

Sustainability of Asante Manhyia Palace Museum: A collection of cultural identity

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Abstract

The Asante Manhyia Palace Museum one of the oldest in Asante, has in its collection a legacy of rich cultural history and unique artefacts preserving the people's culture. The uniqueness of their arts has earned them pre-eminence in a position that the history of Ghana can never be written without it. However, the museum is bewildered with great deal of challenges. The documentation of artefacts in Asante Manhyia museum leaves much to be desired in order to preserve and promote the cultural identity of the people. There is evidently less publicity and the documentation of the artefacts and relics are improperly done especially with respect to bringing them under one roof to possess a common force to expose the culture. In sum, without the understanding of the finer nuances of the artefacts of the museum and its sustainability, the cultural identity of the people would be gradually lost.

Keywords: Museums, cultural identity, artefacts, documentation, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Asante kingdom is endowed with a number of art and historical Museums. These include the Manhyia Museum,

Yaa Asantewaa Museum, Prempeh II Jubilee Museum and the Military Museum all in Kumasi, Ghana. The culture including the arts of the Asante hold a significant cultural heritage, which

has lived long throughout the people's history. The Asante museums which exhibit the uniqueness of the arts of Asante as a part of their culture have earned them pre-eminence in a position that the history of Ghana can never be written without the mention of it. Ghanaians in general use their artefacts to maintain the concept of reality, to enhance the appearance of objects and to maintain their culture (Brako-Hiapa, *et al*/2010).

According to Stone (2001) the primary goal of historical museums is to educate visitors about the past. Their artefacts tell the stories of families, communities, cities, states, and even regions. A historical museum may house portraits of community members as well as paintings, photographs and maps of the community and landscape as it was in the past. Museums are treasure houses of the human race and store memories of cultures of ethnic groups (Thompson, 1986). This means that one can learn of his past culture from museums. For example, a particular artefact such as the *asipim* chair found in Manhyia Palace museum could throw light on one's culture, because it is a chair associated with the enstoolment of the King of the Asante. Crooke (2008) opined that the primary responsibility of museums is to use its collection to encourage people to learn about their own histories and to understand other people's culture.

Asantes are one of the sections of the people known as Akan in Ghana. There are different schools of thought surrounding the origin of the Asante. Osei (1994) opined that the ancestors of the Asante emerged from a hole in the ground at Asantemanso, near

Essumegya in Bekwai of the present day Amansie West District. Asantes like other African societies, have lost some of their material culture which ranges from the chiefs regalia to utensils in ordinary person's homes to the British, their colonial masters. Some of the artefacts were looted during conquests (Personal interview, Osei Kwadwo, curator at Manhyia Palace, August 2007). However, there is a large stock of cultural materials stored in the Manhyia museum as a medium of preserving Asante cultural identity for posterity. However, this art and historical museum which exhibits the cultural identity of the people is bewildered with a lot of challenges. A possible outcome of the challenge would be the deterioration of the material culture of the people thereby losing or blurring the 'real McCoy' of Asante cultural heritage. The study therefore seeks to identify and appreciate the various artefacts found in the Manhyia museum in Asante with the spotlight on the various challenges hindering its sustainability.

Methodology

The study, which is qualitative in nature, focused on the description of the various artefacts found in the Manhyia Palace museum. Qualitative research is a systematic process of describing, analysing and interpreting insights discovered in everyday life (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

The study employed observation, structured and unstructured interviews in collecting data from the museum curator, administrators, workers, and the general visitors. The narrative research was used in recording the history of the museum. The descriptive research

method was used in describing, recording, analyzing and interpreting the artefacts and the nature of challenges being faced by the museum.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical account of Manhyia Palace Museum

The building housing the relics and other valuables was put up in 1925 by the British government for Nana Agyeman Prempeh I who returned from exile in the Seychelles Islands in 1924. According to Otumfuo Opoku Ware Jubilee Foundation (2003), the building was a compensation for the *Asantehene* since his palace at Adum was destroyed during the Yaa Asantewaa war in 1900. This palace used to be the residence of Nana Agyeman Prempeh I and Nana Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II the 13th and 14th kings of the Asante kingdom. Prior to the Manhyia palace, there had been two palaces for the Asante Kings: the first one was built by Nana Osei Tutu I at Adum, in the area where the Kumasi Home Store is situated. The second palace was built by Nana Osei Asibe Bonsu when he returned from the coastal campaign of 1806. That palace was situated in the area where the Kumasi Fort, now Armed Forces Museum is situated.

