1994) will be one of my key sources. Together with Anderson's 'Imagined Communities', this text has helped me shape my research, dissect hidden assumptions the concepts are carrying and set out the general drift. The *Négritude* movement is used to understand anti-colonial nationalism. Césaire's ideas, who was also advocating Pan-Africanism; an ideology and movement that encourages the solidarity of Africans worldwide, was for this reason a source of inspiration for Kwame Nkrumah. Finally, I will make use of the

⁸ McLeod, 2000: p. 7.

⁹ Steiner, 1995: p. 6.

archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen's 'In Defense of Things' (2010). This book is a critical survey of material culture studies that turned out to be very useful for me when looking at the way in which objects are treated in different cultures and the relation people have with objects and things.

In order to gain an understanding of how the museum works as a tool for nationalism and since the museum's foundations are intertwined with political and historical events, I will start the second chapter with a short review of these events. Then, I examine the collection and exhibition program of the National Museum of Ghana in the period shortly after it opened its doors in 1957. The collection presentations and the official policy plan of the GMMB will help me answer the first sub-question ('what is the main message they want to convey?'). For this part, I rely upon Mark Crinson, who wrote an extensive report on the collection presentation in the 1950s and 1960s.

The third and last chapter contains an investigation of the museums' contemporary policies. A thorough analysis of the first and only *Cultural Policy of Ghana*, which was published by the National Commission on Culture in 2004, will be carried out. And, to see whether and how these policies are being complied, I will explore the museums' contemporary manifestations.

1. Imagining the Nation and Cultural Narratives

1.1 Introduction

In the early 1980s, nations and nationalism became a popular and established field of research. Initially, not many scholars investigated the connections between national museums and national identity. In his influential work, 'Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism' (1983), Benedict Anderson (1936-2015) touches upon this relation very briefly. However, since the mid-1980s, scholars slowly began to examine how the development of national museums is linked to the development of national identity and nationalism.¹⁰ Today, more has been written about this relation, mostly confirming and problematizing but not so much investigating. Despite the fact that Anderson opens his argumentation discouragingly by saying that "Nation, nationality, and nationalism – all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze", a close reading of Anderson and Homi K. Bhabha (1949) will be carried out to help me set up the structure within which I can later look at the National Museum of Ghana. In this first chapter, I will explore this field of research and look at nationalism and identity formation on a theoretical level. First, I will do so in a general, global perspective and further into the chapter I will concentrate on anti-colonial nationalism through the concept of *Négritude*.

1.2 Imagining Communities

What the eye is to the lover – that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with – language – whatever language history has made his or her mother tongue – is to the patriot. Through that language, encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed.
(Anderson, 1983)¹¹

It might be a truism that nations and national borders have not always existed. Yet, the nation has become one of the most important modes of social and political organization in the modern world and we perhaps assume that they are simply 'just there'.¹² As John McLeod (1966) strikingly describes in 'Beginning Postcolonialism' (2000): "Nations, like buildings, are planned by people and built upon particular

¹⁰ Fuller, 2010: p. 157.

¹¹ Anderson, 1983: p. 154.

¹² McLeod, 2000: p. 68.

foundations – which also means that, like buildings, they can both rise and fall.”¹³ Most authors accept the thesis that the idea of the nation has a Western origin, developing simultaneously with Western capitalism, industrialization and, inevitably, imperialism. The borders didn’t occur naturally, they were constructed, defended and – sadly enough – bloodily contested.¹⁴ It is therefore, that today we think of nations as an idea. The concept of the nation state is nevertheless age old. The Roman Empire and Ancient Egypt were the first known structures that we would now call nations, but the contemporary concept is more complex and can be defined as ethnic nationalism: a shared heritage, which usually includes a common language, a common faith, and a common ethnic ancestry.

Benedict Anderson describes the nation in his much acclaimed book ‘Imagined Communities’, as “first and foremost an imagined political community”¹⁵ He comes to this definition by first explaining three paradoxes. These are paradoxes that, according to Anderson, have often irritated theorists of nationalism. First, there is the objective modernity of nations to the historian’s eye versus their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists. Next, there is the formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept (everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality such as he or she ‘has’ a gender) versus the “irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations, such that, by definition, ‘Greek’ nationality is *sui generis*.” And lastly, the political power of nationalisms versus their philosophical poverty and incoherence.¹⁶ The difficulty is partly, that the concept is often unconsciously approached as an ideology, while, as Anderson sees it, it might be easier to look at nationalism the same way we look at concepts as ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’, instead of approaching it similar as ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’.¹⁷

With his definition Anderson tries to avoid these paradoxes and look at the concept in a more anthropological light. He defines the nation as an imagined political community because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.¹⁸ So, individuals *think* they belong to a larger

¹³ McLeod, 2000: p. 92.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Anderson, 1983: p. 6.

¹⁶ Ibidem. p. 5.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem: p. 6.

collective, it gives them a sense of community and belonging. This sense of belonging is natural to humanity; we are like group animals looking for companionship. It is this fraternity that also explains the willingness to die for the fatherland. Anderson also gives two other characteristics of the nation, namely that it is imagined as *limited* and *sovereign*. The nation is limited because there are boundaries separating them from other nations. There probably exist no nation-states in which all people dream of sharing their country with all members of the human race. Nationality is thus intricately tied up with exclusion, to which I will come back later. Anderson doesn't claim that nationalism replaced religion, but religion is a cultural system, just as the dynastic realm, through which nationalism can be understood better. Both of these were frames that were – initially – not being questioned, as nationalism is today.¹⁹

How does the aforementioned companionship manifest itself? What are the tools to enhance this sense of belonging? According to Anderson one of the main things that plays a role in the formation of national identity and nationalism is language.²⁰ Related to language is the invention of printing. Before this invention, the diversity of language – in Europe, and, of course, elsewhere in the world, was enormous.²¹ These different idiolects were capable of being assembled, within definite limits, into print-languages.²² In once-colonized countries, the issue of a 'standard language' is more complicated and I will be exploring this in the next paragraph.

In Europe, print-languages laid the bases for national consciousness in two distinct ways. First, and – if we follow Anderson – foremost, print-languages created united fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars. People speaking various types of French, English or Spanish now became capable of understanding each other via print and paper, whereas this was much more difficult before.²³ As a consequence, they became aware of the large amount of people in their language-field. And at the same time, they became aware of the fact that this field is limited. Or, as Anderson describes it more eloquently: "These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible

¹⁹ Ibidem: p. 12.

²⁰ The quote on top of this paragraph underlines Anderson's thoughts on the importance of language.

²¹ Anderson, 1983: p. 43.

²² In linguistics, an idiolect is an individual's distinctive and unique use of language, including speech. This unique usage encompasses vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Idiolect is the variety of language unique to an individual.

²³ Anderson, 1983: p. 44.

invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community.”²⁴

Secondly, print gave a new fixedness to language, which in the long term added to the image of antiquity, which is very important to the subjective idea of the nation.²⁵ Books and archives became stable factors in society and stabilized language and grammar. The words of our forefathers who lived centuries ago are still accessible.²⁶ The daily newspaper is one of the mediums that enhance the sense of belonging in a particular way. They provide news in different sections such as ‘home affairs’ and ‘foreign affairs’, making a clear distinction between the readers’ own nation and all others. Also, the act of reading adds to the national community of the reader. When reading the paper, thousands of other people are reading the same texts as he or she is, at the same time – or, at least at the same day.

As mentioned before, there is another important element that is fundamental to the understanding of nationalism: the construction of otherness. Every definition of identity is always defined in relation to something else.²⁷ Borders, imaginative and real ones, divide the nation’s people from others outside. This national consciousness has to be fed, in order to grow. To see how this happens, apart from the issue of language, and administrative “groups, over time, come to be conceived as fatherlands, we have to look at the ways in which administrative organizations create meaning”.²⁸

1.3 Advancing Nationalism

The efforts of nations to advance nationalism through the promotion of specific cultural histories can, from this perspective, be understood in terms of the construction of a cultural narrative, often called the ‘myth of the nation’.²⁹ It is important to keep in mind that these were processes happening in every nation across the globe. How this worked in once-colonized nations, I will examine later, when discussing *Négritude*. The sense of national belonging is produced by the performance of different *narratives*, *rituals* and *symbols*. I use the word performance deliberately as it will come back later, in paragraph 1.5 when discussing Bhabha. Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917-1912) argues that the nation depends upon the invention of national tradition, which

²⁴ Anderson, 1983: p. 44.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ This is not a new development. Ever since humans started to express oneself through letters and marks ca. 2000 years BC, their descendants could find them.

²⁷ McLeod, 2000: p. 74.

²⁸ Anderson, 1983: p. 53.

²⁹ Hess, 1999: p. 4.

are “made manifest through the repetition of specific symbols or icons.”³⁰ The performance of national traditions enhances an important sense of continuity between the nation’s present and its (imagined) past and adds to the feeling of a *shared history* of its people – something we have already come across in relation to the writings from the past. Hobsbawm noted that, when looking at the history of European nations:

Entirely new symbols and devices came into existence as part of national movements and states, such as the national anthem (of which the British in 1740 seems to be the earliest), the national flag (still largely a variation on the French revolutionary tricolore, evolved 1790-4), or the personification of ‘the nation’ in symbol or image, either official, as with Marianne and Germania, or unofficial, as in the cartoon stereotypes of John Bull, the lean Yankee Uncle Sam or the ‘German Michel’.³¹

These national symbols are part of the ‘invention of tradition’ and provide the ideological foundation the people need to gather as a single, national body, next to the political and institutional foundations of nations. Closely related to the invention of these symbols is the narration of history. The nation has its own historical narrative, which posits and explains its origins, its individual character and the victories won in its name.³² Following McLeod, there are as many different versions of this history as there are narrators; but a national history makes *one* particular version of the past the only version worthy of study. In many cases, certain events in these narratives are highlighted and turned into ritual celebrations. Examples of such celebrations are Thanksgiving in America, Guy Fawkes Night in Britain or King’s Day in the Netherlands. This connects the narrative of history with the aforementioned symbols and, through the repetition of the rituals and celebrations, also adds to the sense of continuity. As Hobsbawm clearly describes it: “Each commemoration looks back to an occasion that is considered a defining moment in the history of the nation, the celebration of which helps cement the people’s relationship with their past as well as underline their togetherness in the present by gathering them around one emotive symbol.”³³ So, a national history provides the people with a sense of shared origins, a common past and a collective identity in the present.³⁴

To sum up, the concept of the (myth of the) nation has been defined as imagined communities that gather together many individuals who imagine their simultaneity

³⁰ Hobsbawm, 1983: p. 7.

³¹ Hobsbawm, 1983: p. 7.

³² McLeod, 2000: p. 70.

³³ Hobsbawm, 1983: p. 12.

