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Linking Centralised Politics to Custodianship of Cultural Heritage in Ethiopia: Examples of National-Level Museums in Addis Ababa

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Ethiopia has a history of complex cultural dynamics, which have been reflected in and manipulated according to the political motivations of successive governments. In particular, historical biases in cultural policy and practices can be strongly linked to governmental support of cultural programming initiatives such as the types of culture centres that were developed for particular segments of the public. Archival sources – beginning with the rule of Haile Selassie, as well as in more recent studies of heritage management in the country – give a detailed chronology of government-sanctioned developments in Ethiopia's culture sector in the last century, which have influenced both the institutional presentation of heritage objects, and public access to those objects. For this article, archival and contemporary sources related to Ethiopia's cultural policy were central to a review of the successes and constraints of two federally-funded museums in Addis Ababa.

Key words: cultural policy, museums, Ethiopia, heritage preservation, custodianship

In exploring the development of national museums in Ethiopia, it is necessary to have some understanding of the socio-political history. This is because the divergent ideologies of various ruling parties have contributed to the nature of heritage conservation, and the political implications of cultural expression cannot be denied in the Ethiopian context. Despite divisive historical regulation of cultural expressions, notable efforts of public presentation and the conservation of diverse heritages in Ethiopian museums have emerged. The present article, part of a wider study of community engagement in Ethiopian museums (Asante 2008), reviews the influences of Ethiopia's recent socio-political history on cultural programming and evaluates how community actors participate in activities related to both heritage management and museums.

This historical review of the political influences on museum developments in 20th century Ethiopia will help to underscore the motivations behind current cultural preservation initiatives, and help to place Ethiopia's museum practices in the wider discourse of African museology and cultural politics. In investigating the relationship between politics and culture in Ethiopia it will give a background to current federal initiatives, including advances in the celebration of cultural

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pluralism. It also aims to explain organisational and funding constraints in the management of cultural heritage.

Museums and Politics in Africa

By and large, the early establishment of museums in places like America, India, and Africa followed colonial visions of what constituted a museum, and were based on the precedents set in the museums of western and northern Europe whose collections reflected conventional western art-historical assumptions. Even in the latter half of the 20th century, museums that were created outside of colonial influences were often still modelled upon American or European standards. Authors such as Gaugue (2001) and Visonà et al. (2001), for example, pointed out that tropical Africa's early public museums reflected a colonial mentality which objectified the exotic otherness of peoples of the locale, while serving as forums for justifying the colonial prerogative.

After independence many African museums struggled to move beyond the inherited western habits of institutional presentation of artefacts as well as colonial conceptions of who the audience of an African museum should be. Fortunately, recent trends have seen many of these colonial-era museums transformed into centres that promote research into national customs and cultures – making efforts to address the issue of elitism in access to cultural heritage. Moreover, entirely new African museums have arisen that, though not immune from modern socio-political wrangling, have nonetheless attempted to establish uniquely Africanised museum venues which, especially of late, embrace the diversity of cultural expressions.

Despite many noteworthy advances in the African museology discourse, persistent misconceptions about the current nature, missions, and concerns of museums in Africa remain. Many debates in the worldwide museum community, however, are simultaneously being debated among African museologists; African museum specialists are actively contributing to these debates in conferences (AFRICOM, South African Museums Association, West African Museums Programme and others),¹ and in publications (ICOM 1992; Irvine 1999; Kaplan 1994; Ravenhill 1994; Ardouin 1997; Adande and Arinze 2002; Coombes 2003). Not only are African museums endeavouring to purge themselves of the elitist imprint on museums, they are also concerned with securing institutional support for community-relevant cultural programming in often precarious political climates.

Introduction to 20th Century Political Influences on Cultural Expressions in Ethiopia

Ethiopia, like other African nations, has a history of complex cultural dynamics, which have been reflected in and manipulated by successive regimes. Although never colonised by western powers, the nation's rulers' prejudiced tactics had similarly profound effects on the support of privileged cultural expressions,

intended to advance a centralised political agenda. An outline of the political events of the last century that influenced the Ethiopian government's generalised support of cultural programming will be helpful in evaluating the historical biases in cultural policy and practice. I will then highlight the organisation and governmental support of cultural programming in general, and focus on the evolution of two museums at the national level in order to attribute advances in cultural pluralism, as well as identify areas of cultural policy and practice that could benefit from future revision.

Precursors to the Modern State

Looking back on Ethiopia's long history, political conflict seems to have always existed, though with oscillations in intensity and locale. For thousands of years Ethiopia has been multilingual and multi-ethnic – with current estimates showing that in a population of 74 million people (CSA 2008), there are nearly 80 ethnic groups that speak 80 languages (Bender et al. 1976; Bloor and Tamrat 1996). In such a plural society, it is not surprising that the various social, political and cultural groups have been in fluctuating states of cultural harmony and discord, incorporation and fragmentation.

From the late 19th century, ethnic Amhara from the Shewa region headed a feudal aristocracy and their elite members, along with Amhara assimilationists, were the dominating group in terms of government decisions regarding education, language, economics and politics. It was the Shewan king Menelik (later Emperor Menelik II) who consolidated the Ethiopian Empire within its present-day topography (excepting Eritrea), establishing his new capital in the city of Addis Ababa. Shortly after the death of Menelik II, one of his favoured descendants was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I (1892–1975) in 1930. Haile Selassie soon began modernising his empire, but maintained the Christian Amhara dominance of his progenitor.

