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ABSTRACT

The Iziko museums in Cape Town, South Africa in collaboration with the International Museums Studies Programme at the University of Bergen, Norway, have jointly developed a Web-based concept that combines oral storytelling with new technology to connect schools in the South and North. Awaiting funding at the time of publication, this project was scheduled to be trail tested later in 2002. African storytelling traditions support communal ownership of stories and involve multiple forms of expression: mime, dance, music, as well as verbal narrative. The South African project considers how the Internet can be utilized to support and enhance these forms of storytelling with authors in the South and North. This paper considers parameters of community involvement in widely differing socio-economic contexts. Township involvement includes extending storytelling workshops at community centers to the Web. Focusing on technology transfer, the paper also considers the relationship between central museums developed within the apartheid system with newly established community centers on the periphery of urban centers. It reviews the need for changes to established museums in the post-apartheid period with a particular emphasis on incorporating black history and contemporary oral history into social and cultural museums, both physical and Web-based, in South Africa. (Author/MES)

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PAPERS

Museums and the Web 2002

STORYTELLING AND THE WEB IN SOUTH AFRICAN MUSEUMS

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Abstract

The Iziko museums in Cape Town, South Africa in collaboration with the International Museums Studies Programme at the University of Bergen, Norway, have jointly developed a web-based concept that combines oral storytelling with new technology to connect schools in the South and North. Awaiting funding, this project will be trail tested later this year.

African storytelling traditions support communal ownership of stories and involve multiple forms of expression: mime, dance, music as well as verbal narrative. The South African project considers how the internet can be utilised to support and enhance these forms of storytelling with authors in the South and North. The paper considers parameters of community involvement in widely differing socio-economic contexts. Township involvement includes extending storytelling workshops at community centres to the web.

Focusing on technology transfer, the paper also considers the relationship between central museums developed within the apartheid system with newly established community centres on the periphery of urban centres. It reviews the need for changes to established museums in the post-apartheid period with a particular emphasis on incorporating black history and contemporary oral history into social and cultural museums, both physical and web-based, in South Africa.

Keywords: storytelling, traditional culture, mobile van, community museum, post-colonial museum, cross-cultural programs, PDA's, wireless

The Iziko Project

In 2001 and 2002 the Iziko Museums of Cape Town and the International Museums Program in Bergen, Norway developed and trial tested a web-based museums project which draws on the skills and narrative structures of South African traditional storytelling. This paper, in addition to describing the particular strategies that have been chosen for this township project, offers also a background to the need for new forms of representation in South African museums and new relationships between museums, townships and a more diverse audience. The project involves the use of a mobile van in collaboration with community centres and satellite museums in outer urban and rural centres. Stories by children as well as adults are collected through digital video and disseminated through handheld devices (PDA's) as well as through the web to computers in collaborating schools, museums and community groups

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within South Africa and overseas.

The paper begins with a brief history of museums, representation and segregation in Cape Town - a necessary background to understand the need to create new stories and reach new audiences also through the use of new technologies.

A short history of the museum

In Cape Town, before 1962, the major museum - The South African Museum - housed both the natural history and the cultural history collections. It lies in the centre of town in what was, and in many ways still remains, a white area due to economic segregation that includes institutions such as the National Gallery, The National Library and Provincial Government parliament buildings, institutions that only recently were open to black and mixed audiences as the majority of these facilities were designated for whites only under South Africa's apartheid system.

The Museum of South Africa was, as such - an exception amongst these institutions. However, the placement of the museum in the city centre ensured that the museum remained a white-only entity. This vision of the museum as a segregated space remains as one of the major challenges facing South African museums. The geographical placement of the museums are also compounded by the fact that the representations of black and white history have changed little since the apartheid system was abolished in the 1990's. The reasons for this are partly economic - with major funding going to challenges within health, welfare and housing - and partly related to a lack of new curatorial staff to force through major changes. Returning to history, black and white cultural history were further segregated in 1962 when a decision was made to move the cultural history collections to a separate building while natural history including ethnography, and therefore black cultural history, remained at the initial site. This split was reinforced by a political decision to place the cultural history collections under the governance of "white own affairs" (Davidson, 2001) .

The layout of the cultural history collections were further reinforced this split between white and black history. The exhibition was increasingly organised such that the viewer would walk through the collections in a seemingly 'natural' pattern - from the Ancient civilisations of Greece and Egypt through to Europe, particularly Northern Europe, and finally to colonised CapeTown. This organisation, through default, meant that African history, with the exception of colonial history, did not play a part in the formation of modern day Cape Town. In the original museum, today's South African Museum, a predominantly natural history museum, the ethnographic collections were organised around the dual desires of classification of material cultures, tribes, types of weapons etc. - and that of documenting an authentic African rural life before it became tainted by industrial developments.