³⁴ McLeod, 2000: p. 70.

with others; the nation's 'people'. Nations depend upon the invention and performance of histories, traditions and symbols, which sustain the people's specific identity continuous between past and present. Through these histories, traditions and symbols, feelings of belonging, home and community are created and consolidated. Nations standardize a unitary language accessible to all the people and create borders that separate the people 'within' from different people outside.³⁵

1.4 Anti-colonial Nationalism

The same process of nation building, as outlined in the Hobsbawm quotation in the previous paragraph, has occurred in colonized countries. The sense of national consciousness and the 'myth of the nation' have proved to be a valuable resource to many anti-colonial movements. The nation became a powerful symbol, which they used to organize themselves against the colonial administration.³⁶ In contrast to subordination of the colonizer, anti-colonial nationalisms promised independence and political self-determination.³⁷ According to Ndabaningi Sithole (1920-2000), a politician and the author of the book 'African Nationalism', many colonies were represented in this period as "nations-in-chains, whose peoples had been alienated from the land which was their rightful possession and which would be returned to them once independence dawned."³⁸ With this symbol of the nation-in-chains, Sithole builds on a pictorial tradition that has been used many times before, for example during the Polish Uprising against the Russians in the 19th century.

When studying these claims, it is important to keep in mind that these anti-colonial nationalist movements were using national territorial borders that had not existed prior to colonialism. At the Berlin Conference of 1885 the Western powers divided Africa between them by drawing borders around various parts of the continent. These borders ignored the Africans' own maps and, as a result, in some cases divided indigenous tribal lands over more than one 'new nation'. In other cases they merged various tribes with different beliefs, backgrounds and languages, forcing them to share a nation.³⁹ And, to complicate it further, due to the slave trade many people have been moved around the globe. For these people, the relationship with the

³⁵ McLeod, 2000: p. 74.

³⁶ Sithole, 1959: p. 24.

³⁷ McLeod, 2000: p. 75.

³⁸ Sithole, 1959: p. 25.

³⁹ McLeod, 2000: p. 75.

new homeland was even more complex. The imagining of a sense of national unity and identity for disparate groups of people in the colonies thus had to face several challenges. One of the most influential responses to this problem comes from the concept of *Négritude*.

Négritude has been of great influence in Africa, the Caribbean and America. It was used to forge the deep, horizontal companionship for colonized people I described earlier. Today the movement is predominantly associated with the work of two writers and statesmen, Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) and Léopold Senghor (1906-2001). Although both men have a background in a French colony, their intellectual legacy spread over entire West Africa, including the British colony of Ghana. *Négritude* works with many of the points that lie at the heart of the 'myth of the nation'. One of its main goals was to unite people living in different nations through their shared ancestry and common origins.⁴⁰ So, even though the movement was important in relation to anti-colonial national liberation in certain nations, it clearly had *pan-national* ambitions. Nevertheless, the movement had a large impact on the mindset of people in colonized nations, both under French and British rule.

Aimé Césaire was born in Martinique, the French Caribbean colony. In the 1930s he came to Paris to attend college. This is where he met Léopold Senghor, who was born in the French African colony of Senegal. Despite their completely different backgrounds, they both found themselves undividedly identified by the French as *négres*, an insulting term connected to the racist term 'nigger' in English.⁴¹ These disparaging and negative views encouraged them to fight back by writing poetry and essays that represented being black as valuable and positive. Whilst colonial discourses usually considered black people comparable with primitive and degenerate, without a culture of real worth or importance, Senghor and Césaire paid written tribute to the qualities of black peoples and cultures.⁴²

In the nineteenth century, throughout Europe it was commonly believed that the world's population existed as a hierarchy of 'races' based upon color, with white Europeans as the most civilized and black Africans as the most savage.⁴³ *Négritude* was an attempt to save blackness from its definition in negative terms. 'Blackness' was

⁴⁰ McLeod, 2000: p. 77.

⁴¹ Joubert, 1999: p. 124.

⁴² Ibidem: p. 126.

⁴³ McLeod, 2000: p. 77.

rebuilt as something positive and valuable “behind which black peoples throughout the world could unite as one body”.⁴⁴ This celebration of blackness was about more than just skin-color; it was about a way of life grounded in unique African virtues. For Senghor, *Négritude* was precisely this. Through his texts, he showed the sophistication and special qualities of African cultures. He argues that black Africans simply have a different relationship with the world than Europeans and that this influences the way in which they perceive reality and represent it in their art.⁴⁵ Going against the European verdict that African art is primitive, Senghor claimed that it was just as aesthetically beautiful as the most appreciated works from Europe. In his essay ‘Prose and Poetry’ (1962) he describes the intuitive relationship black Africans have with the world, contrary to the clinical scientific approach the Europeans have:

The African is as it were shut up in his black skin. He lives in primordial night. He does not begin by distinguishing himself from the object [of study], the tree or stone, the man or animal or social event. He does not keep it at a distance. He does not analyze it. Once he has come under its influence, he takes it like a blind man, still living, into his hands. He does not fix or kill it. He turns it over in his supple hands, he fingers it, and he *feels* it. The African is one of the worms created on the Third Day ... a pure sensory field.⁴⁶

These qualities become evident in things like ‘emotional warmth’ and a ‘natural’ sense of rhythm. To illustrate this, Senghor says that when he, for example, watches a football game he takes part in the game with his whole body. And, “when I listen to jazz or an African song, I have to make a violent effort of self-control (because I am a civilized man) to keep myself from singing and dancing”.⁴⁷ It is striking that he uses the word ‘civilized’ here, to clearly describe the civil behavior that he adjusted to in France. For him, this behavior equals the suppression of instinctual responses. Senghor thus defines *Négritude* as “the awareness, defense and development of African cultural values. It is the awareness by a particular social group of people of its own situation in the world and the expression of it by means of the concrete image.”⁴⁸

The notion of *Négritude* for Césaire was slightly different. He descended from the African slaves that were brought to the Caribbean, but he never lived in Africa. The recovery and preservation of an African past as a source of renewal was more problematic for black people in the Caribbean. As a result, Césaire’s based his version

⁴⁴ McLeod, 2000: p. 77.

⁴⁵ Ibidem: p. 78.

⁴⁶ Senghor, 1962: p. 29.

⁴⁷ Ibidem: p. 31.

⁴⁸ Ibidem: p. 97.

of *Négritude* less on the instinctive differences between white and black people. He saw *Négritude* primarily as something to be measured ‘with the compass of suffering’.⁴⁹ With this, he means that a common experience of oppression is what unites black peoples more than their essential qualities as ‘Negroes’, as Senghor describes it. Césaire’s version of *Négritude* has become known mostly by his influential poem ‘Cahier d’un retour au pays natal’ (1939).⁵⁰ It is a long and complex poem, which is not easy to summarize. I will therefore point out some important aspects, rather than interpret the text. First of all, the ‘pays natal’ from the title as I read it, refers to both Martinique and Africa, as Césaire is making connections and at the same time disjunctions between the different – but historically linked – places. I relate to McLeod, when he says that Césaire shows the investment that Martinique’s black people have in African culture, but does not advocate a simple return to Africa as a salve to colonialism’s ills.⁵¹ What he does underline more than once is the fact that he doesn’t agree with how easily black people (and himself included) accept the white condemnation of blackness. At the same time, like Senghor, he also celebrates black people’s perceived valuable aspects that have lain inert during colonialism. He urges the black people of Martinique to unite and think of themselves as a people within the Caribbean, with their own history and predicaments. The poem is also an attempt to speak for the voiceless and letting them know that he is doing this:

Embrace me without fear
 And if all I can do is speak, it is for you I shall speak
 And above all, my body as well as my soul
 beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator
 for life is not a spectacle
 a sea of mysteries is not a proscenium
 a man screaming is not a dancing bear⁵²

In forging this sense of collective identity they should join the fight with others who are oppressed, particularly people of color. He captures this view in the famous lines:

As there are hyena-men and panther-men, I shall be a Jew-man
 a kaffir-man
 a Hindu-from-Calcutta-man
 a man from-Harlem-who-does-not-vote⁵³

⁴⁹ McLeod, 2000: p. 80.

⁵⁰ I read the translated version: *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, translated by M. Rosello and A. Pritchard, 1995.

⁵¹ McLeod, 2000: p. 80.

⁵² Césaire, 1995: p. 15

⁵³ *Ibidem*: p. 35.

Oppressed people discover their unity in the simultaneity of their suffering, rather than with recourse to a common ancestral past (African or otherwise), although that past also remains a resource for the present. According to Césaire, only when this solidarity is struck, can their imprisonment by white Europeans be challenged.⁵⁴

Senghor and Césaire's long-term aim of *Négritude* was to emancipate the entire human race from its subjugation to colonial thought. In the short term, *Négritude* offered a way of uniting oppressed black peoples and defying their representation in colonial discourses, and its supporters pursued it mainly for this reason.⁵⁵ But both Césaire and Senghor saw the emancipation of *all* peoples from the sorry condition of colonialism as the ultimate goal of *Négritude*. One of the great strengths of the concept was that it was nostalgic for a mythic African past. It posited a denial of, and an affront to, colonial representations of African history and culture. Senghor argued for a return to an African spirit, while for Césaire 'return' meant the importance for Caribbean blacks to forge a connection with their ancestral home of Africa. These returns both depend upon the construction of a mythic pre-colonial African past before the time of colonialism. But did such a 'golden age' of perfection ever really exist?⁵⁶ To this last question, I don't have the answer. But it is interesting to see that this nostalgia exists and that colonialism without doubt helped to forge African nationalism. An author who acknowledges this and sees this as one of the positive roles colonialism played in Africa is Ndabaningi Sithole, who I mentioned before briefly in this chapter. Sithole was born in Rhodesia and studied pedagogy in the United States until 1958.⁵⁷ The publication of his book 'African Nationalism' (1959) and its immediate prohibition by the Rhodesian government motivated Sithole to pursue a career in politics. He founded the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), a militant organization that opposed the government of Rhodesia in 1963. After this opposition, Sithole spent ten years in prison. In 'African Nationalism' he tries to answer this question: what is it that has brought about this strong nationalistic feeling among the otherwise docile peoples of Africa who had, to all appearance, acquiesced in white domination?⁵⁸

⁵⁴ McLeod, 2000: p. 81.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Ibidem: p. 82.

⁵⁷ Rhodesia was a self-governing British Crown colony in southern Africa from 1923 to 1980, equivalent in territorial terms to modern Zimbabwe.

⁵⁸ Sithole, 1959: p. 19.

According to Sithole, there have been some major factors playing a role in the rise of African nationalism. First of all, there was World War II. During the war, the Africans came into contact with practically all peoples of the earth. He met them on a life-and-death-struggle basis. He saw the so-called civilized and peaceful and orderly white people mercilessly butchering one another just as his so-called savage ancestors had done in tribal wars. There was no difference between the primitive and the civilized man anymore. As Sithole claims, “he saw through European pretensions that only Africans were savages. This had a revolutionary psychological impact on the African”⁵⁹ At the same time, the Africans who had to join the colonizers armies, learned that it was a positive thing to fight for your freedom and the Europeans learned what it was like to be under foreign rule. After World War II, the Africans began to direct their anti-domination spirit against their colonial rulers.⁶⁰

Sithole also describes the role of language in the development of national consciousness, in relation to the Christian Church as well. The Christian Church, by sending religious, educational and industrial missionaries to Africa, has broadened the outlook of many Africans: “it has provided opportunities for many to develop their latent qualities and it has discouraged tribal hatred and encouraged universal brotherhood instead.”⁶¹ This is also connected to the construction of roads, bridges and railroads (in the time of Sithole, and internet and mobile phones today), which made the exchange of ideas much easier.