Institutionalisation of Cultural Custodianship under Haile Selassie I

As early as 1931, Haile Selassie set about modernising the empire by establishing Ethiopia's first written constitution and consolidating power within his own hereditary line. Amhara dominance characterised the imperial regime: Amharic was the language of government and education; Amhara representation dominated central government posts; Orthodox Christian identity was favoured for upper administrative and military positions; and Amhara became powerful landholders. The imperial regime attempted to validate Amhara dominance by emphasising the linguistic and historical superiority of their group.

Haile Selassie expanded his modernisation initiatives with the creation of the first National Archives and Library Agency of Ethiopia (*Wemezekir*) in 1944. The collection of regalia and art that had been donated by the royal family and their

associates for special exhibition in the mid-1930s, and later kept at the National Archives, would eventually merge with the founding collection of the National Museum of Ethiopia. Along with the National Archives and Library, other modernisation initiatives that would play a role in the centralised support of cultural heritage included the first institute of post-secondary education (University College of Addis Ababa, or UCAA) established in 1950; the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) with its museum, founded in 1963; and the Ethiopian Antiquities Administration, created in 1966. However, the advances in educational and cultural arenas were not of immediate benefit to the wider public; one of the objectives of the Antiquities Administration was to stimulate popular interest in Ethiopian antiquities,² but it was made clear that ownership and possession of all antiquities belonged to (and therefore must be surrendered to) the state.³

In addition, a common ironic feature of these early institutions was that, while they aimed to promote Ethiopian culture, their highest administrators were often foreigners.⁴ Qualified as they were, as well as being exceptionally knowledgeable in Ethiopian studies, in the absence of formally organised Ethiopian scholarship, these foreign scholars could not help but bring foreign aesthetics to bear upon the presentation of Ethiopian culture in these institutions. Correspondingly, in their capacities as affiliates and employees of the state, the chosen interests of foreign leaders in Ethiopia's heritage sector often mirrored the government's expressed interest; interests that were set out under the then Ministry of Education and Fine Arts. Thus antiquities, Christian art, manuscripts, contemporary Ethiopian painters patronised by the emperor and who had studied academic art abroad,⁵ as well as Christian history, were frequently the preferred interests of the state's foreign affiliates who were employed in the educational and culture sectors. An example of the merging of state and foreign interests in early cultural institutions was seen in 1959 when – at Ethiopia's first post-secondary institution (UCAA) – the country's first exhibition of Amharic books was organised by Stanislaw Chojnacki, the institution's librarian (Pankhurst 2000). Similarly, student members of the UCAA Ethnological Society established by Chojnacki were, at Chojnacki's urging, instrumental in amassing and researching an ethnographic collection of objects, which later formed the foundation of the IES Museum collection. This represents an early case of a wider public (though still educated elite) having direct participation in the establishment of early national museum collections (Pankhurst 2000; Chojnacki 1996).

The institutionalisation of cultural custodianship under Haile Selassie outlined above set precedents that would continue long past his own reign, although by the mid-1970s a revolutionary shake-up of leadership was imminent. Discontent with policies that privileged the elite grew among the masses, and in time, Haile Selassie's unwillingness to accommodate rural peasantry interests within the feudal system, combined with his incompetence in dealing with prolonged drought and famine, led to the revolution of 1974.

Abbay (2004) has labelled the type of ethnic dominance seen during Haile Selassie's reign as 'the use and abuse of history'. This prevailed throughout much of the 20th century, and contributed to a series of rebellions and coups.⁶ Essentially:

In its quest for hegemonic power through which the people would be ruled consensually, the state vied with centrifugal elites for history by producing, privileging and maintaining particular versions of bygone events as collective representations of the Ethiopian past. Subordinated ethno-regional elites reacted by seeking their own history, with their heroes and villains. (Abbay 2004:596)

Cultural Representation under the Derg Regime

In 1974, the Provisional Military Administrative Council (Derg regime), led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, seized power and established a socialist state. The new revolutionary force aimed to make political reforms inspired by Marxist ideology. In order to pave the way for a classless society, reforms were initiated immediately which would affect nearly every aspect of political and social affairs in the country, including cultural representation. In fact, immediately after the coup d'état the Derg leader made an inscription in the so-called 'golden guestbook' of the IES Museum, declaring that the contents of the museum were for the people: a gesture of historic significance, signalling a break from the elitists' control over treasures of cultural heritage.

In the years immediately following the 1974 revolution, the collective representations of Ethiopian history sanctioned by the Derg were the polar opposite of those promoted during Haile Selassie's rule. As a case in point, under the Ethiopian Empire, Orthodox Christianity was favoured as the state religion, while other religions were relegated to the periphery, but the Derg's official stance was that all religions were equal. Moreover, while Haile Selassie commissioned works of art by a limited number of trained artists and favoured depictions of the culture and history of the Orthodox Church and his own genealogical line, the Derg demanded instead that artists – especially those who were well known and/or art instructors – create art which was *about* and *for* the masses. Thus scenes of rural life and communal solidarity were expected of painters,⁷ while community theatre and dance groups were scripted to spread socialist ideals to public audiences.

Initial reforms that particularly affected cultural heritage included changes in the bureaucratic organisation of cultural institutions; in 1974, the Ethiopian Antiquities Administration (established during Haile Selassie's reign, and charged with research, the preservation of monuments and antiquities, and museum management) became a department of the Ministry of Culture and Sports Affairs, and in 1976 the Center for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (CRCCH) was created within the same ministry.⁸ Both the ministry and CRCCH would have lasting organisational arrangement and responsibilities, which would outlast the Derg's power.