Representations of black culture were, and in many ways still are, in line with European ideas of the noble but primitive tribesman. Many of the images of the natives were timeless and idyllic. Plaster casts were made of tribal people carrying out traditional activities. These casts were then often placed in agricultural settings. They suggested produce and activity rather than hardship or effort. Family groupings, often mother-child compositions portrayed the notion of social cohesion. These were

images that supported the arguments of those who sought a solution for South African in racial segregation (Goodby, 2001). Left alone, the black population was a proud and self-contained nation.

Other images, and plaster-casts, were oriented towards titillating a white audience. Plaster-casts were made of hunters, reinforcing the image and stereotype of the savage. These plaster-casts were placed in a diorama which initially could be seen only through peep-holes. This experience allowed the white viewer close contact with the 'dangers' of black Africa but ensured a safe distance behind the glass and with only one way viewing. This diorama was closed down in the year 2000 to the outrage of local audiences and tour operators. Tour operators, in fact, threatened to stop bringing tourists, who in the current economic climate were vital to the museums income, unless the rest of the ethnographic section remained as it was with its offerings of 'real' tribesmen (Lohman, 2001).

The reality of life amongst tribal groups during the time of the collecting of this material was in fact largely different. Traditional tribal land and the Reserves, where much of the anthropological material was gathered, were heavily effected by integration and urban change - not the least through the movement of labour, predominantly male, to mining camps and urban centres where labour was needed. This form of social history was not portrayed in the museum context, and the current collections and exhibitions are still heavily influenced by the attempts of capturing 'authentic' black history.

For the anthropologists at the museum this need to 'capture' black cultural history before it changed was understandable and similar activities have been made elsewhere. The problem here was the lack of inclusion of more contemporary social history such as the effect of mining and segregation. Like many post-colonial societies, professional and amateur anthropologists and missionaries were often the only groups in a position to gather and document these material cultures and histories in a manner that was acceptable and understandable for broader audiences. As such these collections have value. However, the stories they tell do not fully encompass the histories of the people they represent.

One problem facing museums today is that little alternative documentation has been collected. Historians can easily find documents and artefacts of officers and industrialists, but few voices or images remain from early or mid-colonisation. However, many cultures, including indigenous Australians and African cultures, argue quite rightly, that their histories, if not material cultures, have been preserved through other manners of documentation - through for example oral cultures including ceremonies, song, dance and storytelling. These stories, and this manner of documenting history, remain problematic within traditional concepts of history and science and the need for historical certainty.

A number of situations have arisen in post-colonial societies in which the value of these stories have had to be reviewed. Land Rights claims have led to an introduction of storytelling within the legal apparatus. Museums also are increasingly including storytelling not simply as a manifestation of cultural output but as a possible source for historic fact. This desire to reconsider the role of storytelling has led to a number of changes in the museums of Cape Town. One manifestation of this is in the change of name of the Cape Townian museums to the Iziko Museums of Cape Town. Iziko means the hearth around which stories are told. Another

manifestation is in the desire to consider how various forms of storytelling can be incorporated into the museum environment and be disseminated to a wider audience - such as in the storytelling and the Web project to be described here.

Centre-periphery relations

A further piece of background needs to be added before entering the specifics of the storytelling project. To understand the need to move both the collection of material and the dissemination of the stories and exhibitions, the geographical lay-out into which the project is placed needs to be understood. Again there is a need to provide some historical background.

Cape Town today is geographically effected by the apartheid system of the 20th century which was reinforced through Western concepts of urban planning. Urban planners in South Africa were particularly interested in Corbusier's ideas of the modern city and, as was the case in many colonies, European intellectual ideas often found a greater foothold there than in their home countries. This foothold was supported both by a lack of contestation as well as political might to carry through the changes. For Cape Town urban renewal in the height of apartheid meant the creation of the 'white' city centre through the demolition of inner-city suburbs and forced removal of the inhabitants. This 'planning' or demolition effected particularly inner-city suburbs that were deemed racially mixed - such as District Six. The inhabitants of these districts were moved to the outer-lying Cape flats according to their designated colour. The apartheid system included 15 different categories of colour and race of which only one was white.