1.5 Nationalism as a disillusion

In the years since the period of decolonization, there has emerged disenchantment with the ideas of the nation and nationalism. According to McLeod, this is in many ways a consequence of the *historical experience* of decolonization when several national liberation movements, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean, confronted a series of often-insolvable problems once formal independence was achieved. In the next chapter, I will zoom in on Ghana to see how this process took place. In this paragraph, I will try to consider how nationalist representations might contribute to the continued oppression of some groups within the national population. The fact that many occupants of colonial lands did not possess a sense of ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’

⁵⁹ Sithole, 1959: p. 19.

⁶⁰ Ibidem: p. 20.

⁶¹ Ibidem: p. 64.

prior to the advent of colonial government caused complications in a later stage. The production of this unified imaginary community can thus both be nationalism's greatest strength and its ultimate weakness.⁶² Although the myth of the nation might function as a valuable resource in uniting a people in opposition to colonialism, it often does so by ignoring the diversity of those individuals it seeks to homogenize. Many once-colonized nations have struggled with the internal differences that threaten the production of a national unity.⁶³

One of the most influential and challenging interventions in the debate concerning nationalist representations is Homi K. Bhabha's essay 'DissemiNation; Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation' (1990).⁶⁴ Bhabha aims to show in this text that nationalist representations are highly unstable and fragile constructions that can never produce the unity they promise.⁶⁵ As mentioned before, it is the aim of nationalist discourse to create community out of difference. In so doing, Bhabha argues, they engage with two contradictory modes of representation, which he calls the *pedagogic* and the *performative*, each possessing its own relationship with time.⁶⁶ So, on the one hand, nationalism is pedagogic and claims a fixed origin of for the nation and a sense of a continuous history, linking the past to the present: "The pedagogical founds its narrative authority in a tradition of the people, encapsulated in a succession of historical moments that represents an eternity produced by self-generation".⁶⁷

It is pedagogical because it guarantees the nation as the central political and social unit, collecting the population into a 'people'.⁶⁸ As McLeod understands it, the people are the object of the pedagogical discourse; they are the body that nationalism constructs and upon which it acts.⁶⁹ But on the other hand, Bhabha argues that nationalist discourses are at the same time 'performative'. This term refers to the ways in which the people must continually rehearse nationalist icons and popular signs in order to maintain the sense of 'deep, horizontal comradeship'.⁷⁰ A national culture is

⁶² McLeod, 2000: p. 103.

⁶³ McLeod, 2000: p. 103.

⁶⁴ This essay first appeared in a collection of essays *Nation and Narration* (1990) and is reprinted in *The Location of Culture* (1994). I have used the latter.

⁶⁵ Bhabha, 1994: p. 201.

⁶⁶ McLeod, 2000: p. 118.

⁶⁷ Bhabha, 1994: p. 211

⁶⁸ Ibidem: p. 209.

⁶⁹ McLeod 2000: p. 118.

⁷⁰ Ibidem.

endlessly performed: “The scraps, patched and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture.”⁷¹ In this sense, the people are the subjects of nationalist discourse at the same time. They are actively involved in the (re) production of its signs and traditions and must repeatedly tell their history, perform the nation’s rituals, celebrate its great figures and commemorate its anniversaries.⁷² As a consequence of this ‘double’ narrative movement, the nation is split by what Bhabha calls the ‘conceptual ambivalence at the heart of its discursive strategies’.⁷³ The nation is always torn between two antagonists: the nation as a fixed, original essence (continuing and pedagogic) and the nation as socially manufactured and without a fixed origin (repetitive and performative). According to Bhabha, it is between these two positions that a sense of the nation’s homogeneous ‘people’ begins to fragment: “The pedagogical representation of the people as ‘object’ constructs an idealized image of unity and coherence in the past. But because of the necessity for the performance of the nation’s signs by the people as ‘subject’, the pedagogical ideal of the homogeneous people can never be realized.”⁷⁴ This is, as McLeod describes it clearly, because the performative necessity of nationalist representations enables all those placed on the margins of its norms and limits to intervene and challenge the dominant representations with their own narratives: “A plural population can never be converted into a singular people because plurality and difference can never be entirely banished.”⁷⁵

Counter-narratives interrupt the nation’s smooth self-generation at the level of the performative, “the national memory is always the site of the hybridity of histories and the displacement of narratives”.⁷⁶ Ultimately, Bhabha states in his essay that there can never be one, coherent narrative through which a nation and its people can be adequately captured. Narratives which claim otherwise, can do this only by marginalizing certain groups. In Bhabha’s work, nationalist discourses are ultimately illiberal and must always be challenged.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Bhabha, 1994: p. 214.

⁷² McLeod, 2000: p. 118.

⁷³ Bhabha, 1994: p. 217.

⁷⁴ Ibidem: p. 218.

⁷⁵ McLeod, 2000: p. 119.

⁷⁶ Bhabha, 1994: p. 219.

⁷⁷ McLeod, 2000: p. 120.

2. The National Museum of Ghana

2.1 Introduction

It is safe to say that the National Museum has not turned out to be the success the initiators were hoping for. More tourists than citizens the museum is supposed to serve are visiting. In this second chapter I will therefore examine the collection and exhibition program of the Ghana National Museum, beginning with the history of the collection and its presentation after the opening in 1957. The significant place in the life of the local people it aimed for, the museum has not developed. In order to gain an understanding of how the museum wished to work as a tool for nationalism – and since the museums' foundations are intertwined with political and historical events – I will start with a short investigation of important events in recent Ghanaian history. In doing so, I will be focusing mainly on the period around the nations' independence in 1957 and the period that came after this date. In the end of this chapter, I will go into the relation people in this region have with objects in general. The book 'In Defense of Things' (2010) by Bjørnar Olsen will be used as a guideline to investigate the role objecthood plays in Ghana.

2.2 A Brief History of Ghana

Since ancient times, Europeans have been travelling the globe and encountered people from whom they differed on cultural, political and social levels. Based on their various European backgrounds, sustained by superior arms and in search for 'God, Glory and Gold' they were able to prevail over the peoples they met.⁷⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century, Africa was split up and divided among the major European powers. Generally, the Berlin Conference of 1885 is seen as the consolidation of this division.⁷⁹ It was Britain and France who ended up ruling over the majority of the continent. In West Africa, the British occupied around a third of the region: Sierra Leone, Gambia, Nigeria and – the area on which I am focusing – the Gold Coast (Ghana).⁸⁰ Initially, the British imposed a system of indirect rule on all colonies, premised upon the notion of the coexistence of British authority and chieftaincy. This arrangement rendered the

⁷⁸ Adedze, 1997: p. 23.

⁷⁹ McLeod, 2010: p. 56.

⁸⁰ France ruled over two-third of the region, Portugal 'took' the Cape Verde Island and Guinea Bissau. Liberia stayed independent and has a completely different history, as it was one of the first countries to be ruled by ex-slaves who came back from the New World.

chiefs 'the executive agents of the colonial administration'.⁸¹ At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the Gold Coast developed economically, the governmental power gradually moved from the governor and his colonial officials to a small group of educated natives. These changes resulted in a strong spirit of nationalism and, eventually, in independence.

The key-figure in the independence movement was Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah had been educated in Europe and the United States of America, at the London School of Economics and Political Science, at Lincoln University and the University of London. The increasing anti-colonial nationalist movements in the Gold Coast drove him back to his homeland to engage in the upcoming revolution.⁸² In 1951 he was installed as *Head of Government Business*, after being released from prison where the British held him for his radical and revolutionary campaigns. Being imprisoned made him even more popular in the eyes of the population. In 1954, after a long period of resistance and non-cooperation against the British, the Gold Coast became a self-governing colony, with Nkrumah as Prime Minister. On March 6th 1957, the Gold Coast was the first Sub-Saharan country to gain its independence. Its name was symbolically changed to 'Ghana' after *Ancient Ghana*.⁸³

The country became one of the 53 member states within the British Commonwealth, a Dominion with Queen Elizabeth maintaining the highest title of Head of the State of Ghana, which therefore was not entirely independent. Nkrumah declared Ghana a Republic on the first of July 1960 and gave himself the highest title, namely President of the Republic of Ghana. As a president of a newly independent republic, he considered it one of his most important tasks to convince the (largely illiterate) Ghanaian people of the fact that they were independent of British rule. Nkrumah started a large campaign to show them: "Many of my people cannot read or write. They've got to be *shown* that they are now really independent. And they can only be shown by signs."⁸⁴ Later in this chapter, I will come back to these signs and symbols.

Nkrumah's political views became increasingly clearer during his presidency, leading to the establishment of his governmental policies but also to writings, such as *Africa Must Unite* (1963) and *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965). In

⁸¹ Apter, 1972: p. 119.

⁸² Nkrumah, 1957: p. vii.

⁸³ Ancient Ghana was the seat of one of the most powerful kingdoms that existed in West Africa, hundred years prior to the Ghanaian independence.

⁸⁴ Nkrumah, 1957: p. 12.

his autobiography it becomes evident that these writings are the result of his stay in Britain during his studies.⁸⁵ Here, he attended the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945. The main goal of the Pan-African movement was to unite people of African descent and improve the lives of workers who had been exploited by capitalist enterprises in Africa.⁸⁶ Nkrumah describes the influence of the congress as follows: "It was the Fifth Pan-African Congress that provided the outlet for African nationalism and brought about the awakening of African political consciousness. It became, in fact, a mass movement of Africa for the Africans."⁸⁷

Consequently, when he became the first president of independent Ghana, he believed he had an important role to play in the battle against foreign capitalist involvement on the continent:

"Freedom for the Cold Coast will be a fountain of inspiration from which other African colonial territories can draw when the time comes for them to strike for their freedom ... To me, the independence for the Gold Coast is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the continent of Africa."⁸⁸

This Pan-Africanist agenda conflicted with the building of the nation. On the national level, he strongly promoted a quick modernization of industries and communications and ensured the labor force was completely African and educated. Road building projects, mass education and health services were important if Ghana wanted to play this leading role in the total liberation of Africa from colonial and neo-colonial domination.⁸⁹ Thus, Nkrumah started to develop these projects. However, he also believed that this goal could be achieved most effectively if opposition parties and traditional chiefs didn't disturb his policies, and therefore his regime began to take on an autocratic shape. The opposition mainly came from the Asante, a large ethnic group that is now part of Ghana.⁹⁰ His supporters approved the appointment of Nkrumah as president for life, the acceptance of his Convention People's Party (CPP) as the only political organization of the state and the party's control of the civil service. This, and the fact that he used national budget to support other countries, made him highly

⁸⁵ Nkrumah, 1957: p. 63.

⁸⁶ Ackah, 1999: p. 13.