In a relatively brief time, the revolutionary move from imperial to military rule was followed by fighting among the new government and opposition forces vying for control of power from February 1977 until late 1978. In violent conflicts over the next decade, tens of thousands of intellectuals, students, and others suspected of political opposition were detained and tortured, or executed. An era of fear prevailed, while policies of resettlement and displacement led to continued resentment and uprisings protesting disappearances of citizens, and the strain on resources that were exacerbating famine.

Amidst the civil strife and discontent that continued for another decade, the Derg managed to establish some important provisions for cultural heritage management, though they were long overdue. On 31 August 1989, 'A proclamation to provide for the study and protection of antiquities' came into effect that included provisions for artistic heritage ranging from manuscripts to sculptures, ethnographic implements and ornaments, covering the whole gamut of cultural objects, both organic and manmade.⁹ This represented an important shift from the old Antiquities Administration whose remit pertained only to objects dating before the mid-19th century and was particularly concerned with religious art.¹⁰ Acknowledging the importance of vernacular arts and natural environments should have paved the way for greater support of geographic and social diversity in the heritage sector. Nonetheless, despite these and other efforts to celebrate the plurality of the state – at least in policy – during the Derg era, Amhara dominance remained and cultural oppression was rampant. Showing pride in the cultural legacies of separate ethnic groups apparently went against socialist ideals, which promoted a unified Ethiopian community. Thus, treasured objects of ethnic identity were often confiscated and destroyed by the Derg, and people were fearful to gather in groups for cultural practices, which the administration might misinterpret as political assembly.¹¹ Yet again, a government had failed to introduce policies that adequately accommodated the variety of ethnic groups. Anger over displacement and resettlement programmes, and severe famine throughout the 1980s, led to civil revolts and iron-fisted suppression tactics by the Derg.

Custodianship of Culture in the Federal Democratic Republic

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition force, led by members of the Tigrayan ethnic group, ousted the Derg on 28 May 1991. In the subsequent transitional government, Meles Zenawi became the interim president, and later prime minister. The EPRDF remains the dominant party of the present government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), a government constitutionally adopted in December 1994 and installed the following year. Under the federal republic system, there were some positive moves to disavow the atrocities of the former Derg, such as the first multi-party elections in 1995 and the establishment of ethnic federalism. However, the silencing by intimidation, and detention of opponents of the EPRDF, remains common practice.

In terms of cultural policy and practices, the current government has, as noted by Abbay (2004:604ff), attempted to practise cultural inclusiveness that accommodates the variety of Ethiopia's ethnic groups. There has been more religious tolerance, for instance; since 1991, the official favouritism for Orthodox Christianity was replaced with constitutionally sanctioned freedom of religion. Moreover, the state officially recognises Christian and Islamic holidays.

In 1994, the country was divided into ethnically-based regions. Currently, there are nine of these member (regional) states, and two autonomous administrative zones (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa) in the FDRE. Under ethnic-based federalism, a progressive attitude of multi-ethnic tolerance was constitutionally prescribed, whereby the nation's cultural diversity was afforded greater respect than in previous regimes. National standards and policy criteria for the 'protection and preservation of cultural and historical legacies' were set forth (FDRE 1997:article 51), and equality of languages was recognised (article 5). Moreover, important cultural objectives were constitutionally inscribed:

1. Government shall have the duty to support, on the basis of equality, the growth and enrichment of cultures and traditions that are compatible with fundamental rights, human dignity, democratic norms and ideals, and the provisions of the Constitution.
2. Government and all Ethiopian citizens shall have the duty to protect the country's natural endowment, historical sites and objects.
3. Government shall have the duty, to the extent its resources permit, to support the development of the arts, science and technology. (FDRE 1994:article 91)

By constitutional mandate, then, the current government seems to have not only supported the rights of cultural expression by all ethnic groups, but also to have recognised its own obligation to support the arts. Still, the key phrase in terms of implementation of article 91, above, is 'to the extent its resources permit'; in practice, monetary and expertise resource shortages have inhibited the full development of the proposed cultural objectives. For example, examining where culture fits into national government expenditures for social services, it is clear that culture is not given great consideration: since 1997, the economically linked category of 'culture and sports' received only one to two per cent of the annual government expenditures for social services.¹² In terms of federal support under FDRE, culture is not heavily funded when compared with other social service sectors.¹³ That said, the federal administration has still managed to consistently increase its recurrent expenditure on 'culture and sports' over the last ten years and helped renovate both the National Museum of Ethiopia and the IES Museum.

The FDRE has also clarified the roles of leading cultural departments. For instance, proclamation 209/2000 granted CRCCH the status of an authority as the renamed Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCCH) and is charged with the protection, supervision, preservation, research and support of cultural heritage, tangible and intangible.¹⁴ ARCCCH has recently

been instrumental in coordinating training in heritage management (for example, object handling, preventing illicit trade, stewardship of properties, digitisation of collections) to a wider public audience, especially through workshops for administrators of the regional bureaus of culture who may have received little previous training. In 2003, for example, representatives of AARCH and the Harari Regional Bureau of Culture joined the Ethiopian National Customs Authority's workshops to heighten awareness of the illegal export of cultural items. Subsequently, signed authorisation was required for the export of all traditional baskets and manuscripts from Harar.¹⁵ Moreover, in the past five years, the Ministry of Culture and ARCCCH have collaborated with regional bureaus of culture, civic groups and international agencies, including UNESCO, to arrange technical, financial and infrastructural support for the growing number of regional museums.