According to oral tradition, the first palace was burnt down alongside other houses during the Sagrenti war in 1874 by the soldiers of Sir Garnet Wolseley, who also demolished the second palace known as Nana Bonsu Aban. However, after the Sagrenti war of 1874, Nana Kofi Karikari, the *Asantehene* at that time, rehabilitated the first palace and lived there. The subsequent kings, Nana

Mensah Bonsu, Nana Kwaku Dua II and Nana Prempeh I also lived in that palace and after Nana Prempeh I was exiled, the palace became vacant. It is interesting to note that the British reconstructed Nana Bonsu Aban and named it The Kumasi Fort. The fort was then used by the British Resident commissioner as administration offices of the Asante Region. The Governor and his entourage were in the Fort when the Yaa Asantewaa war of 1900 was declared.

The palace which has been converted into a museum is of great historical importance and contains the cultural identity of the people. It does not only house the museum's exhibits; it is itself an exhibit of the museum. As pointed out earlier, this was a form of compensation by the British government to the *Asanteman*. However, Nana Prempeh I turned down the offer and only moved into it as his residence after *Asanteman* had paid for it. The museum has been the official residence of three Asante kings namely Nana Prempeh I who was the 13th king who died in 1931, Nana Prempeh II who also died in 1970 and Otumfuo Opoku Ware II who was the 15th king of Asante and died in 1999. Most of the regalia used by the kings were still kept in the former residence before they were converted into the museum. The museum was organized by an educationist, Osei Kwadwo who retired as a director of education in the Efigya-Sekyere district. He organized the activities of the museum with little knowledge in museum administration and no formal studies in museology. The museum was officially opened by Otumfuo Opoku Ware II on 12th August 1995 as part of the activities or events marking the

Silver Jubilee of his accession to the Golden Stool. The museum is a two storey with open verandas and a yard. It has a small outhouse which was added for use as the museum shop.

Discussion on selected exhibits of the museum

The Manhyia Palace Museum has two floors. The two floors have rooms where the artefacts have been displayed. Artefacts of the past kings and other warriors of the Asante kingdom have been preserved to throw enormous light on the culture of the people. This first room serves as the administration headquarters of the Asante nation from 1925 to 1974. Artefacts displayed include two antique telephones on a writing desk and a chair used by the kings, a book shelf with files and documents, a bronze head of Nana Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II and an old sketch map of the Asante Nation. On the wall is a picture of the present queen, Nana Afua Kobi Serwaa Ampem II, who was installed as the queen of Asante in 1977.

The room has six show cases in which are displayed a stool, rings, necklaces, state swords and other gold ornaments. One sword that portrays the cultural identity of the people is the *Mpomponsuo* sword. This is a sword used by all the Asante kings in swearing their oath of office to *Kumaseman*. The paramount chiefs used this artefact in swearing their oath of allegiance to Asante kings. The original *Mponponsuo* is claimed to be at the British Museum of Mankind in London (Personal interview, Moses, the museum curator, August 2008). This sword and other swords in the various rooms were believed to have been designed by

specialist craftsmen from Techiman and Denkyira who were brought to Kumase after the Asante defeated them in a war around 1720-30. (Personal interview, with the curator, 2008).

Photographs and effigies of past Asante Kings

Another medium in which the present generation understand their cultural heritage is through photographs and effigies. The pictures include that of the old palace used by the ancient kings. It was situated at Nkwantanan in Adum. There is also a picture of the Bantama Mausoleum where the ancient kings were laid to rest. This picture was taken in the 1890's. The picture of Nana Mensah Bonsu, the 11th king from 1834–1867, has also been displayed. There is also a display of a picture of the Lady Julia, wife of the current King, Nana Osei Tutu II. Among the pictures is a street of the Kumasi city in the 1890's. This is quite interesting considering at the vast changes which have taken place over the centuries.