⁸⁷ Nkrumah, 1957: p. 52.

⁸⁸ Ibidem: p. 62.

⁸⁹ Adedze, 1997: p. 56.

⁹⁰ I will not go into the Asante history very thoroughly, but it is important to realize that this ethnic group was a large pre-colonial Kingdom and primordial nation-state. The Asante Kingdom successfully resisted the British. They fought four wars between 1826 and 1896. In 1896, the British destroyed Kumasi, the Asante capital and subsequently dismantled the political order of the Asante Kingdom.

unpopular and led to a military coup, led by the National Liberation Council, overthrowing Kwame Nkrumah in 1966.⁹¹

After the subsequent elections in August 1969, the first competitive nationwide political contest since 1956, the Progress Party (PP), headed by Kofi A. Busia, gained 59 percent of all votes. Nevertheless, this administration – now called the Second Republic, lasted only 27 months. Due to the enormous amount of debts they had inherited from the Nkrumah administration, they were not able to turn the tide and make Ghana financially healthy. This became a problem for all following governments.⁹² The Third Republic lasted from 1979 until 1981, with the People's National Party as dominant party. In 1981, the military intervened again. All elected institutions were dissolved and they banned all political activity. After eleven years of military rule led by the leader of the coup Jerry Rawlings, in 1992 a referendum led to a new constitution. This didn't proceed without controversy, since Jerry Rawlings won the first elections. The opposition contested these results and demanded a second election, which they then boycotted. Subsequently, Rawlings' party, the social democratic party National Democratic Congress, won after all. By the elections of 2000 a new law had been installed; presidents could, from now on, only serve two terms each with a maximum of four years. This time, the New Patriotic Party defeated the NDC and John Kufuor was installed as president to be re-elected in 2004. The NDC candidate, John Atta Mills did get his revenge, winning the elections in 2009. Sadly, Mills died during his presidency and his vice-president John Dramani Mahama got elected in 2012. Today, Ghana finds itself in the Fourth Republic with social democrat Mahama still installed as president.⁹³

2.3 Building a New Nation

In 2004, under the presidency of liberal democrat John Kufuor, the government established the Culture Trust Fund to give financial backing to “the promotion of Ghana's diverse culture”.⁹⁴ This fund was an idea of The National Commission on Culture, who, in the same year, released for the first time *The Cultural Policy of Ghana*. In this document, which is “the result of many years of deliberation and discussion”⁹⁵,

⁹¹ La Verle, 1999: p. 143.

⁹² Ibidem: p. 152.

⁹³ Ibidem.

⁹⁴ The Cultural Policy of Ghana, 2004: p. 1.

⁹⁵ Ibidem: p. 7.

the commission expounds its view on the cultural policy and its look on the future. Further on in this thesis, I will analyze this policy more thoroughly, to see if the reality, now more than a decade later, meets this vision. First, I will go back to the period right after Ghana's independence and go into Kwame Nkrumah's symbolic 'propaganda' for the new nation.

Despite the negative aftertaste Kwame Nkrumah's rule left, he did start to build the foundations of a nation. How did he proceed? Did he succeed in reaching the illiterate masses, as he was planning to? In this part of the chapter, I will look at the symbolic and cultural outings of nation building, rather than going into the economic, and political programs such as the establishment of a Central Bank, a national currency, a national flag, shipping line and a Navy and Air Force.⁹⁶

In his book 'I Speak of Freedom' (1961), in the chapter titled 'Building a New Nation', Nkrumah outlined these programs, which he believed are indispensable for Ghana "on the way to progress", very precisely.⁹⁷ Nkrumah started by making demands for a national currency when he was appointed Head of Government Business in 1951, when the Gold Coast was still a colony. The new Ghana pounds, shillings and pence that were issued by the Bank of Ghana in 1958 all showed Nkrumah's portrait and the Latin phrase *Civitatis Ghaniensis Conditor* (Founder of the State of Ghana), appropriating – not by chance – the early Greek and Roman coins.⁹⁸ Alongside these coins and notes, he also had postage stamps designed, carrying images of Nkrumah, the national flag and people celebrating the independence. Furthermore, he had the national anthem re-written, putting a Pan-Africanist slant on the lyrics. He also changed the yellow in the national flag to white, to match the colors of his Convention People's Party. And, to really reach the illiterate masses, he had various monuments installed; statues of himself, the Independence Square and – my main focus point – the National Museum that housed the material culture and history of Ghana and Africa.⁹⁹

After Nkrumah's presidency, the National Liberation Council started to remove his statues and issued new coins and stamps that now showed the 'liberation' of Nkrumah.¹⁰⁰ This strengthened the negative perspective of the Ghanaian people on Nkrumah. Until today, there's still a strong debate going on about his legacy. Some

⁹⁶ Nkrumah, 1961: p. 111.

⁹⁷ Ibidem: p. 115.

⁹⁸ Fuller, 2010: p. 24.

⁹⁹ Ibidem: p. 25.

¹⁰⁰ Fuller, 2010: p. 25.

Ghanaians believe that, if Nkrumah would have succeeded in creating the African Union, Africa would have been much more successful today. But, the majority still thinks of him as a dictator who eliminated all his political opponents and spent all the countries' resources. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny his strong campaign of to build the nation he envisioned. All the ingredients were there, but – and we cannot blame a newly independent people with a long history of slavery and repression – as his dictatorial behavior grew, his popularity decreased. This dissension is clearly visible in the way in which some statues of Nkrumah have been reinstated (fig. 1). Not restoring the statue, but leaving the head off and displaying it on the side makes this part of history visible as well.



Fig. 1 Beheaded statue of Kwame Nkrumah in Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Accra.

2.4 Collecting the Nation

The National Museum of Ghana is located in Accra, the capital of modern Ghana. The museum is a product of the historical moment that encompasses the transition from colonial rule to postcolonial independence in West Africa. As mentioned before, the museum opened soon after independence was declared in 1957, as part of a larger project of nation-state building. In this paragraph, I will go into the history of the museum's collection.

The National Museum has its origins in the collection of the Anthropology Museum of the Achimota School that was founded in the 1924 in Legon, near Accra. The original 10.000 items were largely amassed by one man: the British archaeologist Charles Thurston Shaw (1914-2013). He began this collection during the construction of the Achimota School, which unearthed many objects.¹⁰¹ Soon, many others knew that Shaw was collecting these items and missionaries, colonists, businessmen, academics and adventurers began to send him archaeological and ethnographic artifact from across the entire continent.¹⁰² For Shaw, the reason why he collected these artifacts was very clear:

“Archaeology has an interesting place in the growth of a people to full manhood as a nation. It is a curious thing that sometimes the early stages of society seem, almost like adolescents, to exhibit a kind of shame of their childhood and want to make a break with the past. Yet to the leaders of growing or resurgent nations, the patriotic worth of archaeology is self-evident. Whether the past of a people is great or humble, no nation can feel truly self-confident or self-conscious if it is uncertain about its past.”¹⁰³

Another important name in this history is Robert Sutherland Rattray (1881 – 1938), born in India and generally referred to as Captain R. S. Rattray was an early Africanist and student of the Ashanti. Rattray was appointed government anthropologist in 1921. He has been strongly promoting the Anthropology Museum and convincing chiefs and elders of the Akan areas to donate objects to the museum. Many of the objects were found in the commercial mining areas within the Akan territories Obuasi, Nsuta and Tarkwa and sent to the museum.¹⁰⁴ The Anthropology Museum also benefitted from donations from individuals.¹⁰⁵ For example, in 1929 a collection of “cutlasses, swords,

¹⁰¹ Fogelman, 2008: p. 20. The Achimota School was a private school set up by the British in 1927 to create a new African elite capable of taking over some of the middle positions in the colonial bureaucracy.

¹⁰² Adedze, 1995: p. 61.

¹⁰³ Shaw, 1943: p. 146.

¹⁰⁴ Akan is, like the Asante, a large ethnic group in Ghana. The Akan language is widespread over the country. A third large group is the Ewe in the East. This group divided by the Eastern border with Togo.

¹⁰⁵ Adedze, 1995: p. 61.

guns and curios” acquired by the British explorer Sir James Willocks in the Gold Coast and Burma was donated to the government of the Gold Coast.¹⁰⁶

In an age when artifacts were considered ‘primitive art’ that was the product of collective thought processes rather than the creation of an individual artist, and were expected to ‘speak for themselves’, many artifacts arrived with little or no background information.¹⁰⁷ Shaw therefore recorded little information on who made the objects, how or by whom they were used, where they came from, or how they were acquired. As a result, this collection is more a reflection of the personal tastes and travels of the donors rather than a complete overview of Ghana’s material culture. Or, perhaps more importantly, what the local peoples would find worthy of preserving. When the Achimota Museum dissolved in 1951, the collection was transferred to the University College of the Gold Coast (now called the University of Ghana) to watch over the objects, while plans for the Ghana National Museum were being made.¹⁰⁸

Shaw’s collection had a large impact on the National Museum. Around 40% of the museum’s inventory consists of objects from this collection. Also, the objects started to function as exemplary of cultural heritage during the colonial era. The artifacts that were collected after the independence have tended to mimic rather than diversify the colonial collection.¹⁰⁹ This is what Agbenyega Adedze, a Ghanaian historian who now teaches at the University of California, identified as the phenomenon of indigenous repetition of colonial misrepresentations of cultures.¹¹⁰ For example, in the 1960s ‘collectors’ across the country were hired and trained to request donations from their home regions. By putting up posters with images of Akuaba figurines (Ghanaian fertility dolls), beads and gold weights to ask the people to send them to museum.¹¹¹ By requesting these specific objects, the collection only grew in size not in diversity. Most objects in the collection have an Akan origin. Certain types of objects and cultures that had been overlooked in the past continued to be overlooked. After this collection and donation project ended, the collection has not been growing much. Due to political turbulence and governmental changes in the policies towards arts and culture, new artifacts are rarely brought into the permanent collection. Also,

¹⁰⁶ Agbodeka, 1977: p. 109.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem: p. 110.

¹⁰⁸ Fogelman, 2008: p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem.

¹¹⁰ Adedze, 1995: p. 63.