Politics and Culture in Perspective

In Ethiopia's plural society, the nature of the implementation of various political ideologies (whether by rewarding assimilation, allowing for accommodation, or promoting conciliation by the government administrations) has affected the degree to which the majority of citizens have felt satisfied with the cultural situation in the country over time. Successive regimes used selective representations of linguistic and material history to promote their own agenda. Haile Selassie created national cultural institutions which worked in his interest of promoting modernisation. These premier institutions were also instrumental in advancing the study of selected aspects of Ethiopian culture and history among a selected elite audience, often in consort with foreign scholars and their associated establishments. The imperial command expressly promoted Orthodox Christianity, Amhara language and Shewan dynastic history – giving particular attention to the protection of their associated antiquities (manuscripts, architecture, religious art), all of which were proclaimed to be state property. However, the empire gave little consideration to engaging the wider public in the promotion of or access to institutionally supported cultural projects.

In contrast, the subsequent Derg regime promoted the creation of a new 'revolutionary' portrayal of the working class in the arts even at the local level through propaganda activities disseminated through *kebeles* (urban dwellers' associations); for example, the Harari community organised a travelling exhibition of culture, music and dance that coincided with the anniversary of the deposing of Emperor Haile Selassie I on 12 September 1974 (Zekaria n.d.). However, the Derg suppressed representations that it thought glorified the imperial legacy or went against socialist ideals. To this end, the former imperial regalia and material referents were rounded up, stored and effectively demystified in the new regime's government buildings, including museums. The Derg era also witnessed important reorganisation of national institutions responsible for cultural heritage, granting constitutional equality among Ethiopia's languages. Similarly, the Ethiopian Antiquities Administration (under which the National Museum functioned) that

was previously managed by an executive board chaired by the emperor himself was transferred to the Ministry of Culture and Sports in 1974. This perhaps symbolically represented a transfer from an exclusive dominion to an authority with proclaimed public interest. Then, in 1976, CRCCH was created in the aforementioned ministry and was given powers to protect, supervise, preserve, discover, advise, and study Ethiopia's cultural heritage. CRCCH would prove to be an enduring organ of cultural management, even outlasting the Derg regime whose inclusive cultural 'policies' meant little when socio-cultural/political 'practices' were, in fact, terrorising.

Finally, on paper and to a degree in practice, the subsequent EPRDF ruling party, in attempting to support ethnic federalism, has sought to accommodate the variety of cultural and linguistic practices of most ethnic groups. The ethnic pluralism of the nation has become a tool which the EPRDF sees as an asset, especially in terms of international investment in heritage conservation and for the future course of the nation's economic development (Tarsitani 2009a).¹⁶

The federal provisions for a relative decentralisation of regional bureaus of culture has also allowed for some local autonomy (financial and ideological) in cultural heritage management; autonomy not previously known in regional or zonal levels under previous governments (Asante 2006; Tarsitani 2009b). As a result, regional administrators are inviting often-overlooked groups of local artisans and women representatives to participate and benefit from cultural workshops.¹⁷

Moreover, the emergence of federal support for cultural programming like the Ethiopian Cultural Heritage Project¹⁸ marks an innovative attempt to sustain and promote, on an unprecedented scale, community participation in the visual arts of Ethiopia. Essentially, as regards cultural programming as a wellspring of economic development, the government seems to be moving towards the support of more local, multi-ethnic cultural initiatives in which unprecedented numbers of citizens may participate. Museums certainly have a role to play in this.¹⁹

Present-day Federal Custodianship of Cultural Heritage

The display of both historical and rare, and contemporary and more abundant arts in publicly accessible institutions, is a 20th century development which began with Haile Selassie's initiatives; namely, the establishment of IES, the Antiquities Administration, and the Institute of Archaeology.²⁰ Although the institutionalisation of Ethiopia's tangible heritage began with Haile Selassie's modernisation efforts, museums have developed considerably since that time due, in no small part, to some recent federal policy changes. For example, in 1997, the (then) Ministry of Information and Culture issued a *Cultural Policy*, and commented in its introduction on the efforts of previous governments:

Nowadays it has become a global conviction that any development program that does not pay due attention to culture cannot bear fruit. However, neither the past regimes nor the members of the ruling class were able to accept this reality, and there was not a time when a development policy that considered the culture of the people has been put into effect. On the contrary, they were engaged in promoting policies designed to consolidate political systems that insured the continuation of their personal powers and welfare. To this effect, they followed a discriminatory policy by seeding enmity among peoples and regarding the culture of a certain nation or nationality as superior and looking down upon the cultures of others. (FDRE 1997)

The FDRE proclaimed this to be a popular cultural policy, which pays attention to the rights of participation by its multi-ethnic population, and aims to create culture-conscious citizens of a nation that gives equal recognition to the history, fine arts, handicrafts, and folk art (oral traditions and performance arts, etc) (FDRE 1997). In fact, there are many good intentions in the current policy and related proclamations, including for instance the provision allowing the state and private citizens to maintain *de facto* custodianship of material heritage.²¹ However, the legal mandate for decisions regarding custodianship obtained through exploration, discovery and study of cultural heritage lies, in fact, with the federal government through ARCCH.²² Essentially this means that citizens may possess cultural objects, but those objects deemed to be of exceptional national value, or historical items which can be found only through archaeological, palaeontological, or anthropological inquiry are generally outside the public domain, unless prior – difficult to obtain – permission is granted by ARCCH. The wording of the policy discourages citizens from coming forth with important heritages in their possession for fear of confiscation, and importantly, leaves no chance for citizens to meaningfully engage in the process of discovery and preservation of their heritage.