The study also observed effigies of some renowned kings and queen mothers. These effigies are life size seated figures. They were executed by an anonymous British sculptor. The *Nananom* are adorned with the usual traditional *Adinkra* cloth interspersed with *kente* strips *nwomuu* to match with richly decorated indigenous sandals, headgears and other accessories. The queenmothers wear the famous *dansinkran* hairstyles with simple but beautiful indigenous sandals.

There are also photographs depicting the life history of Nana Sir Osei Agyemang Prempeh II. These include

his enstoolment in 1931 as the *Kumasehene* (Chief of Kumase) and swearing his oath of office as the *Asantehene* (Asante chief) following the restoration of the Asante confederacy on 31st January, 1935. Other selected photographs of his later years are also displayed. The effigies of Nana Opoku Ware II, the *Asantehene* from 1970 to 1999 and of the present queen mother, Nana Afua Kobi Serwaa Ampem II, who he installed as *Asantehemaa* in 1977 are also available. All the photographs of the different facets of Asante cultural heritage throw enormous light on the culture of the people. The inference could be drawn that the various artefacts found are a gateway to understanding the past culture and appreciating the present.

There is a vast hall which used to be the kings' living room. The kings received ordinary visitors, people who could be termed as non-VIPS such as students and the youth. Over here is the kings' library and a bookshelf which contains a collection of books used by the Kings. One of the books in the shelf is titled *Journal of a Residence in Asante* by Joseph Dupuis esq. which was published in 1824. The first literate king of the Asante was Nana Prempeh I. He learnt to read and write and was baptized into the Anglican Faith in the Seychelles.

Nana Prempeh I was enstooled in 1888 and he ruled until 1896 with the stool name Kwaku Dua III. This was later changed to Nana Prempeh I as he was made the paramount chief of the states (Osei, 1994). However, (Tufuo and Donkor, 1969) argued that of his own volition the king chose to be in exile on the Seychelles Island for twenty eight

years. Other artefacts observed were an antique radiogram used by Nana Prempeh II and also a chess game used by the kings and their wives. The room is considered to be the room for the king's visitors. He received his distinguished visitors such as the Governor, the Chief Commissioner, District officers and other Dignitaries. In this room is found elegant display of furniture used by his visitors, a mirror in a cardboard and then medals for Prempeh II and a cocktail bar.

Guns used during wars by past Asante kings

There is a specimen of the gun used by Nana Osei Tutu 1 (1695-1719) called *doku*. He used this gun during the war against the Denkyira people. The war broke up after Nana Osei Tutu I had succeeded Nana Obiri Yeboa as chief of Kwaman State later known as Kumasi State. Nana Osei Tutu I was able to lead the Asante nation to defeat the Denkyira and he freed them from domination by the Denkyira state.

The most instrumental figure of the Asante was Okomfo Anokye who gave them a spiritual direction and formula for the victory. There is also *Sikantoa* gun used by Nana Opoku Ware I (1720-1750). He succeeded his grand uncle Nana Osei Tutu when he was called to eternity. Shortly after his enstoolment Nana Opoku Ware I and his army were faced with the task of waging a war against the Akyem to avenge the defeat of the Asante under Nana Osei Tutu I. He was successful in most of the wars and extended their territories. It was said that Nana Opoku Ware I and his men were determined and was very much peeved since it was during a

previous war with the Akyem that Nana Osei Tutu I lost his life. The Asante kingdom under Nana Opoku Ware I fought two wars with the Akyem people. In both wars the Asante won. In one, the Akyem chiefs including Frimpong Manso, Pobi Asomanin and Owusu Akyem Tenten lost their lives.

The gun used by Nana Osei Kwadwo Oko-Awia (1746-1777) is *Gyahyetoa*. He succeeded his uncle Nana Kusi Obodum and continued the extension of the Asante kingdom through wars. He earned the name Osei *Koawia*, an Akan word meaning who fights in the broad daylight. He waged a war against the

Banda people after news got to him that some Asante traders had been killed in the Banda territory. The Gyaman, Denkyira, Kong and Wassa states formed an ally and joined Banda to fight against the Asante.