¹¹¹ Nunoo, 1970: p. 53.

budgetary constraints restrict active expansion. Since 1986 the average of acquired objects are even less than one per year.¹¹²

This preponderance of Akan objects in the National Museum of Ghana may be explained also by the fact that Akan material culture has been very popular in the European art market, resulting in a proliferation of Akan objects. The same situation can be found in the Republic of Benin, where more than fifty percent of the collections at the Musée Ethnographique Alexandre S. Adande at Porto Novo are representative of the Fon and Yoruba peoples. Here too, the collections were assembled by Europeans like the anthropologist and filmmaker Jacques Lombard (1926) who set out to collect what he perceived the best pieces and not those that would make a representative collection of the territory of Dahomey.¹¹³

Contrastingly, the collections at the Museum of African Art in Dakar, Senegal are more representative of West Africa as a whole than they are of the modern nation-state of Senegal. The curators during the colonial period had the same ambitions as the colonial administration: the museum in Dakar, being the capital of the French Federation of West Africa, should showcase a piece of each territory. The collections, however, were not very systematic since the French collection policy directed by the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) was, as Adedze describes it, at best vague and fell largely within the salvage paradigm.¹¹⁴

Going back to the period around the opening of the National Museum, it was in 1951 that the government approved a proposal for the creation of a national museum. This was a result of the recommendation of a commission headed by H. J. Braunholz, the keeper of the Department of Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum at that time.¹¹⁵ Braunholz wrote a report in which he clearly agrees with the policy of Shaw:

“In the political and educational spheres, relics are the indispensable means of creating in the African a balanced perspective of his own place in history. Properly interpreted they should be the means of giving him a sense of pride in and continuity with his own past, from which will spring confidence in his future progress. The realization that he has a solid background of indigenous culture should help to counteract the bewilderment and instability engendered by the sudden impact of alien values and ideals.”¹¹⁶

¹¹² Fogelman, 2008: p. 21.

¹¹³ Adedze, 1995: p. 61.

¹¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹¹⁵ Hess, 1999: p. 115.

¹¹⁶ Crinson. 2001: p. 240.

Also, Braunholz proposed at least one central or national museum in the capital and three regional museums. The central museum would play a unifying role, 'embracing generally the archaeology and ethnology of the whole of the Gold Coast' and the regional museums would represent the cultures of their locality.¹¹⁷ Following the report, the Achimota School contributed its collection to the museum in 1953, and the museum was directed for the next four years by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Legon. This contribution was an important moment in the history of the collection: before the collections were transferred to the new building, the board had to make choices, since they could not bring all artifacts. As a result, many of the non-Ghanaian and many of the less visually interesting objects stayed in the University collections.¹¹⁸ The remaining objects were intentionally chosen to represent the new national identity and give historical context.

In 1957 the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board Ordinance established control over the museum with a board appointed by the Nkrumah administration.¹¹⁹ One of the first things this board achieved, related to the articulation of a cultural policy, was the construction of a new building for the museum and a fundamental reconceptualization of the museum collection. The modern building, designed by the British architect-duo Drake and Lasdun, was located on Barnes Road, in the southern part of the central area of Accra. This part of the city was designated to be redeveloped for cultural institutions and central government functions, such as the National Archives and a planned science museum.¹²⁰ The siting separated the building from Accra's commercial and historical neighborhoods, giving it a sense of social distinction that is heightened by the architecture of the museum.

Mark Crinson, a British art historian who has researched the relation of architecture to colonialism, describes the building as follows: "The building is a centrally-planned concrete structure, with windows set in saw-toothed angles at ninety degrees to the outer wall. A high porte-cochere greets visitors and a low saucer-shaped aluminum dome, with an ambulatory beyond it, covers the central space. Neither the entrance area nor the temporary exhibition area on the other side of the dome is sufficient to impose an axis of movement: circulation and display space are

¹¹⁷ Crinson, 2001: p. 239.

¹¹⁸ Hess, 1999: p. 115.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁰ Crinson, 2001: p. 232.

described it as an exemplary institution in the imagining of the nation, “profoundly shaping the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion [...] especially the legitimacy of its ancestry.”¹²⁴

As I described earlier in this chapter, throughout the period from 1951 – when Kwame Nkrumah and the CPP first came to power in a transitional arrangement under the British – to 1957 when Nkrumah took over the reins of the independent country, issues of national identity and regional loyalties were critical. To create a coherent national identity, Nkrumah took on many traditional titles, such as *Osagyefo*, *Katamanto*, *Kasapieko* and *Nufeno*, that signified leadership to all Ghana’s major ethnic units and the CPP adopted the Northern Ghana smock and the Kente Cloth¹²⁵ It were objects like these and for example Asante stools that were to become prime items in the new museum’s displays. Also, there were important implications in Nkrumah’s policies for regional museums. The most striking example was the regional museum at Kumasi, the heart of the Asante country. This museum, which had nothing to do with Braunholz’s proposal, was the Asante Cultural Centre and opened its doors in 1951 on the initiative of the Asantehene. It included a museum, an open-air theatre and a contemporary craft gallery.¹²⁶ However, in 1963 this was nationalized by Nkrumah and retitled ‘Centre of National Ghanaian Culture’. The result of this homogenizing action was a complete disinterest in the government-run institution by the Asante and eventually even the foundation of a new museum in 1995; the Manhyia Palace Museum. An interesting contrast can be found in the case of Nigeria where the government was aiming for these regional museums to succeed. Here, too, they were establishing museums to unite the country. But a ‘museum of unity’ was established in each state. The objective was to unite the various ethnic groups in a state, create mutual respect and present a coherent picture to the local, state and national political entity to others – whether foreign or Nigerian tourists, visitors, politicians or potential investors.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Anderson, 1983: p. 145.

¹²⁵ Nkrumah, 1961: p. 113. Kente cloth is an Akan royal and sacred cloth worn only in times of extreme importance and was the cloth of kings. Over time, the use of Kente became more widespread. However, its importance has remained and it is held in high esteem with Akans. Northern Ghana smock is worn by kings in the northern regions but is now popular across Ghana and even southern Burkina Faso.

¹²⁶ Crinson, 2001: p. 240.

¹²⁷ Kaplan, 1996: p. 45.

2.5 Representation in the Museum

When the National Museum was finally opened in 1957 its scope was described as “not confined to the limits of West Africa, still less of Ghana. The ancient cultures of Egypt, Nigeria and Southern Africa, the Greek, Carthaginian and Roman periods in North Africa, the emergence of Islam, the recent arts of the entire continent – all these related aspects of the ‘Man in Africa’ theme are illustrated in the Museum’s showcases.”¹²⁸ As Janet Berry Hess, Professor of African and Diasporic Studies at Harvard University, very systematically describes: materials related to ‘natural history’ were being removed and exhibits that emphasized the Pan-African origins of Ghanaian culture were being installed in order to promote this ‘historical’ consciousness. Plaster replicas, such as the Daughter of Nefertiti from the Louvre and a bust of Marcus Aurelius and the Ife heads from the British Museum, and photographs of objects from regions as Greece, Cameroon, and Roman North Africa were placed close to objects of art from central Ghana, the Northern Territories and the coastal regions of Ghana and Togo. This was an attempt to show that “the ancestors of the existing population must have originated elsewhere”.¹²⁹ An attempt that weaves seamlessly into the ‘Ghana hypothesis’ I described in the previous chapter; to provide modern-day Ghana with older roots in a pre-colonial state formation by linking the Akan peoples to the ancient Ghana Empire based far from the colonial Gold Coast in the southern Sahara.¹³⁰

In this Ghana of the 1960s, perhaps only elite groups like the students from Achimota School would understand the representative function of these replicas. But nevertheless, the fact that the curators made these decisions does result in interesting juxtapositions and the blurring of cultural hierarchies. And I think it also says something about the way in which people in this region treat and value replicas and originals. The question of authenticity is in every respect different from the European perspective. In the next paragraph I will come back to this issue of object hood. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that text beyond an object’s probable ethnic or geographic affiliation is rare, as are photographs, maps or other visual aids, providing little context for informed interpretations.¹³¹

The spatial layout of the museum is completely conditioned by the circle shaped

¹²⁸ Crinson, 2001: p. 242.

¹²⁹ Hess, 1999: p. 117.

¹³⁰ Crinson, 2001: p. 233.

¹³¹ Fogelman, 2008: p. 22.

building. The architects presented this shape to be offering flexibility to the display spaces and modes, but at the same time it poses some problems of orientation and meaning. Where does the route start? What is the significance of peripheral location and, likewise, what are the particular resonances of placement in a radial or concentric display?¹³² The most obviously ‘peripheral’ placed displays are those in the gallery on the first floor and in the leftover spaces on the ground floor between the circular area under the dome and the outer wall.¹³³



Fig. 3. Overview of the National Museum, Ghana.

In this gallery, the archaeological collections pointing to a prehistory of the nation are placed, and the artifacts and reproductions that indicate its relation to other ancient cultures. The most charged location is the middle of the space. It’s a very open space that you keep seeing when going around the galleries. Also, when walking on the first floor, it’s the middle of the space that remains visible at all times. Moreover, it is the display in the central space that has been changed over time. The other galleries have stayed practically the same since the opening.

Mark Crinson has outlined the changes in the presentations in the middle space,

¹³² Crinson, 2001: p. 243.

¹³³ *Ibidem*.

based on archival material. He describes that when the museum was first opened in 1957 with the display called 'Man in Africa'; its central space was taken up with a display of sixty Akan stools on four levels of a circular stand.¹³⁴ It is striking that they chose only one of the four ethno-linguistic groups in Ghana as a centerpiece: a focus that may have been inherited from the colonial status quo. It was only in 1990 that the display changed. Then, an iron-smelting stand had taken up the central position. In 2000, a model of a nomadic man mounted on a horse showing chiefly regalia from northern Ghana occupied the area.¹³⁵ Despite the central role given to the Akan stools, it is the Asante culture that is hegemonic in the collection presentation. Asante objects outnumber objects from any other region and are given the most aesthetic display in the museum, for example with purple and blue velvet backgrounds. Although there is some reference to their functions and meaning, in the texts accompanying the displays they are foremost presented as beautiful and valuable objects.¹³⁶

One last display that I would like to highlight is a row of state chairs in one of the peripheral galleries. This display has also been on view in the museum since the opening and is the only one – as far as I understood it – that displays colonial history. There is one wall-text that mentions the probable provenance of 'canes of authority', given by the British Governor to a Cape Coast chief in 1872.¹³⁷ The display of chairs consist of the state chair of the last Dutch governor before the Dutch left in 1871, the chair of state of the last German Governor of Togoland (both of which were given to the collection in the mid-1950s), a British state chair that belonged to the last Governor-General and was probably moved to the Museum soon after independence. The three colonial chairs prominently show their coats of arms and between them they indicate a compressed history of rule across the region in the last few hundred years.¹³⁸ More recently, Kwame Nkrumah's presidential chair was acquired and added to the display.¹³⁹ In the context of the nearby display of Akan stools and Asante state chairs, the colonial state chairs might be taken to represent a circular and perhaps indistinguishable sequence of tradition-bound rulers.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Crinson, 2001: p. 244.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*: p. 244.

¹³⁶ Lawrence, 1957: p. 91.

¹³⁷ Crinson, 2001: p. 246.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*: p. 246.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

2.6 Objects and Things

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the National Museum did not meet the aims of the initiators. In the end, the curators are still faced with the underlying problem that the museum is a creation of the colonial era and it has not developed a significant place in the life of the local people. In the next chapter, I will look at the museums' contemporary policy, to see how this has changed from the one I discussed here. But, to understand part of the 'failure', I will first try to get a grip of what artifacts and material culture mean to the people in West Africa and thus in Ghana.