Nonetheless, as federal policy towards culture has evolved from its exclusionary incipience to its present form, there can be no denying the positive and inclusive strides made in the last decade. But in Ethiopia, policy and practice are not always mirrored. Therefore, in order to evaluate the performance of the current cultural policy, I will now consider the current administrative division of federal bureaucracy, and the national level actors who are officially responsible for decisions regarding the implementation of the national cultural policy.

The highest actor in heritage management at national level is the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Among powers relating to the tourism industry, this ministry has supervisory power for heritage conservation and is charged with the establishment and expansion of national museums. It is also expressly charged with expanding ‘cultural institutions to institutionalize public participation in the field of culture’.²³

Three other federal executive organs related to cultural heritage are accountable to the ministry: ARCCH, The National Archives and Library Agency, and the National Theatre.²⁴ ARCCH is responsible for the kind of material heritage of particular interest to this study of museums because it has an official mandate

for the management and protection of cultural heritage assets. The activities of ARCCCH include research, expertise sharing, and allocation of financing for major cultural heritage projects. There are six departments in ARCCCH, but the National Museum, which will be described later, is most pertinent here.²⁵

Another important branch of the current national level government's efforts in heritage conservation is the IES. As stated earlier, IES is a research institute, library, and museum and is a major custodian of man-made artefacts in Ethiopia. It was established in 1963 at Haile Selassie I University (formerly UCAA and subsequently Addis Ababa University), and came to house a significant collection of books and an ethnographical collection of artefacts. Today, IES remains a part of Addis Ababa University, and although on 16 August 1995, the university senate issued administrative autonomy to IES, it remains a federally funded organisation, inextricably tied to the administration of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Having considered the current federal management of cultural heritage, the following section turns to the presentation of objects in public museums, in order to understand the links between national-level administration and institutionalised presentations of cultural objects. A review of the National Museum and the IES Museum, both in Addis Ababa, will serve as case studies of contemporary policy/practice at the national level.

The National Museum of Ethiopia

The collection of the National Museum began with donations by the royal family and their associates for an exhibition in the mid-1930s, which was first housed in the National Archives and Library. Later, the collection was transferred to the National Bank, then to buildings belonging to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, until 1999 when a new structure was built for the museum after advice from UNESCO consultants (Bossardet 1981).

Today, the National Museum is part research institute, part museum. The museum proper is located in a four-storey building at Amst Kilo campus of Addis Ababa University (AAU). The entrance fee (as of 2007) is 50 cents for Ethiopian students, 2 birr for adult Ethiopians, and 10 birr for foreigners.²⁶ The collection ranges from the 3.5 million-year-old skeleton of 'Lucy' (*Australopithecus afarensis*), to modern paintings, and includes a variety of cultural and historical objects, archaeological findings and art objects. Among the archaeological, historical and cultural objects are an abundance of items that represent vernacular arts. However, the collection of more than 45,000 items is 97 per cent archaeological, which is heavily comprised of palaeontological finds, and at first impression the holdings appear to represent a collection of Ethiopia's distant past.

Despite the large numbers tallied in the museum's statistics, the inventory methods of the National Museum give a misleading perception of its holdings,

as the more than 45,000 items listed as ‘archeological findings’ actually include bone fragments, beads, and pottery shards which are individually counted as ‘objects’. A review of items actually exhibited in the museum space will help to clarify which heritage items are presented to visitors.

The lower two floors of the museum contain the largest display areas and focus on ancient history, and imperial relics. The subterranean level holds fossils and skeletons, while the first floor holds royal relics, archaeological finds from Axum and Tigray, ancient tools and vessels, and a multimedia presentation on the birth and development of humanity. The upper floors of the exhibition hall are dedicated to the more recent history, and modern-day culture including modern art, handicrafts, costumes, religious artefacts, musical instruments, and weapons. Although the cultural expressions of many ethnic groups can be found on the upper floors, the items are rarely labelled with classificatory names or functions, not to mention the ethnic groups with which the item is associated, or the location where the items were collected. Instead, insufficiently wide categories of ‘Christian’ or ‘Muslim’ or ‘Musical Instruments’ and the like are all that appear on many of the displays.

One would expect that the combination of low entrance fees, central location, and large collection of historical and cultural items would lead to high visitor numbers, but this is not the case. There has been an increase in domestic and foreign visitors to the museum nearly every year between 1998 and 2004.²⁷ More than 70 per cent of the visitors were domestic and it would seem that locals (i.e., Ethiopians) are benefiting most. However, the total number of visitors each day is actually disappointing considering the central location of the museum in the capital city of nearly three million people. In fact, the museum’s web page laments that the museum can be compared to a well-kept secret.