The townships of Cape Town surrounding the economic centre, grew in part through this forced removal, and in part through the arrival of rural populations for work purposes. The townships are only a 20-minute drive from the centre of town however there is comparatively little traffic between the two sites. For many white South Africans, many of the townships are deemed too dangerous, and for the large majority of township inhabitants the journey to the centre of town, is too costly and therefore seldom made, unless employment is there - such as the case of many domestic helps. Trips for purely entertainment reasons or education such as a museum visit, would be highly unusual for many township inhabitants. It is important to note, however, that the different townships include a diversity of inhabitants, with some townships populated by emerging middle-class social groups. The most populated townships include predominantly economically disadvantaged groups and it is to these that references are being made.

One of the major questions then for the Iziko Museums is how to reach out to these audiences. One, fairly traditional way of ensuring a broader visitor segment, is through bussing of school groups to the centre of town and Iziko has a relatively active educational program including transport solutions. This fills a stop-gap need however more long-term solutions need to be sought.

New audiences and new museum structures

A variety of ways of serving these communities have been considered including mobile museums, collaboration with newly established community centres, and the construction of permanent satellite

museums. Each type of entity raises a particular set of issues to be worked out before even considering the inclusion and use of new technologies.

For politicians and local government satellite museums are seen as continuing the role museums have traditionally had i.e. educating the populace particularly in the areas of science - an area which local teachers have little resources to do properly. The driving thought here, in the South African scenario, is that the museum experience will encourage local youth to remain in school. Within this perspective the museum is seen as serving local audiences. However, in the current economic climate in South Africa, museums are expected to be self-sustaining and local audiences are not financially situated to cover these costs. Therefore the museums must also reach out to the tourist market as well. Local science education at a primary level and promoting tourism sit together uncomfortably but is part of the mandate as seen by a particularly important set of gatekeepers and one that needs to be addressed in any proposed project. New technology in this scenario would then be divided - in part covering local education needs and in part disseminating information to visitors and tourists.

Community groups themselves are divided over the issue of the role of satellite or community-based museums. For some the community centre or satellite museum should ensure local employment and support local industry in a variety of ways including the sale of local produce, attracting tourism, and employment within the museum/centre. This leads to a view of the foreigner as the primary audience for the museum rather than the local population with the content of the museum being a representation of local culture for the enjoyment or education of others. In this scenario new technology will primarily have the role of broadcasting local culture to others.

For other sections of the local community, and for museum staff, cultural heritage is primary. The collection of material culture is seen, by museum staff, as a continuation of core work. Cultural heritage involves both presentation of local materials to the tourist market as has been done previously at the original museum, both within limited exhibitions and through the museum shop, but it is also seen as the instillation of pride in local history and material culture amongst local audiences.

This goal is approached not only through the presentation of local cultures and social history but also through participation in the creation of the centre. This is not a new approach. Indigenous participation has been discussed by many museums particularly since the 1978 UNESCO seminar *Preserving Indigenous Cultures: A New Role for Museums*. Participation has moved from simple consultation in the preparation of exhibitions by settler curators to active training of indigenous curators, inclusion on administrative boards and clear guidelines regarding consultation at all stages of exhibition planning. New technology in this scenario should then be used not only in the gathering and dissemination of local information by traditional museum staff but also involve local communities on a variety of levels including the creation of exhibition materials.

Iziko stories

With this variety of gatekeepers (and sponsors have not been included though they have a set of criteria of their own), the project in focus, Iziko

stories, chose a route that involved cultural heritage and speaking to both local and foreign audiences. Education was met through children and community groups use of new media as well as through oral histories. More on this below. Local participation was also primary both through consultation as well as 'curating' the project itself. The project was developed both for use within a satellite museum or community centre as well as within a mobile museum framework.

The major question arising out of the mobile museum framework was the extent to which continuity could be maintained. Local community groups asked, quite rightly, what a mobile museum would leave behind. Continuity after the mobile museum left became then another variable to be addressed through the use of new technology.

Networking was a further issue. Traditional museums and simple satellite museum structures were likely to continue centre-periphery structures. An argument was made that rural connectivity was as important as that of centre-periphery contact. This is a similar argument as that made for the development of community media and the use of satellites to connect rural areas to each other rather than simply disseminate information from the centre to outlying rural areas (Molnar and Meadows, 2001).

Storytelling

The audience for the project became similar local audiences, centre audiences as well as foreign audiences. To find a universal element amongst these groups and to ensure interaction and equivalent input, a decision was made that a common element to all these groups was that of stories. Storytelling had the further advantage of being a central part in the culture of the local groups participating in the project.