How do things and objects mix with human beings to form those configurations we call society and history? What role do things play in enabling and securing social life? These are the central questions – which are also very relevant to my research – Bjørnar Olsen (1958) is investigating in his book *In Defense of Things. Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (2010). In order to achieve this he discusses several important thinkers and philosophers, such as Foucault, Ricoeur, Barthes and Derrida, who have been concerned with things. Olsen shows that within archaeology humans are just one of a multitude of entities and the relationship between humans and things needs to be reconsidered.¹⁴¹ More extremely even, he wants to erase the hierarchical relationship between things and humans and make them equally important instead of the common vertical relation that values humans as more important than animals and things: “Why is it a priori “wrong” to blur the boundary between humans and things or to ascribe personality and identity to things? What is the ontological justification for the persistent idea that action, influence, and power are capacities of which only humans hold possession?”¹⁴²

The reason why I want to point out some of the central ideas of Olsen is that they give me a good theoretical network to look at objects and understand the way in which people in other parts of the world might look at objects. Olsen claims to counter the mainstream archaeological thinking; that we need to get at the meaning behind things and that objects always represent something else.¹⁴³ This does not mean that he is not interested in symbols and meaning, but he thinks these aspects of material culture studies have been given far too much attention at the expense of other more

¹⁴¹ Olsen, 2010: p. 6.

¹⁴² Ibidem: p. 96.

¹⁴³ Ibidem: p. 56.

mundane, everyday implications of being in entities with things. The mainstream archaeological philosophy that Olsen mentions several times is interesting when thinking of the collecting policies of the National Museum. As described earlier, after the opening of the museum, not many artifacts have been collected and acquired. In opposition to the urge with which archaeologists like Shaw were collecting, this is a large contrast. A contrast that is explained very well by Simon Knell, a museum studies specialist interested in the construction of objects, intellectual disciplines and knowledge in museums and galleries. He claims the following:

“Collecting, that is keeping objects until they become old, or acquiring old objects, is closely related to how we see and try to understand the past. The meaning of objects – and the role of objects in creating meaning – depends upon a people’s concepts of the past and of time, and upon the various ways objects can express the past in the present or serve to deny a separate existence of the past. Objects may lose meaning in museums if their role in society is incompatible with the idea of the past that the museums are trying to purvey.”¹⁴⁴

That this concept of the past and of the meaning of objects differs for each individual society might seem as a *sine qua non*, but is nevertheless very important in relation to the way in which a collection and an entire museum are being perceived and appreciated. The West African philosophy of material culture doesn’t support the centralized accumulation of material cultural heritage. Objects that are no longer used within their cultural context lose their meaning and are thus not worth keeping, in the view of West African people.¹⁴⁵ And, vice-versa, why would you lock away objects that are still actively employed? Understanding this, it makes sense that the citizens of the newly independent Ghana did not feel very connected to the National Museum: “the objects they possess lost their meaning when they were removed from their original context of use; so far, in the museum, they have not developed new meanings.”¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, objects and things play an important role in making society possible – in, but more importantly outside the museum. Society would, without things, institutions and structures, simply not exist and, in Olsen’s words: “imagining a social world beyond things is just that – imagination.”¹⁴⁷ Building on Benedict Anderson, Olsen thus makes the imagined community tangible. Of course, tradition and cultures are invented and societies constructed, but this does not make them unreal or false. Nation-states

¹⁴⁴ Knell, 2004: p. 54.

¹⁴⁵ Fogelman, 2008: p. 23.

¹⁴⁶ Knell, 2004: p. 55.

¹⁴⁷ Olsen, 2010: p. 139.

are not resting in the minds of people; they are real entities.¹⁴⁸

Ghanaians understand that tradition is very much alive and dynamic, even if this is not reflected within museum walls. In the last few decades, international organizations like Unesco and Africom and African museums themselves have developed many strategies to surmount these differences between African and Western notions of material cultural heritage and increase resonance for African populations.¹⁴⁹ In the third and last chapter I will investigate what the contemporary strategies of the National Museum of Ghana are and if and how the government is still part of this process.

¹⁴⁸ Olsen, 2010: p. 5.

¹⁴⁹ Fogelman, 2008: p. 24.

3. Imagining Contemporary Ghana

3.1 Introduction

A museum is made a museum by its collections, so that its collecting policy, past and present, helps define its very role and identity. Yet that policy itself depends on how the museum sees its mission.¹⁵⁰ This mission was shortly after its opening for the National Museum of Ghana, above all, part of the national homogenizing strategies of the newly installed government under Kwame Nkrumah. In the previous chapter I have been trying to present the situation of the museum and its collection in the early period, after the independence of the country. Today, as seen in the introduction, the museums' board is rethinking the collection and its presentation. This third chapter contains an investigation of the museums' contemporary policies. A thorough analysis of the first and only *Cultural Policy of Ghana*, which was published by the National Commission on Culture in 2004, will be carried out. This Cultural Policy paper will serve as a guideline to test the governments' aims and actual outcome regarding the conservation and presentation of the collection of National Museum. And, to see whether and how these policies are being complied, I will explore the museums' contemporary manifestations.

3.2 Redefining the Museum

Museums as public institutions in Africa today are a legacy of colonialism. The fact that these museums were born as elitist and paternalistic institutions and were alien to indigenous populations seems to contribute to the irrelevance of museums to the contemporary African communities they intend to serve.¹⁵¹ Emmanuel Nnakenyi Arinze (1945-2005), curator of the National Museum in Jos (Nigeria) and one of the founders of the Program for Museum Development in Africa, underlines that this colonial heritage means in essence that African museums were not established for the same reasons as Western museums. The latter encouraged scholarship and provided educational enjoyment for their public and were seen as agents of change for national growth and development. In contrast, African museums were created to house the curios of a 'tribal' people and to satisfy the curiosity of the elite citizens almost to the

¹⁵⁰ Knell, 2004: p. 24.

¹⁵¹ Fogelman, 2008: p. 19.

total exclusion of the local people who produced the objects and materials.¹⁵²

As described in the previous chapter, the National Museum of Ghana started out with a collection that had three main origins: archaeological objects from the British colonial state, objects donated by (mainly Akan) chiefs and other traditional leaders, and object of modernity – of which the building is also part. And, even though it was Nkrumah's and his successor's goal to create a site that would "encourage the development of a historical sense among the people of the Gold Coast and to nourish the recent growth of national consciousness", the museum never really reached this point. The museum turned out to be under-funded, not well preserved, under-visited by local people and the collection was subjected to theft, neglected and deteriorated.

Also, the museum was intended to not only lay claim to the traditional as a source of legitimacy, but to build on the leftovers of the colonial state and at the same time, represent an image of the nation as moving forward, that is, as being modern.¹⁵³ This era, which saw the dependence of the museum on the government for all its funds, created a situation that today has become negative, preventing the museum from being independent and autonomous.¹⁵⁴ The people of Ghana have seen many things since the opening of the museum: famine, poverty, and political upheavals for example. But the museum never reacted on these events. Rather than promote new ideas and strategies to meet any form of change, the museum's board clung to the past, showing little motivation and no clear vision of what they are expected to be doing nor how to respond to contemporary society.¹⁵⁵ They still contain and exhibit objects that no longer bear any relevance to the living culture and continue to remain foreign institutions with little significance to the national communities. The fact that the curators favored one ethnic group and withal showed objects that went beyond the boundaries of the nation-state of Ghana, resulted in a failure to promote nationalism and to build a truly, unifying national culture.¹⁵⁶

Since 1986, the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome has run training courses at various levels to address the specific problem of Preventive Conservation in African Museums

¹⁵² Arinze, 1998: p. 31.

¹⁵³ Fuller, 2010: p. 166.

¹⁵⁴ Arinze, 1998: p. 33.

¹⁵⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁶ Adedze, 1995: p. 60.

(PREMA).¹⁵⁷ This program, consisting of a nine-month international university course, has proved to be very successful and effective in addressing the problems of dust, rot and decay in the various storerooms and exhibition galleries of African Museums.¹⁵⁸ In 1995, the program was part of the colloquium at the university in Accra. This program showed that well-articulated training for museum professionals at all levels is a real and pressing problem. But this is clearly also a matter of funding.

In 1998, after a period of attempts such as the PREMA project, Arinze published an article in the UNESCO magazine where he expressed his vision on the way in which African museums could move forward. He states that, in order to move forward, African museums will have to carry out an honest, incisive and in-depth self-evaluation and critique to confront a number of issues.¹⁵⁹ First (and, according to Arinze, foremost), they need to redefine their mission, their role and themselves. They need to break away from their colonial vestiges to create African-based museums that will be responsive to their communities. He adds something important to this idea, namely that in order to achieve this they must discard the classical Western model.¹⁶⁰ Second, the museums must propose new possibilities of change, rather than passively collect material culture. This means that the training that must be given to African museum professionals must be a combination of scholarship and practical work so as to produce a “complete museum person who can manage and organize the museum professionally.”¹⁶¹ Arinze ends on a positive note by saying that he sees Africa as a catalyst in museum development: “for she remains the virgin who can still give birth to ideas that will lead to the development of new museum models which will be both challenging and exciting.”¹⁶² It is worthy of note that Arinze uses the word ‘virgin’ as the embodiment of Africa, this way probably indicating the continent as ‘pure’ and ‘unaffected’.

3.3 The Cultural Policy of Ghana

Following the tendency that theorists such as Adedze and Arinze initiated, the Ghanaian government realized that some change and professionalization was required

¹⁵⁷ Arinze, 1998: p. 34.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibidem*: p. 36.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*.

in the cultural field. The strategy that was developed during and after the independence era was recognized as outdated. After three years of workshops, debates and developing, the National Commission on Culture was able to publish its first Cultural Policy in 2004. I will not discuss the entire policy here, but focus on the main points and by doing so, create an overall impression of what the commission's aims are. On the first page of the document, these aims are being stressed clearly: "It is dedicated to the realization of the vision of the people of Ghana to respect, preserve, harness and use their cultural heritage and resources to develop a united, vibrant and prosperous national community within a distinctive African identity and personality and a collective confidence and pride of place among to comity of nations."¹⁶³ The frequent use of words such as 'united' and 'pride' make it sound like it could be written fifty years earlier; the aims are still the same. But, there is something different in the way they address 'the people of Ghana'.

First of all, I would like to focus on the policy's subtitle: For the promotion of unity in diversity.¹⁶⁴ That means first and foremost great emphasis on the diversity of all ethnic groups in Ghana: "Our country was founded on a clear perception that meaningful development must be based on a strong cultural foundation. One fascinating attribute of our culture is the strength and unity we derive from our diverse cultural background."¹⁶⁵ So, it is the diversity the commission embraces. It seems as though this commission is abandoning – or, at least changing – the unifying strategies of the governments in the 1960s and 1970s. Evidently, this new approach builds on the ones that preceded it. The sense of historical continuity, for example, still lies at the basis of the policy: "Our history, cultural values and institutions must continue to exercise a deep influence on the nation's destiny and play a key role in governance and national life. This policy is proposed to give direction to the promotion of culture in nation building."¹⁶⁶

The abovementioned acknowledgement of the different ethnic groups residing in Ghana is one of the major changes in the commission's vision. And, however their main objectives (document and promote traditional cultural values, ensure the growth and development of cultural institutions and enhance Ghanaian cultural life and

¹⁶³ The Cultural Policy of Ghana, 2004: p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem: front page.