IES Museum

The IES Museum was initially arranged hastily in only a few months in order to accommodate the first conference of the Heads of African States:

In the great movement of political life, Ethiopia intended, with her acute sense of history, to show the best of her cultural heritage ... the Institute and its collections were to play their role, this time on a grand scale. (Chojnacki, quoted in Pankhurst 2000)

The early ethnographic and literary collection has since expanded to accommodate a broad range of items with increasing numbers of objects and icons considered under threat of illicit expatriation. Today, the IES departments have also increased to five sections: anthropology, art gallery, ethnomusicological, philatelic, and the Culture African Network Centre for research and artist exchange.²⁸

The mission of IES has been distinguished by its emphasis on research and conservation of cultural heritage. Its initial emphasis was on scholarly pursuits (to collect, research, exhibit, publish, and hold conferences), and specific mention was made of working with scholars from abroad and presenting exhibits abroad.

However, interest in a public access dimension was missing from the mission statement, a situation that remains to this day. The emphasis on scholarship can be clearly seen in the two objectives of IES, as proclaimed by the Addis Ababa University senate in 1995, to:

1. conduct, promote and coordinate research and publication on Ethiopian Studies with special emphasis on the humanities and cultural studies; and
2. aid in the conservation of the Ethiopian cultural heritage by collecting, classifying, cataloguing, preserving and displaying in a museum objects reflecting the material and spiritual culture of the diverse nationalities of Ethiopia.²⁹

Today, the IES Museum collection continues to develop with the help of the Society of Friends of the IES, which works to increase awareness and raise funds for the collections. Presently, in an area of over 500 square meters, the museum houses arguably the most varied collection of quality artefacts and fine art in the country, sampling objects from nearly all cultures in Ethiopia. It balances examples of the more recent past alongside examples of handicrafts that are part of Ethiopia's living heritage.

IES's entrance fees are significantly higher than those of the National Museum: as of October 2007, non-Ethiopian adults pay 20 birr, non-Ethiopian students pay 10 birr, Ethiopian adults pay 3 birr, and Ethiopian students pay 1 birr. The number and type of visitors to IES's Museum between September 2004 and August 2007 have been recorded by entrance ticket receipts and show that in these three years about 30,000 people in total visited the IES Museum – about half the number that visited the National Museum in both 2004/05 and 2005/06.³⁰ Even if the IES Museum collection is much richer than that of the National Museum, access is certainly curtailed. The Amst Kilo campus requires much less security clearance for entrance by the general public than does the Arat Kilo campus where IES is housed; just to enter the Arat Kilo campus a non-university affiliate must surrender photo ID and pass a security check.

The IES Museum guest book entries provide a significant guide to visitor responses to the museum experience, and generally there are positive responses from all categories of visitor. Of course, only a small fraction of visitors take the time to leave comments in the guest books and most of them limit their comments to one sentence at the IES Museum, but these comments could be helpful in developing future visitor programming. Among the information visitors often include in guest books is their nationality; of the 31,424 visitors who provided this information between 1999 and 2007, less than one-third were Ethiopian nationals.

Conclusion

The exhibitions of the two federally funded and administrated national level museums described above represent the museums that have a long history of federally-sponsored alliances. There is a wealth of artefacts that celebrate the

'birth of humanity' in the National Museum's collection, while the collection of artefacts from the IES Museum is heavily celebratory of the Aksum Empire, Christian heritage, and imperial legacy, although a growing and diversified collection of other ethnic and religious heritages is present. Despite the central location of these two museums in Addis Ababa, and their public accessibility (with entry fee), there are fewer yearly visitors to either museum than one would expect in a city with a population of nearly three million. Located only a few hundred metres apart, the National Museum and the IES Museum have similar emphasis on research, so the limited number of visitors to the museum tend to be affiliated with the university (educated elites), visiting expatriates, or foreigners.

Research into the collections of these museums has been carried out by curators and researchers from Ethiopia and abroad, and continues to advance the understanding of Ethiopia's cultural heritage. Moreover, a newly organised Graduate Programme in Ethiopian Studies has been integrated into IES (Addis Ababa University). Since 2005, this programme includes specialisations in museology, contemporary cultural studies and indigenous cultural studies and will certainly have positive effects on the future of Ethiopian scholarship with regard to museum collections in Addis Ababa.³¹ However, there remain several constraints to the development of these federally run institutions. First, the sometimes arbitrary and/or political postings of administrators in the culture sector can lead to problems in the management of bureaucracy and the biased implementation of cultural policy. This becomes even more problematic with the frequent reorganisation of executive organs of the federal government, which leads to the constant reshuffling of limited staff, thereby diminishing the opportunities to develop proficiency through familiarity with procedures. Secondly, in the past, budgets shared with information, sports and youth or social affairs sectors left limited funding for culture. Furthermore, before the 2005 restructuring of the culture sector, budgetary and expertise expenditures for this sector was mostly reserved for the conservation of archaeological sites, and few resources were traditionally made available for conservation or promotion of other aspects of cultural heritage – in particular, aspects of culture which pertain to the lives and livelihoods of a wider section of the contemporary Ethiopian population. Thirdly, lack of information-sharing and expertise-sharing within sub-ministry branches has remained a problem. A lack of systematic standardised documentation, inventory and statistics-gathering methodologies between departments, and even within an individual department, is an unfortunately common circumstance. With so many practical challenges facing these and other museums, it is fortunate that a new Ethiopian non-governmental organisation (NGO), Ethiopian Museums Support Association (EMSA) has begun to offer timely assistance in the last few years. Registered with the Ministry of Justice in July 2005, EMSA aims to assist the development of museums and museum-related institutions throughout the country with conferences, knowledge-transfer and awareness-raising projects initiated to promote professional development.³²

