

## **Examining the Value of Artefacts: A Study of the Museum of Natural History Obafemi Awolowo University Ile Ife, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

**A**rtefacts are objects, tools, or the remains of manmade utensils, characteristic of an earlier time or cultural stage, especially such an object found at an archaeological excavation. They tell us about the past and may indeed be a pointer to the future. Ironically little attention is paid to this class of objects as they are seldom seen as valuable. This paper examined the value of artefacts. The paper looked at the different theoretical expositions on value and discussed some of the methods that may be used in the valuation of object particularly those that possess artefactual character. A study of the Museum of Natural History at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife Nigeria was undertaken. The study revealed that the myriad of objects at the museum present different scenarios in the valuation process such that each object aligns itself to a process or method of valuation only unique for exhuming the supposedly true value of the object.

**Keywords:** *Artefact, History, Value, Object, Museum.*

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## **Background to the Study**

Artefacts refer to but will not be limited to physical objects, which are human creations, culled from natural entities around them. According to Eze-Ezoamaka (2016) these human creations came to be, to meet the demands of human need or purpose. Artefacts are the result of human intention and design. They are created to enable humanity to control the forces of nature for the betterment of human life and existence. Other materials including primary records or physical objects that constitute a primary record can also be defined as artefacts. For example physical mediums (including photographs or books) in which the information value of the resource does not remain only in the text or content, but also in the object itself. Artefacts are human creations made or modified, which are usable objects such as stone tools, metal, pottery and weapons. The most important fact is that they must have intrinsic value as objects, independent of their informational content. In other words, artefacts must be viewed in the light of their purpose and ultimately their function. Where there is no purpose for the creation of an object, they cannot be referred to as artefacts. In archaeological investigations, they provide crucial evidence to help us answer scientific research-based questions that arise about prehistoric occurrences. Artefacts are made from different types of materials that occur in the natural environment. The materials include stone, clay, wood, textiles, glass and metals.

Artefacts are part of everyday life of prehistoric and contemporary people. They help us to understand our history better. Artefacts are very important objects that have material force. They are an important way to approach the past. They help us to understand the past. They are research and educational tools, which enrich the archaeological records. Artefacts tell their own stories and they give people a sense of identity. When studied over a period of time, they could reveal cultural progression. Artefacts provide us a way into history, bring memories and meanings to life and consequently make history real.

Artefacts are usually kept in museums for protection and preservation. The need for this cannot be over emphasized because people are so interested in the past. According to Nwaka (2016) the past is a guide for the future. This view was supported by Okoronkwo (2016) in his study of Nsibidi writings. It is not just appropriate to document and save the pictures of artefacts. Considering the amount of money spent to create, maintain and run museums, it is right to conclude that artefacts are as important and valuable as the museums that house them.

## **The Value of Museums**

Museums are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which are held in trust for society. This definition which appeared in the Economic Research and Business Intelligence report for Arts Council England (2015) was agreed in consultation with Arts Council Cross Sector Museums group. The definition includes art galleries with collections of works of art as well as museums with historical collections of objects. In his fascinating Ted Talk "[Weaving Narratives in Museum Galleries](#)," [Metropolitan Museum of Art president, Thomas Campbell](#) was quoted as saying that:

*Nothing replaces the authenticity of the object presented with passionate scholarship. Bringing people face-to-face with our objects is a way of bringing them face-to-face with people across time, across space, whose lives may have been different*

*from our own but who, like us, have hopes and dreams, frustrations and achievements in their lives.”*

Museums hold the cultural wealth of the nation in trust for all generations and by its function and unique position; have become the cultural conscience of the nations. Museums ensure understanding and appreciation for various groups and cultures. They promote better understanding of our collective heritage and foster dialogue, curiosity and self-reflection. Further, they serve to help future generations comprehend their history and recognize the achievements of those who came before them.

Museums are both necessary and relevant as they are the institutions charged with conserving, protecting and displaying artifacts from our past and thus preserving our rich heritage which might otherwise be lost to private collectors or to time. Quite simply, without museums we would most certainly lose the tangible links to our past. Museums are the thresh holds and repositories of the past.

To collect, document, interpret and preserve artefacts is to a large extent the responsibility of museums all over the world. Museums examine artefacts, put them into their historical context, based on archaeological investigations and then display them to the members of the public. Curators make it their undertaking to ascertain and convey these stories and put objects back into history.

Following a research project done by the Netherlands Museums Association, the value of museums for society can be expressed through five key factors: the value of collections, the educational value, the experience value, the social value and the economic value. According to Lagendijk (2011) museums are a public resource, owing their existence to private initiative and public funds. In recent years, they have also established closer ties with the market. As the stewards of our public heritage, museums contribute significantly to society, which justifies their reliance on public funds. Schmitt-Tegge (2011) concluded in a terse remark that if one lesson can be learned, it is that decision makers are not always aware of the societal and economic values museums can have.

Museums generate income including those earned from investments, grants from charities and foundations, and donations. Through procurements mostly focused on local suppliers, visitor spending which is more significant for some locations than others, and place making and regeneration where museums and heritage offers have been significant elements of a development project, museums impact on the economy.

### **Museum of Natural History Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife**

Natural history has been defined in many ways (Bartholomew 1986, Herman 2002, Greene 2005, Schmidly 2005) as the observation and description of the natural world, with the study of organisms and their linkages to the environment being central. This broad definition which is inherently cross-disciplinary and multi-scaled reflects the span and potential of natural history activity. For most of the history of science, natural history was the natural sciences.

The Museum of natural history is at Obafemi Awolowo University. The university is a Federal institution that was established in 1961 at the ancient and historic city of Ile-Ife Osun State Nigeria. The university is geographically located on 7° 31' 06"N 4° 31' 22"E and situates on about 5,000 acres of land.