The war was tough for the Asante that they were repulsed twice by the allied forces but the third attack was successful. After the fight Wassa and Banda who were not part of the Asante territory were annexed (Personal interview, Osei Kwadwo, September, 2008). The various guns discussed are evident in figure 1.

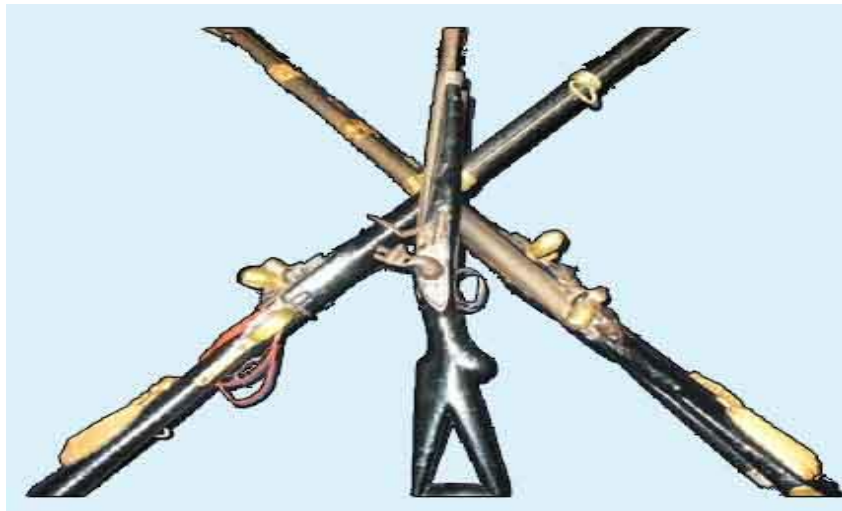


Figure 1: Doku, Sikatoa and Gyahyetoa guns used by past kings of the Asante

Figure 2 shows the Golden Axe which was a symbol of peace. In the past, the axe was used to invite warring parties to the king for amicable resolution. It was extensively used by King Kwaku Dua I. His conflict resolution earned him the title “The peaceful King of Asante” by the Europeans of his days. It was learnt

that the original Golden axe is at Windsor castle in the United Kingdom. The roles of these artefacts in preserving the culture of the people are enormous in scope. These artefacts displayed in the museum afford the visitors to fully comprehend their cultural heritage.



Figure 2: The golden axe which signifies peace

Other artefacts of the museum

The study also revealed *Fotuo*, a money bag made of leather, which previously contained the King's gold and silver (see figure 3). There are also a scale and weights used by the *Sanaahene* (The King's Treasurer) for his financial transactions. Besides, there are two ceramic containers and a white stool. The ceramic containers

were used as receptacle of the king's palm wine. During durbars, the King's palm wine tapper filled the containers with palm wine, which was served to some of the chiefs who attended the durbars. *Asesedwa* is a stool carved from sese wood which is blackened in memory of a dead chief or queen mother.



Figure 3: Fotuo (treasury bag) used in storing the Kings treasury

It is ritually blackened and placed in the stool room to serve as a shrine of a dead chief, a dead king or a dead queen mother. This stool is used as an occasional house

for the dead chief. It is blackened in a special private ceremony and named after a dear chief (See figure 4).



Figure 4: A replica of a blackened stool

Challenges of Asante Manhyia Museum

The study revealed a number of challenges the museum is facing which need to be addressed in order to sustain the museum and preserve the cultural heritage of the people. The challenges reflect in almost all aspects of museum operation from administration to conservations, through to curatorial services.

The architecture of museums forms an important aspect of the museums ability to attract visitors. Most modern museums have an interesting and attractive appearance which would help lure visitors. The Manhyia museum is an old fashioned building and this prejudices the type of collections expected to be seen in it. The museum building should see improvement in order to be at par with modern structures. This would make the buildings become an exhibit

itself. For example, a visit to Asante Armed Forces Museum could give vital information about wars fought years past through colonialism since there are exhibits of weapons used in the various wars fought by Asantes. These are displayed outside the building.