Finally, these national level museums do not have mission statements that support programming or activities that engage non-academic community members. As such, only a limited elite group is benefitting from their current activities, even if the present government has explicitly called for greater participation of citizens in cultural heritage management and conservation. Some have argued that the limited number of visitors is due to a lack of interest on the part of ordinary citizens, and that the few museums in Ethiopia result from the limited amount of museum-quality artefacts available. Getachew (2000) has claimed that a compelling reason for the 'remarkable dearth' of museums in Ethiopia is 'the looting and forced removal of countless treasures by foreign armies resulting in magnificent items of Ethiopian origin that are today on display in European Museums'.³³ Placing the guilt for underdeveloped museum settings on such distant culprits seems futile. But it would appear that, just as many African museums want to blame foreign influences (usually colonialism) for their own stagnation, Ethiopian museums are also tempted to place the blame on foreign agents. However, it would be more constructive for national policy-makers and museum specialists to address some of the situations which could be managed by internal restructuring; visitor statistics could be positively affected and new museums created by increasing public access with better community programming that takes into account recommendations made from the visitors themselves in museum guest books. Perhaps even offering periodic free access for Ethiopian visitors would be a way of encouraging more of the popular participation in cultural programming, which the current administration professed in its own *Cultural Policy* document.

Although the institutional housing of arts in Ethiopia has been shown to be a mid-20th century innovation of the central government, this new form of display has recently taken root and is being mimicked throughout the country by community groups, individuals, and government bodies – many of which look towards the large museums of Addis Ababa as prototypes of the Ethiopian museum experience. That is not to say that new museums seek to simply copy the format of national museums; instead, many aim to distinguish themselves as more intimate and community-relevant cultural centres. The forthcoming Oromo Cultural Center (and museum) in Addis Ababa is worth mentioning here as it will focus on the heritage of Ethiopia's largest ethnic community – one which the state has historically marginalised. This museum project of the Oromia regional government has the potential to invigorate community engagement in a major museum in the capital.

Outside the capital, there are now attempts to integrate contemporary and historical aspects of material heritage in venues accessible to the average community member, and these new initiatives are finding increasing financial and institutional support at federal and regional level. Even if the statistics are incomplete, reports indicate the rising popularity of museums throughout the country in the last few years.³⁴ Between 2004 and 2006, the number of regionally administered

museums more than doubled (from five to 11), foreshadowing perhaps the future in community management of cultural heritage in Ethiopia.³⁵

With the number of museums steadily rising, this article has tried to put Ethiopia on the map of African museums by looking not only at the institutions and their collections, but also by attempting to quantify and qualify the degree to which the local communities are interacting with the museum environment, and to elucidate the social and political relevance of museums in the Ethiopian context. Ethiopia should be commended insofar as its federal policy towards culture has evolved from its exclusionary beginnings to its present form. There can be no denying the positive and inclusive strides made in cultural pluralism in the past decade. The challenge remains, however, for the nation's policy-makers and museum administrators, to continue to promote research into national customs and cultures, particularly by Ethiopian researchers.

Note on Contributor

Belle Asante Tarsitani has carried out extensive anthropological research in Ethiopia on the traditional arts and museums of Harar. Dr Tarsitani's current focus is on developing a framework to merge indigenous praxes and international standards in African museums.

Notes

1. 'A Roundtable on Communities and Cultural Heritage Centers in East Africa' (Addis Ababa, 6 November 2009), was a workshop for East African museum specialists with topics ranging from educational outreach to archives and future collaboration.
2. *Negarit Gazeta* 'An order to provide for the creation of an Ethiopian antiquities administration', order 45/1966, item 3.6.
3. *Negarit Gazeta* 'A proclamation to provide for the protection and preservation of antiquities', proclamation 229/1966, articles 3, 5, 7.
4. Among the foreigners heading the newly established educational and cultural institutes in Ethiopia was the Canadian Jesuit Lucien Matte, first rector of UCAA and later president of Haile Selassie University. In 1962, the Englishman Richard Pankhurst became the founding director of IES, with Stanislaw Chojnacki as curator; and archaeologists of the French Institute of Archaeology headed early research missions approved by the state. Today, foreigners continue to fund, curate occasional exhibitions or otherwise offer expertise at IES; however, Ethiopians occupy leadership roles in the institution.
5. Foreign educated professional artists of the time included Skunder Boghossian, Gebre Kristos Desta, Agegnehu Engida, Abebe Wolde Giorgis, Ale Felege Selam Heruy, and Afewerk Tekle. Upon their return to Ethiopia foreign educated artists received commissions from Haile Selassie, which often depicted Christian history, military campaigns, or the imperial dynasty.
6. General surveys of Ethiopia's political history include Cerulli (1971), Henze (2000), Levine (1974), Marcus (2002), Pankhurst (1971, 1982, 1984), Tamrat (1972), Trimmingham (1965), and Zewde (2002).
7. Many foreign-trained painters commissioned by the emperor now found their subjects and styles no longer in line with the ruling party. Artistic license was so limited that many of these painters went into exile.