¹⁶⁵ Ibidem: p. 7.

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem: p. 9.

develop cultural programs) are not groundbreaking, how they are planning to realize this undoubtedly is. Building on the document's subtitle, the first specific objective that is outlined is showing this strategy: "The specific objectives of the Cultural Policy shall be, to foster national unity among the diverse ethnic groups by promoting cultural interaction and inter-ethnic understanding."¹⁶⁷ So, whereas Nkrumah and his successors mainly focused on the national instead on the local the government now wants to make the people of Ghana aware of the contemporary relevance of their traditions and cultural heritage by assisting local communities. But at the same time, making them aware of each other's existence and making their differences part of the whole. Also, throughout the document it becomes clear that traditional values and uses are being accepted instead of repressed.

First, chieftaincy is being recognized and supported again. The institution of chieftaincy is the cornerstone of Ghanaian traditional culture and "The functions of the National House of Chiefs thus clearly affirm that in the diversity of ethnic cultural traditions, Ghanaians recognize overarching cultural values, common historical bonds and similar cultural institutions and practices. The House has thus become a forum for projecting inter-ethnic understanding and national unity."¹⁶⁸ Linked to this revaluation is the approval of and encouragement towards traditional Ghanaian languages. Under the article 'development and promotion of culture' it is listed that the commission will develop, promote and propagate Ghanaian languages through the production and publication of literary works and the use of Ghanaian languages in educational institutions and at official and public functions.¹⁶⁹ And later in the document: "It shall be recognized that the Mother-Tongue is a vital aspect of cultural identity and vehicle for the expression and transmission of cultural values."¹⁷⁰ This is a very insightful development, for the reason that this was definitely not the case under the reign of Nkrumah and even a few decades after.

Another way to incorporate indigenous ideas and aesthetics is through architecture. In the policy, it is described that architects, planners and designers of civil works and engineers shall be encouraged through workshops and seminars to incorporate indigenous ideas and aesthetics in the design of settlements, public

¹⁶⁷ The Cultural Policy of Ghana (2004): p. 11.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibidem*: p. 13.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*: p. 16.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibidem*: p. 30.

facilities and buildings. This must give Ghanaian cities, towns and villages a distinct character. Furthermore, as a result of this policy, the government has enacted a law in 2005 to ensure that public buildings, parks and monuments embody indigenous aesthetics and culture that express their cultural values and historical experiences.¹⁷¹ The crucial notion, I believe, because of which these developments are being made possible is that of 'awareness': awareness of the fellow-citizens. It is allowed for the Ghanaian people to keep traditional values, languages and structures and preserve them, as long as they are aware of their fellow-citizens. A large part of the policy is written towards enhancing this awareness. For example, the proposed increase of excursions, not only to museums, chiefly palaces, monuments and other heritage sites, but also to historical and cultural sites in other regions "to ensure a broader appreciation of cultural diversity."¹⁷² Besides this intention – another example – is the implementation of cultural programming on radio and television. The commission states that it will support this effort by "periodic analysis of the program contents of the media to ensure adequate space for cultural materials and qualitative improvement of cultural presentation by standards determined by public opinion surveys and paradigms of good practice in line with cultural values and national interest."¹⁷³

Apart from these mass-media outings, it is interesting to see that the concept of the festival is being mentioned several times in the policy. Under the article on 'the presentation of culture', the festival is even listed first. Festivals have never been prohibited, but also never officially recognized as mode of presentation: "The state shall recognize festivals as significant events in the life of a community for the transmission of culture. It shall also recognize them as significant events in the cultural life of the nation as a whole."¹⁷⁴ It seems as though, gradually, the government is starting to realize that the most effective way to reach the people and to unite the people in the country, is through their own traditional means and habits.

This understanding is also supported by the fact that in the Policy official institutions and museums are mentioned, but marginally and always listed after the traditional habits. The Museums and Monuments Board and the National Museum are only mentioned once, when the commission lists institutions that are obliged to apply

¹⁷¹ <http://www.ghanalegal.com>

¹⁷² The Cultural Policy of Ghana (2004): p. 23.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*: p. 26.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibidem*: p. 39.

the policy by law. There is one, minute article completely devoted to the museum. Here the commission mentions its aim to establish museums “as repositories of our past and contemporary achievements as sources of inspiration to the present generation.”¹⁷⁵ The fact that such a museum already exists is not referred to. Also, the commission notes that it aims to promote the accessibility of museum objects to the populace through the operation of mobile museums.¹⁷⁶ How this would work in a practical way, is also not explained. But the fact that the commission closes off this article by stating that they are planning to “ensure that museums are promoted as part of community life and as invaluable resource for the teaching of social and cultural history”, is promising.¹⁷⁷ In the next part of this chapter, I will look at the National Museum as public institution today – more than a decade after the commission published this policy.

3.4 The National Museum of Ghana Today

The Cultural Policy shows that the government realized that the initial homogenizing strategy turned out to be without success. Coming back to the statement by the present National Museum’s Board Chairman Fritz Baffour that I mentioned in the introduction, saying that the current closure would allow for the curators to develop a new collection presentation and that the museum will explore and present the dynamic diversity of Ghana as a nation, it is interesting to see that he copies the motto of the Cultural Policy. This ‘unity in diversity’ has become an important notion. Baffour’s statement connects very well to the constructive criticism that has been expressed by for example the aforementioned historian Adedze. In his article ‘Museums as a Tool for Nationalism’ that he published in 1995, he argues that national museums should be a coordinating body of regional museums. And the latter should itself coordinate the activities of community museums.¹⁷⁸

Adedze introduces The Palace Museum of Abomey as an example of an on-site museum that succeeded. Abomey was the capital of the seventeenth-century Kingdom of Dahomey – the current Republic of Benin. All the successive kings lived in the same

¹⁷⁵ Arinze, 1998: p. 37.

¹⁷⁶ Perhaps they thought of the *Zebra-on-the-Wheel* project that took place in Botswana. This was a successful Mobile Museum project of the National Museum in Gaborone, Botswana, that attracted the public to the museum by taking the museum to remote communities that otherwise would never have had the opportunity of visiting the capital.

¹⁷⁷ Arinze, 1998: p. 37.

¹⁷⁸ Adedze, 1995: p. 63.

palace, although they built their rooms beside the preceding king whose regalia and symbols were kept in his room. The palace was burnt during a French invasion in the late nineteenth century but the French colonial authorities, led by the local section of IFAN restored the palace and the regalia of the successive kings in collaboration with the local people. This effort by the local people and the colonial government was appreciated by all. As a result, the Historical Museum of Abomey is not only a tourist attraction, but it is also considered to be a shrine to the local population. Religious ceremonies are held in the palace amidst tourist sightseeing.¹⁷⁹

The National Museum of Ghana doesn't have this historical legacy, so it must find its social relevance through alternative activities. After the publication of the Cultural Policy, some changes have been made in the collection presentation. For example, the centerpiece has been adjusted. When I visited the museum in 2012 there were traditional stools assembled in the middle space of the museum. But this time it was not only Akan stools; they were coming from 8 different chiefs of different language groups in Ghana. An attempt to show the Ghanaian diversity had been made. In the same sense, it is interesting to see that they added the state chair of Nkrumah and his statues to the museum. Making this some sort of relic from a distanced past.

As mentioned before, not much else has changed in the displays in the National Museum. Fogelman describes an early 1980s project (the first real attempt) to overhaul museum exhibitions that was terminated after only several archaeology cases were completed when staff became wary of liberties allocated to the guest curator in a context that created an uncomfortable work environment.¹⁸⁰ In 2000, changes have occurred through the addition of new displays. Two exhibitions on slavery are now on display at the museum. The first was developed internally at the request of the United Nations as a complement to the Slave Routes Project conference held in Accra in 1995. The second is a replication of the travelling exhibition *The Slave Ship Fredensborg* that was donated by the Norwegian government in 1999.¹⁸¹ In 2004, an exhibition containing chiefly Asante regalia was installed with the help of a sponsor who provided 10.000 dollars.¹⁸²

As Fogelman argues, the presentation of exhibitions is not necessarily driven by

¹⁷⁹ Adedze, 1995: p. 63.

¹⁸⁰ Fogelman, 2008: p. 22.

¹⁸¹ Ibidem.

¹⁸² Ibidem.

the Cultural Policy-prescribed museum philosophy of education, preservation and building rapport with local communities.¹⁸³ Besides the new permanent displays, the museum has since 2012 started to host temporary exhibitions that are developed externally and financed privately. This means that the role of the museum staff is mostly administrative instead of content-related. Unlike temporary exhibitions in Western museums, the exhibitor pays an exhibition fee and determines the content; much like private art galleries.¹⁸⁴ Frequently it is foreign embassies and consulates that use the venue as a public forum to celebrate their national holidays or to promote tourism to their home countries through displays of folk art and images of national treasures.¹⁸⁵ Also, local artists (who can afford it) use the venue as a gallery to showcase their work.

This exploitation of the museum adds to the current tendency of the Ghanaian museum as venues to bolster and develop foreign and financial relationships and consequently functioning as a tourist attraction. Leading example is the Cape Coast Castle Museum. This was the first major project that was sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development to invest in cultural heritage management as a mechanism to expand tourism and produce an income and infrastructural generator for socio-economic development.¹⁸⁶ Since its completion in 1995, the annual number of visitors to the Cape Coast increased fourfold.¹⁸⁷ Hence, the Ghanaian government has invested largely in the region: the roads have been improved, a modern telephone system has been installed, and electricity and water pipelines have been extended.¹⁸⁸ The Cape Coast Museum inspired many other towns throughout the country, such as Krobo, Techiman and Tongo Hills to develop museums, hoping that they will attract tourists as well. The interesting development here is, as I see it, that these museums might not be socially relevant, in the way the government had envisioned them to be. But for the region, they most definitely are, for they do meet local needs, albeit very practical needs.

Nevertheless, when going through the more recent projects the National Museum has performed I find some interesting temporary exhibitions that

¹⁸³ Fogelman, 2008: p. 22.

¹⁸⁴ <http://nationalmuseumofghana.ghana-net.net/>

¹⁸⁵ Fogelman, 2008: p. 22.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibidem*: p. 23.

¹⁸⁷ Recorded visitor arrivals at Cape Coast Castle were 7.881, 19.439 and 34.871 in 1991, 1995 and 2000 (Dembowski, 2001).

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

unquestionably are socially engaged. One example of a very topical display was when president John Atta Mills suddenly died in August 2012. Then, a special photo exhibition was installed, accompanying a book of condolence. Many local people visited the museum to sign the book, as a result of a Facebook-post.¹⁸⁹ But the most striking project so far was the *Malaria: Blood, Sweat and Tears* photo exhibition that opened in April 2012. This exhibition showcased the complex relationships between malaria, poverty and the need for international support for combating the disease on a grand scale. For the first time, through extensive wall texts, educational information on malaria and personal stories were shared with the visitors.¹⁹⁰ The museum also hired guides, especially for this exhibition, to give tours to schoolchildren. This exhibition was the result of collaboration between the UK based international charity Malaria Consortium and the National Museum of Ghana; with the financial help of the telephone company Airtel Ghana. The difference with previous exhibition lies in the socially engaged subject. By denouncing this very poignant subject and arranging educational material, the museum is taking an important step forward in the direction of Fritz Baffour's and the Cultural Policy's goals.