Lack of publicity also makes the museum somehow obscure. Museums in advanced societies are advertised on the internet, the newspapers and other media networks. In this light, one may be attracted to travel all the way to another country to have a glance at the artefacts in these museums. There are various media such as magazines, the internet, the radio and television, both foreign and local, by which the Asante Manhyia museum can be advertised. The inability of proper advertisement of the museum has made the museum an alien institution. As a result the people do not see

the need to visit the museum at all. The few who visit do not see the museum as banks of knowledge of the Asante culture, but do visit when they have foreign visitors.

The desire for the works to look antique and “spiritual” has contributed to quite poor maintenance of the various material culture. The museum keepers attribute this to mythical beliefs in the collections and so even the cleaning of these artefacts is done religiously in order not to demystify their beliefs behind the artefacts. The sacredness attached to these artefacts and the act of cleaning to some extent contributes to the poor state of the artefacts.

The museum is faced with poor restoration and conservation of artefacts. Although ancestral inhabitation in the artefacts appears to be the reason for irregular cleaning, regular cleaning and preservation are needed to transcend knowledge to future generations. If these artefacts are left in such state, it is likely that they may deteriorate. The authors’ contention is that, a religious rite could be performed to enable the various artefacts be clean of all filth. Perhaps, the gods and ancestors would appreciate that.

Inadequate funding becomes quite a challenge and plagues most museums all over the world (Karp and Lavine, 1990). Since patronage of the museum is not encouraging, it is not able to make enough from proceeds. The Manhyia Museum, according to the curator, relies on the inadequate gate proceeds and sale of artefacts at the museum shop. It is in this backdrop that the Ghana Tourist Board launched a strategy anchored on the campaign theme, “Ghana-Culture” to lure international and local tourists to savour the rich Ghanaian culture, proverbial warm hospitality and a repertoire of its splendid tourist endowment, (Daily Graphic, Thursday, 25th June, 2009).

There is also a challenge of inadequate untrained or specialised personnel working in the museum. The workers do not seem

to know much about the curatorial job therefore they are not able to receive visitors properly and provide adequate information to them. This is very much necessary and could have gone a long way to provide a good source of revenue for the museum.

The way forward in sustaining the museum

The study revealed that the building housing the artefacts is not aesthetically appealing. The Kwagiuith Museum is built in the spiral shape of a sea snail, symbolizing the importance of the sea in the lives of the native American fishing community (Karp and Lavine, 1990). This aesthetic quality attracts people to the museum. The arrangements and positioning of the museum’s collections contribute effectively to the curiosity of the museum visitor. The neatness of the various rooms and the environment as a whole make the visitor comfortable and always wants to learn more. Briggs (1993) made an observation of the burnt Yaa Asantewaa Museum in Ejisu that the building itself was worth the effort of visiting. It was constructed to mimic a 19th century Ashanti chief’s palace with traditional *adinkra* murals on the walls and steeply angled thatched roof.

The challenge of improper treatments of exhibits could be solved by the engagement of specialists such as art restorers and conservers. Workshops should be organised periodically for the workers on how to restore and maintain the exhibits. If this improper treatment continues to exist they could make the collections unpopular thereby affecting patronage of the museum. In addition to increasing the patronage, the museum authorities could borrow artefacts from other museums or private collections. This might encourage more people to visit and revisit the museum.

The museums should organize educational and funfair programmes. The primary, Junior and Senior high school students

should be encouraged to visit the museum as part of their educational curriculum and inaugurate museum clubs in their various schools. This could help inculcate the knowledge about historical heritage and resound their cultural identity. The museum should be seen as a valuable field and its potential for increasing art learning. The authors again share in the same expression by Agyemang Yeboah (2000) that museums are a good source of educational facilities which indicate that there must be cooperation between the educational authorities and the museums if the idea of the outreach is to have a real meaning and become the museums main *raison d'être*. As a result of the pre-eminence given to museum education, most museums like the Ghana National Museum in Accra has established educational units alongside others, such as archaeology, architecture and ethnography. These are absent in Asante Manhyia Museum. It is worth mentioning that a museum is a place where visitors acquire, for information, receive enjoyment and also watch exhibits objects for cultural appreciation.