8. Another critical bureaucratic change related to linguistic scholarship in Ethiopia: Under Selassie's rule, the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts established the National Academy of the Amharic Language in 1972. With the emergence of the Derg, this was reorganised as the Academy of Ethiopian Languages, promoting the equal status given to all of the nation's languages. It is now the Ethiopian Languages Research Center, part of AAU.
9. *Negarit Gazeta*, 'A proclamation to provide for the study and protection of antiquities', proclamation 36/1989.
10. *Negarit Gazeta*, 'A proclamation to provide for the protection and preservation of antiquities', proclamation 229/1966.
11. For example, the Society of Friends of IES, an organisation dedicated to the promotion and support of cultural heritage, could not adequately function from the mid-1970s, but was re-activated in 1991 with the political changes (Pankhurst 2000).
12. CSA, *The 2003 National Statistics; The 2004 National Statistics; and The 2006 National Statistics*, <http://www.csa.gov.et> (accessed 10 March 2008). The federal budgets for culture and sports have been linked for decades, even while the cultural affairs sector has undergone shifts in ministerial alliances (*Negarit Gazeta*, 'A proclamation to provide for the definition of powers and duties of the executive organs of the FDRE', proclamation 4/1995, 'A proclamation to provide for the reorganization of the executive organs of the FDRE', proclamation 256/2001, 'Federal government budget proclamation', proclamation 469/2005). From funds allocated to culture, federal budget expenditures generally prioritised monumental and archaeological heritages. However, the World Bank's Ethiopian Cultural Heritage Project – a US\$5-million loan – was approved in 2000 and represents the first major funding project to include Ethiopia's handicraft culture, in line with the project's aim to include wider civic engagement in cultural projects.
13. A notable exception of extravagant budgetary allocation for culture made for the year-long Ethiopian Millennium celebration, which began September 2007 (Council of Ministers Regulation 117/2005, 24 May 2005).
14. The EPRDF defines cultural heritage as 'anything tangible or intangible which is the product of creativity and labour of man in the pre-history and history times, that describes and witnesses to the evolution of nature and which has a major value in its scientific, historical, cultural, artistic and handicraft content' (*Negarit Gazeta*, 'A proclamation to provide for research and conservation of cultural heritage', proclamation 209/2000, part 1, 3.4).
15. Abdulhafiz Mawi, head of Culture and Mohammed Yussuf, Heritage Controlling Department, interviewed in Harar, Ethiopia, 9 July and October 2004, respectively.
16. The Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum, opened in spring 2010 in Addis Ababa, is the latest museum whose construction the present government approved, thereby propagandising the suffering of diverse groups under Derg rule. Future research into the impetus behind the creation of this new museum by the Association for the Erection of Martyrs Memorial Monument could further the present discussion.
17. For example, in 2004, the Harari Regional Bureau of Culture supported Enayasia women's weaving guild's teaching of basketry skills to a group of girls from the Harar School for the Deaf. Shukuria Ahmad, head of Women's Affairs, Women's Development Initiative Project interviewed in Harar, Ethiopia, 28 September 2004.
18. See end note 12 above.
19. Programmes like the Ethiopian Cultural Heritage Project and the Millennium festival encouraged popular participation, in part because of private sector lobbying and foreign donor pressure on the government.
20. The changing concept of art in Ethiopia is presented in Silverman (1999).
21. *Negarit Gazeta*, 'A proclamation to provide for research and conservation of cultural heritage', proclamation 209/2000, part 2, 14.1.
22. *Ibid*, part 3.

23. *Negarit Gazeta*, 'Definition of powers and duties of the executive organs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', proclamation 471/2005, article 30/1.d.
24. *Ibid*, article 33/16.
25. The other departments of ARCCCH are: Archaeology and Palaeontology, Cultural Anthropology, Heritage Restoration and Conservation, Inventory and Inspection of Cultural Heritage and Heritage Research & Central Documentation.
26. In August 2010, 13.7 Ethiopian Birr = US\$1.
27. Combined domestic and foreign visitors to the National Museum each year were, in chronological order, 21,822; 29,731; 27,945; 39,437; 61,051; 62,877; 61,676; and 63,599. CSA, *The 2004 National Statistics* Table R.7; and *The 2006 National Statistics* Table R.9, <http://www.csa.gov.et> (accessed 10 March 2008).
28. IES, <http://www.aau.edu.et/research/ies/indexn.htm> (accessed 10 March 2008).
29. AAU Senate's Statute of the IES, issued 16 August 1995 is quoted on the IES website, <http://www.aau.edu.et/research/ies/indexn.htm> (accessed 10 March 2008).
30. Ticket receipt statistics were gathered with permission of the museum curator, Dr Hasen Said and the assistance of Dereje Berehanu at IES, Addis Ababa, August 2007.
31. Most of the classes for the Master's programme in Ethiopian Studies take place at IES. Between 2005 and 2007 class size ranged from four to nine students (with 23 students registered in the programme in the 2005/2006 academic year).
32. Information about EMSA is available online, <http://www.ethiomuseums.org>.
33. Many plundered and stolen items of Ethiopian heritage remain in collections abroad, and the author agrees with arguments for their immediate return to Ethiopia.
34. Extensive documentation of case studies of four regional-level museums in Harar has been presented elsewhere (Tarsitani 2009b; Tarsitani and Tarsitani 2010). Findings from regional museums in Harar are exemplary of Ethiopia's new breed of local museums, which allow regional communities to express their own agency in heritage management.
35. CSA, *The 2004 National Statistics* Table R.12, 'Number of Registered Cultural Heritages, Museums, Visitors and Revenue 2004/05', http://www.csa.gov.et/text_files/2006_national_statistics.htm; and *The 2004 National Statistics* Table R.12, 'Number of Registered Cultural Heritages, Museums, Visitors and Revenue 2005/06'.

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