**Fig. 1: Satellite map of Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife showing the location of the Museum of Natural history.**

The building that houses the Museum of natural history is an architectural masterpiece. A visit to the Museum of Natural History, Obafemi Awolowo University is often dubbed a visit to the 8th Architectural wonder of the world and the home of historical artifacts. It situates on a sprawling landscape of green lush vegetation on an undulating to slowly sloping hill side. As on steps inside through a thorough security mechanism, the warmth of the museum is felt instantaneously with the connivance of the Curator's watchmen and technologically propelled cozy atmosphere.



**Fig. 2: Museum of natural history building**

The fundamental properties of organisms—what they are, how and where they live, and the biotic and abiotic interactions that link them to communities and ecosystems—are the domain of natural history. The museum is filled with objects and artefacts of different forms and nature all carefully positioned and labeled appropriately sometimes with a short literature attached. They are beautifully arranged in sections and in perspectives and represents indeed different aspects of life from the medieval to the present.



**Fig. 3: An archival picture of Winston Churchill and the Ooni of Ife (1942) at the museum**

**Note:** The quality and colour of the suit worn by the great Winston Church in the picture was exactly the same worn by the Ooni. Was it a coincidence? Apparently, not. The Onni had more of such quality attires at the time of the visit of the maverick and powerful Prime Minister of United Kingdom.

#### **Value of Artefacts**

Part of the value of artefacts is to educate the public. However, value is a word of many meanings. It is as varied as there are interests. To understand the value of artefacts it is important that we get to the basic understanding that value reflects needs and wants of a particular person or people. Value is not a good in itself but the utility of a good or service and the power of a good or service to command other goods, services, or money, in voluntary exchange. The economic concept of value is ascribed in the minds of people who make up the market. Value change when certain factors and circumstances exist. Basically, there are four primary factors which create value. These are Utility, Scarcity, Supply and Demand, and Purchasing Power. It must be noted very specifically, that these factors or forces cannot exert the required pressure to create or affect value without the market which itself is composed of individuals (people). People create value by creating the utility, influencing the scarcity, and affecting the demand. Utility, scarcity, demand exist only because people exist.

Value of artefacts is described in this study across a variety of dimensions and three main beneficiary groups. The dimensions include instrumental, intrinsic, institutional and use values. The beneficiaries of these values can be individuals, communities and the economy. Instrumental value describes the utilitarian and instrumental benefits that culture can provide for individuals, the economy and for society. The instrumental value of culture is sought through economic benefits such as civic branding, tourism, employment and the multiplier effect on local economies, through social benefits including increased social capital, inclusion, social cohesion, tolerance for cultural diversity, urban regeneration and civic participation and through benefits to individual such as learning, personal wellbeing and health. Intrinsic value gets to the heart of the intangibles of museum and artefacts experiences. For individuals, intrinsic values are experienced as a 'state of absorption', or 'focused attention', 'captivation', and the 'deep satisfaction' that the 'pleasure' of seeing an art work or having a cultural



experience that is moving and meaningful, can generate. Other intrinsic benefits are experienced collectively. Symbolic value is generated through culture's 'expression of communal meanings', through the 'creation of social bonds' that 'make connections between people' and 'reinforce a sense of unity and identity'.

Direct use of cultural services like artefacts in museums is a key indicator in determining public value. Willingness to give something up, to spend money, to commit energy and to spend time visiting, using, enjoying and travelling to and from cultural activities are tangible demonstrations that the public values culture through artefacts. The very fact that people go to theatres and galleries, visit country houses and museums, make music and write poetry is proof enough that they value culture. In this sense culture does not simply produce value; it embodies value (Holden, 2004:49)

The concept of Public Value is created and maintained by public institutions. Public Value refers to the value created by government through services, laws regulation and other public institutions Moore (1995), Kelly et al (2002), Holden (2004; 2006). Public institutions are integral to building public confidence. Well-run public agencies that are ethical, fair and equitable in their dealings with the public and transparent in their practice generate trust in the public and thus create value.

### **Conclusion**

Museums are important contributors to civil renewal. They provide public access to cultural heritage. The Museum of natural history at the Obafemi Awolowo University, is home to past and present collections. If we did not have museums like that, exhibits would be lost to private collections and beyond the sight of the majority of people. Museums enable ordinary people to identify an important aspect of their citizenship by seeing artifacts they might never have the opportunity to experience. The case report of the 'Egg man and his dog' (Sharma et al 2006) is a pointer to real life drama of intrigue, murder and faithfulness continuing after death which buttresses the fact that artefacts always provide vital clues which help in solving vexed cases.

### **Recommendations**

- I. There is the urgent need to establish museums in all institutions of higher learning in Nigeria such that artefacts of all categories could be preserved for history. Museums of natural history are recommended for all universities in Nigeria.
- ii. The work of the National Commission of Museums and Monuments (NCMM) need to be encouraged by government, public funding and close supervision through legislation and interaction with their activities concerning Nigeria's valuable heritage.
- iii. A National Register is an essential part of a nation's history and should be established. When properly done, it could act as an encyclopedia of accurate information and interpretation of the ethnography of a people. Among other things, the register should include all materials of culture, historic and ethnographic value, sites and monuments, antiquities, rare specimens and human settlements as well as monuments. These make

the history of Nigeria rank among the histories of the nations of the world. Photographs, video/audio recordings, films and slides drawings and sketches are all part of the National Register. They should be stored and displayed regularly in art exhibitions and galleries.

- iv. Public lectures are very effective in educating the people on the importance of Nigeria's vast heritage. It is recommended that these should be organized often.

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