Oral transmission of history was well developed in Africa over centuries. In part this is due to a lack of written record-keeping as, with the exception of Egypt, Ethiopia and the Buman, Vai and Akan peoples, there were few written cultures developed on the African continent (Ukadike, 1993). Information, history and cultural mores were passed on primarily through song and spoken word through a variety of ceremonies, family gatherings, royal courts, festivals and rites of passage. A rich cultural history was developed in this manner. Social history was furthermore recorded and kept alive through this manner.

The arrival of colonisers threatened the survival of this oral tradition as Frank Ukadike argues:

Under colonial domination, new values initiated by Western ideologies were introduced into African life, and under neo-colonialism, Africa struggled - and is still struggling - to develop distinct national cultures. ... The European presence brought with it an onslaught of alien influences from industrial nations, that is, the 'western way of life', yet this and endemic natural disasters such as drought, famine, and disease never entirely destroyed the tenacity of the old order.

(Ukadike, 1993, p.22)

Using traditional oral structures does not mean that one is essentialising local populations. It is simply offering a framework that is understood

both by local and overseas audiences. Using a high level of audio-visual material, and drawing on traditional storytelling forms, also meant that it would be well received by a variety of local audiences. Keyan Tomaselli, a South African filmmaker, argues that this strategy is also used by African filmmakers:

Africa is still comprised of people who exhibit varying cultures of orality, semi-literacy and total literacy. As such, African directors often find themselves interfacing between oral and literate worlds. ... Orality helps explain their episodic, often disjointed, lateral narratives, which break with Hollywood linear conventions of beginning, middle and end.

(Siyolwe, 2002)

This disjointedness also worked well within the hypertext structures of interactive narratives on the web or CD-rom. Both here and in traditional African storytelling situations, storytellers can, and are, often interrupted in the telling of the tale. Unlike conventional Western narratives, African stories can take divergent paths depending on the audiences reaction and interaction. While computer games and the Internet have promoted amongst youth, used to these forms of technologies, an acceptance of interactive narrative - one that would be less expected and accepted if it were disseminated through video or television. Like current interactive narratives, however, the paths to be taken are not unlimited, the storyteller - the griot - still decides the limitations of the possible paths. This was important also as the stories were to appeal to a wider audience and in as much as they were to carry an important message of rewriting learnt history and readdressing previously ingrained stereotypes of African people.

The storytellers approached in the project involved both elders who could pass on particular views of history and stories that are not included in the mainstream educational curriculum, as well as youth who would be encouraged to create new stories from their own experiences. Ideally the storytelling process is an exchange between children in South Africa and children overseas and in the initial development children in the Nordic countries, particularly Norway, have been targeted. The goal here was to enable children to promote and exchange cultural traditions through storytelling, encouraging both exploration of their own cultural identities formed by urbanisation and cross-cultural influences as well as traditional practices. Promoting storytelling also met the need of motivation for learning and communicating through new media.

Workshops and PHAKAMA

New media would be a tool to be used in conjunction with workshops in which children would develop skills in, and knowledge of, storytelling. The workshops facilitate processes in which children learn, through a variety of media, to develop critical and investigative skills.

The project drew on the skills of an established community group that ran storytelling workshops - PHAKAMA. PHAKAMA is an organisation working already with cross-cultural theatre and storytelling projects in Great Britain, India and South Africa. PHAKAMA has broad experience bringing together from the Black, Asian, Cape Coloured and Afrikaans communities in Cape Town with communities in Britain - however not as yet through the use of new media. PHAKAMA uses local craftsmen and

women across media to assist in running the workshops so as to enable a continuity of practice after the workshop is held and the initial organisers have moved on. These local craftsmen and women are often attached to local community groups or to schools. The Iziko Stories draws on these experiences and organisation.

The storytelling workshops are organised around everyday, iconic images available across cultures - such as a shoe. These images give the children, in groups or individually, a starting point they can relate to for their stories. The children are then encouraged to create fictional characters with a relationship to the image so as to allow for a necessary distance to reality. At the same time, however, the choice of everyday items meant that the stories reflected, most often, their intimate personal experiences as they are written within their sphere of knowledge. Through stories and the objects, the children communicate who they are and what occupies their daily life. The choice of a common icon facilitates the communication process and identification of children across borders. The children are taught how to act out these stories within traditional African storytelling forms - including performance, dance, music and painting. The stories are also written in a branching mode to allow for later viewer interaction.

A mobile unit complete with trained professionals arrive at the site at the end of the week of the workshops. These professionals have a set of digital equipment to record the children's stories and performances. Children are shown how the recording and editing of their stories takes place. The children also receive and view stories from other parts of South Africa and from overseas through a map exhibition.