After this financial collaboration with Airtel, the museum launched the new initiative 'Friends of the Museum', with the phone company as its first friend. Airtel's support initially involved the creation of a Wi-Fi zone within the vicinity of the National Museum and the availability of a money platform to facilitate the easy transfer of donations through the Friends of the Museum network, in an attempt to make the museum more financially healthy.¹⁹¹ Another result of this collaboration is the increase of the online activity of the museum. With the Internet playing a large unifying role, globally and nationally, the National Museum is online increasingly present. In 2014, a new website has been launched with more up-to-date information and the start of what will be an online archive. June 30, 2015, the Museum posted its first significant tweet: "We're here!"¹⁹² Many more would follow that year. Some were simply practical information about opening hours or trouble with the museums' telephone system; others were real attempts to start a conversation with its 'followers'. Unfortunately, there were no real responses (Fig. 4). Together with the renovation of the building and

¹⁸⁹ Baffour, March 2016, in correspondence with the author.

¹⁹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/National-Museum-of-Ghana>

¹⁹¹ Baffour, March 2016, in correspondence with the author.

¹⁹² <https://twitter.com/NMofGhana/status/615781984162320384>

revision of the presentation, at this moment, the website is also being updated.¹⁹³ Clearly, the Cultural Policy is already somewhat outdated. But, it is interesting to see that the National Museum is going through some large changes. This online presence and the museums' increasing educational programs definitely meet some of the policy's aims and we will have to wait and see until after the restorations what the new collection presentation will be like.



NationalMuseumGhana @NMofGhana · 18 Nov 2015

Should the museum be responsible for collecting vintage records, such as Alhaji K. Frimpong's #KyenKyenBiAdiMawu?

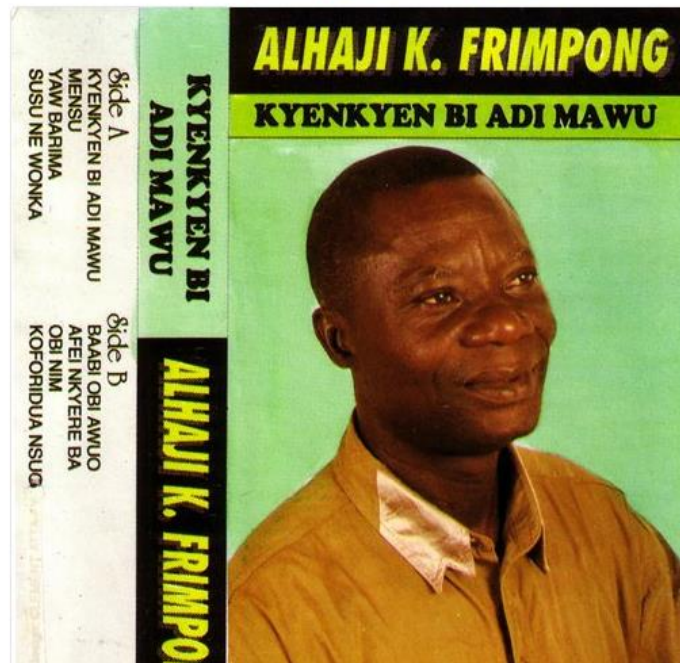


Fig. 4 Tweet by the National Museum of Ghana, November 18, 2015.

¹⁹³ GMMB: <http://www.ghanamuseums.org/>

Conclusion

When the National Museum of Ghana opened in 1957, it was part of the larger campaign to advance nationalism, an initiative of Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister of the newly independent country. The Nkrumah administration expressed that the immediate goal of the National Museum was to inculcate a sense of historical consciousness among the people of the Gold Coast as a way of harnessing the development of national consciousness and to show the 'unity of Ghana as a nation'. The reason why this process is so intriguing is that the national entity that it wished to symbolize was founded only in the same year that the museum was opened. In Africa the countries' borders, as we know them today, have been constructed by colonial rulers during their rule and officially confirmed during the Berlin Conference of 1885. The new national borders contained – and still contain– a number of different ethnic groups, some of which even overlapped into neighboring countries. In Ghana, and in all once-colonized nations, it would therefore not be an overstatement to say that the concept of nationalism is fluid.

This complex relation has been the core of my research. I have been looking at the way in which the National Museum has been defining and presenting itself in the past and today. Did the National Museum of Ghana play a role in the development of national consciousness and the creation of a national identity in Ghana since its independence in 1957? In order to answer this central question and to understand the concept of the nation-state and nationalism thoroughly, I mainly used the theories of Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha. And, to see how nationalism in Africa emerged in the form of anti-colonialism, I investigated the concept of *Négritude*, which was of great importance for independence fighters such as Kwame Nkrumah who was also one of the initiators of the National Museum of Ghana.

Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an imagined political community. Even though the members of any nation will never know or meet most of their fellow-members, so the fact that they *think* they belong to a larger collective gives them a sense of community and belonging. The efforts of nations to advance nationalism through the promotion of specific cultural histories can, from this perspective, be understood in terms of the construction of a cultural narrative, often called the 'myth of the nation'. The sense of national belonging is produced by the performance of

different *narratives, rituals* and *symbols*. The performance of national traditions enhances an important sense of continuity between the nations' present and its (imagined) past and adds to the feeling of a *shared history* of its people. According to Anderson one of the main things that is playing a role in the formation of national identity and nationalism is language. And, as described in paragraph 1.4, one of the positive aspects of colonialism is the introduction of print and a shared language. As a result, people are now able to communicate a lot easier which has led to higher tolerance and less tribal wars. The sense of national consciousness and the 'myth of the nation' have proved to be a valuable resource to many anti-colonial movements. The nation became a powerful symbol, which they used to organize themselves against the colonial administration. In contrast to subordination of the colonizer, anti-colonial nationalisms promised independence and political self-determination.

Négritude has proven to have, using the same rhetoric, a great influence on the mindset of people in colonized nations, both under French and British rule. One of its main goals was to unite people living in different nations through their shared ancestry and common origins. So, even though the movement was important in relation to anti-colonial national liberation in certain nations, it clearly had *pan-national* ambitions. *Négritude* was an attempt to save blackness from its definition in negative terms. Léopold Senghor, one of the spokesmen, celebrates blackness by describing the intuitive relationship black Africans have with the world, contrary to the clinical scientific approach the Europeans have. Aimé Césaire based his version of *Négritude* less on the instinctive differences between white and black people. He saw *Négritude* primarily as something to be measured 'with the compass of suffering'. With this, he means that a common experience of oppression is what unites black peoples more than their essential qualities as 'Negroes', as Senghor describes it. In forging this sense of collective identity they should join the fight with others who are oppressed, particularly people of color.

Both Césaire and Senghor saw the emancipation of *all* peoples from colonialism as the ultimate goal of *Négritude*. One of the great strengths of the concept was that it was nostalgic for a mythic African past. It was posited a denial of, and an affront to, colonial representations of African history and culture. Senghor argued for a return to an African spirit, while for Césaire 'return' meant the importance for Caribbean blacks to forge a connection with their ancestral home of Africa. These returns both depend

upon the construction of a mythic pre-colonial African past before the time of colonialism. In Ghana this has been of great importance as well. Nkrumah and his followers also wanted to provide modern-day Ghana with older roots in a pre-colonial state formation by linking the Akan peoples to the ancient Ghana Empire. In the presentations of the National Museum, this historical legitimacy is very visible. By showing replicas of ancient Greek and Roman artifacts next to Ghanaian objects, a sense of connectedness and continuation is being forged.

In the years since the period of decolonization, there has emerged disenchantment with the ideas of the nation and nationalism. In the case of Ghana, the totalitarian reign of Kwame Nkrumah and the fact that he had been 'wasting' money on other countries in order to promote Pan-Africanism, led to a period of contempt by the people. The policy he initiated, homogenizing all ethnical groups in Ghana and suppressing their indigenous diverse customs and traditions, led to complications. When reading Bhabha's article 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', this process is being expressed in-depth. He claims that the fact that many occupants of colonial lands did not possess a sense of 'deep, horizontal comradeship' prior to the advent of colonial government caused complications in a later stage. Although the myth of the nation might function as a valuable resource in uniting a people in opposition to colonialism, it often does so by ignoring the diversity of those individuals it seeks to homogenize. Many once-colonized nations have struggled with the internal differences that threaten the production of a national unity. This is exactly what happened in Ghana. This quote by John McLeod sharply sums up this process: "A plural population can never be converted into a singular people because plurality and difference can never be entirely banished."¹⁹⁴

As I noticed in the Cultural Policy that the Ghanaian government published in 2004, they now seem to be aware of these issues Bhabha described. The document's subtitle, *for the promotion of unity in diversity*, is a good indication of this change of perspective. Instead of homogenizing the people of Ghana through suppression of their own heritage, great emphasis is being put on the diversity of all ethnic groups in Ghana: "Our country was founded on a clear perception that meaningful development must be based on a strong cultural foundation. One fascinating attribute of our culture

¹⁹⁴ McLeod, 2000: p. 119.

is the strength and unity we derive from our diverse cultural background.”¹⁹⁵ In the National Museum, this shift has not become that visible yet. But, as GMMB Chairman Fritz Baffour stated to announce the current temporary closing of the museum, this closure will allow for the curators to develop a new collection presentation. Baffour also underlined the importance of the ‘dynamic diversity of Ghana as a nation’, which will be their main focus.

To come back to my central question if the National Museum of Ghana played a role in the development of national consciousness and the creation of a national identity in Ghana since its independence in 1957, I think it safe to say that its initiators were very much aiming for the museum to play this role. However, the colonial history of this museum – and for many Ghanaians of museums in general – and the clear nation-building strategies which were in reality not captivating the minds of the local people, made the museum not the successful institution the founders were hoping for. As soon as an object ‘disappears’ into a museum, it has been removed from its original context, where the object was being used and making sense. On display in a museum, it loses this function and its importance. But, as mentioned above, the museum is going through some important changes. When the museum re-opens later this year, it will be interesting to see how the curators have visualized this new approach.

¹⁹⁵ The Cultural Policy of Ghana, 2000: p. 7.

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Images

Fig 1. Beheaded statue of Kwame Nkrumah in Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Accra. Photo: my own archive.

Fig 2. National Museum, Accra, Ghana: plan and section showing the 'diagrammatic analysis of building climate and function'. Photo: Lasdun Archive.

Fig 3. Overview, National Museum, Accra, Ghana. Photo: official website of the museum: <<http://nationalmuseum.ghana-net.com/index.html>>

Fig 4. Tweet by the National Museum of Ghana, November 18, 2015:
<<https://twitter.com/NMofGhana/status/615781984162320384>>