All these artefacts at the museum have got histories attached to them. Therefore there could be some performance in the form of drama, theatre, dance and sketches showing how these collections have performed throughout history. In these domains the artefacts would continue to play an important role in portraying the cultural identity of the people. The management of the museum should come out with attractive entertainment packages especially on public holidays and weekends. The museums could host drama troupes, indigenous and contemporary musicians. The performance of these indigenous musicians such as Agya Koo Nimo (an indigenous musician) whose palm wine music is second to none would attract people to the museum. This would remind the visitors of the existence of the museum and there would be no doubt that the patronage of museums would be increased.

Also, there should be a conscious effort to include museum studies in the various curricula of all levels of education. If this is done, the various significance of the museum would be reiterated to students who will in return develop the love for the study. The students would then aspire to be ethnographers, anthropologists in order to get the requirements for the job.

Monuments over the years have been converted into museums. This means that the architecture of these museums were not actually planned as buildings to house museum collections. They had some modification to suit the purpose. Many of the museums like the Armed Forces and the Manhyia Palace Museums in Kumase created between 1800 and 1950 have been housed in existing historical monuments. Some examples in Europe are the Louvre in Paris, France, the Prado in Madrid and innumerable provincial museums. Most developing nations have followed suit. Therefore the Queens Palace at Tananarive, Malagasy Republic, the National Museum at Libreville, Gabon, and the Fort Jesus Museum at Mombasa, Kenya have old monuments transferred into museums.

Aesthetic and functional aspects of the architecture of museums are of great importance because they contribute greatly to patronage. Until the 1950s it was important as has been noted that the museum architecture should reflect the concept of a museum as the sanctuary of beauty and of the past. There should be a clarion call for all building faculties from the architect, the engineer, the surveyor and the artist to work collaboratively in erecting a building capable of exhibiting the material culture of the people, preserving their culture for posterity. The most prominent primary role of a museum is to institute the duty of reviewing and getting people informed about certain cultural heritage as a means of preserving the culture of the people (Agyeman Yeboah, 2000).

Museum is seen as an educational centre. Therefore it safeguards the historical and cultural aspects of a people and arouses the curiosity of teachers and pupils as well as other citizens. When museums are well prepared to provide quality historical, cultural as well as scientific trends it could become a proper store of knowledge. This helps patronage especially when it is championed through mobile museums as done by the management of some Nigeria museums. These museums could have outreach programmes through the organization of exhibitions at places outside the museum habitat. This could be of a good educational tool as well as whet the appetite of the public so as to create greater awareness.

Deductions from data confirm that documentation of the museum under one umbrella could go a long way not only to project Asante culture but also raise the image of the museums in Asante as a way of attracting tourists and other scholars to the land. The researchers found it tough siphoning ideas from the mind of the various museum workers in charge of the museum because they were having the fears of revealing the secrets of the Asante history. This assertion shows that the old mythologies surrounding the Asante cultural heritage still exist. However, little information gathered has being of great help in knowing the challenges of the museum and therefore could help catapult it to modern standards.

CONCLUSIONS

Although it is vividly evident that the challenges of Asante Manhyia museum are enormous, it still holds the cultural identity of the people. If the challenges are not well addressed to sustain the museum, the history of the Asante which has been imbibed in the material cultures will also be lost. The study shares the view of Adu-Agyem (1998) that appropriate documentation, preservation and protection of the arts and culture then become

important during the influx of foreign ideas, values and technology. The study argues that there must be art museum education in Ghana and agrees with Stone (2001) that the museum can be thought of as a journey, from gaining inspiration upon for classroom discussions to the development of lessons and units for studio, criticism, aesthetics and art history investigation. Findings have shown that it is through these material cultures of the people of Asante which are exhibited in the museum that we understand the past, the present and the future. In sum, the study concludes that without the understanding of the finer nuances of the museum and its material culture, the culture of the people would be lost.

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