Map exhibition

An integral part of the project is a large walk-on map exhibition that gives the students a sense of place. One map is that of South Africa building national understanding, a second is a more regional map to encourage networking and local connectivity. In addition maps of collaborating countries may be included.

The chosen map is rolled out onto the floor of the community centre or school. On a variety of sites at which stories have been collected a set of pedestals are placed. These pedestals include PDA's through which the children can receive and send their stories. The PDA's are sturdy and battery-operated and include an integrated cell phone so that there are no moveable parts that can be damaged. The PDA's are collapsible and stackable so as not to take up too much room in the van itself. The children can walk through the map and the pedestals. They can press the screens and view a selection of taped stories created by other children or elders. They can interact with the stories with a limited number of optional branches. These stories are ideally subtitled (or dubbed if necessary) in the primary language that is used at the school.

In South Africa today English is compulsory while Afrikaans has become optional for students with a non-Afrikaans background. Local languages are varied with six primary languages in use throughout the country. English then becomes a possible common language for broader communication while it is important to include and encourage at least a version of the stories in local languages to build up local networking and reinforce local identity.

The children may also send SMS messages, through an SMS portal, to the narrators with comments about the stories and shared similar experiences. This active participation of the children is necessary to ensure that they understand the processes of the communication that are happening. Finally the children upload their stories into the pedestals through a simple visual guide. Thus the child is participating in creating the exhibition itself, thereby developing an understanding of how the exhibition is built and how new technology can be utilised for communication purposes.

Addressing the issue of continuity, the project involves leaving one cell-phone per school/community group for SMS-messaging contact as well as copies of at least some of the videoed stories for schools which would be able to view this material (i.e. that have electricity, a VHS player and a TV monitor). One obvious advantage of the cell-phone is that electricity is not necessarily a requirement.

WWW

A further feature of the project involves the use of a website which those schools with access to computers and the net can continue to access. This requires a stable satellite up-link present in large parts of South Africa. Mobile coverage is also good along most highways and in urban and semi-urban centres. Where satellite coverage is not sufficient, drop-points may be used to up- and download the stories. This leads to a greater time delay in feedback.

The website involves an intuitive interface and a simple basic structure and is therefore easy to use both by children under guidance as well as the general public. Through the website children and students can access from the home page a web-version of the map exhibition in which they can change languages. They may select different countries on the world map, they can choose particular objects which have inspired stories, and they can continue to send SMS and emailed messages to other children through the SMS portal. In addition, through the web, they can pick up a webcam exhibition showing where the van is and receive updates on the journey of the van and the issues that are predominant in that particular region. As such this is similar other webbed journey stories carried out in other regions of the world.

The secondary function of the website is to provide an easy to use interface for maintaining and updating the content of the web site. The web Back Office fulfils this function. It enables people with basic computer training to upload the stories that have been recorded to the Internet. They do this by typing in necessary information about the digital recording and adding links to the recording. Afterwards all the information is automatically uploaded and stored. It will then instantly become a part of the Map Exhibition and the Webcam Map. The Back Office is also used to upload translations and subtitles to the stories.

The stories are complemented, through the Back Office, with information on regional differences through which the van travels - questions such as population density, environmental issues, history etc. which may be of use for teachers. As the database grows it will contain a large amount of material relevant to understanding the storyteller's daily life. The Back Office ensures also that the search function which offers criteria such as themes, location, languages and age of storyteller, functions so that it may be of use both for museum staff but also for researchers and

teachers who which to use the portal in teaching social studies. Finally, the Back Office provides an element of training of local staff.

Summary

The Iziko Stories project addresses many of the issues raised in this paper. It is concerned with networking within regions rather than only working on a centre-periphery axis. It is concerned with active participation of children and local communities. It works towards deepening cultural heritage not in a manner that essentialises local communities but one that allows for expression of interrelatedness. It addresses the issue of learning through access and utilisation of new technologies but also giving the children a sense of space and geography. Through stories it assures universal interest as well as expression of local perspectives, local desires and local needs.

Obviously it is not sufficient on its own to redress the unbalanced representations that have developed within South African museums during the colonial and apartheid periods. For this to happen a fundamental transformation of curatorial practices needs to take place. Other voices, other stories need to move into the established museum spaces as well as the virtual spaces. The Iziko Stories project does, however, offer a start that allows people with diverging backgrounds to participate in both the transformation of museums as well as transformations in communication practices through new technologies.

The project is still seeking both collaborative overseas partners and further sponsors.

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