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OPINION PIECE:

Resurrecting cultural objects and artefacts in a museum space: The indispensable roles of museum theatre in palace museums in Ghana

How to cite:

Adom, D., Mensah, P.J. E. & Kportufe, E. G. (2023). Resurrecting cultural objects and artefacts in a museum space: The indispensable roles of museum theatre in palace museums in Ghana. *Journal of African Art Education*, 1(1), 125-132.

Palace museums and shrine houses play a crucial role in reconstructing the histories and cultures of people in specific communities. In a broader perspective, palace museums and shrine houses recount the origin, identity, economic and warfare prowess as well as the material culture of a people (Shalima, 2019). Shrine houses are typical to many indigenous Ghanaian communities. However, due to the inter-ethnic wars and the captivation of kingdoms in the colonial era as well as the influx of Christianity, Islam and other foreign religions, most of these shrines are non-existent (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). For instance, in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, there are about ten (10) of these shrines scattered across the region that have been refurbished and inscribed to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage List. Besease, Adwinase (Patakro Bonsam), Asawase, Adako Jachie, Bodwease, Abirim, Kentinkrono, Saaman, Asenemanso and Kenyasi Tano Shrines have preserved the spiritual embodiments of these people. The Tano god, according to oral history, is the most revered god among the Asante people, hence a Tano Shrine was found in every community in the Asante Kingdom of Ghana. This is typical in the case of Bodwease where both the shrine and palace museum are opened to visitors. These shrines were believed to inhabit potent spiritual powers and were held in high esteem as well as revered in these communities. They served as a spiritual backbone for the chiefs, hence, these shrine houses are situated close to the palaces of these towns.

In 2012, some palace museums and shrine houses in Ghana were nominated to be listed as Asante Traditional Buildings (ATB). They were nominated because of their strong symbolic, social, religious, and historical value as well as their affiliation to the historical development and preservation of the Asante culture (Haney, Moriset & Williamson, 2014). As a result of the uniformity of culture and traditional beliefs of the Asante people (Ababio et al., 2019), Palace Museums and Shrine Houses are of unvarying peculiarities. Palace museums are usually palaces that were previously occupied by the royals of their respective towns, as in the case of Bodwease and Bodomase Palace Museums. Palace museums, just like shrine houses, have unique architectural designs similar to typical indigenous Asante homes. These structures are raised to be enclosed on all four sides, creating a courtyard in the middle, with a small door serving as an entrance. This architectural style is influenced by the communal nature of Asante families where all members of the extended family lived in one house. In the shrine houses, the courtyard served as a traditional convention ground for indigenes who went there to perform various spiritual activities. The aesthetic qualities and the symbolic wall engravings found in these shrine houses and museums cannot be overemphasised. Asante et al. (2015) outlined the symbolic significance of the motifs engraved on these traditional buildings. Some of these motifs on the previously named ten (10) shrine houses signified strength and bravery, the optical powers of the deity, quietness and precision, the inevitability of death, mutual understanding among others (Asante et al, 2015). Common among these sites are the presence of antique drums, stools, traditional garments and photographs of iconic characters relative to each town. Every aspect of a palace museum or shrine house narrates a story of a people; stories that are better told with live performances and interactions.

The use of theatrical interpretation in museums is currently gaining popularity, as evidenced by the recent establishment of new professional associations and conferences on the topic (Merritt, 2017). The International Museum Theatre Alliance was established in 1990 as a network for the theatre and museum professionals interested in discussing and advancing theatrical interpretation in museums (Merritt, 2017). Theatre and dramatic methods employed to explain histories, museum objects and other forms of cultural heritage fall under the umbrella term of *museum theatre*, which encompasses a wider range of activities. Portnova (2019) noticed at the A. Bakhrushin Theater Museum in Moscow as well as the Theater and Musical Culture Museum (St. Petersburg) that museum visitors are involved in museum theatre on a variety of levels, which are mostly emotional and intellectual. It can happen in historical sites,

zoos, botanical gardens, museums, libraries, and other locations that engage with the preservation, sharing, and interpretation of cultural heritage. The genre of museum theatre comprises demonstrations of actual people and historical activities portrayed by actors and actresses during the museum performance. The museum theatre industry has expanded significantly over the past few decades since its inception in the late nineteenth century in Sweden at the Skansen Living Museum by Artur Hazelius, demonstrating its capacity to engage museum visitors in contentious social themes (Bridal, 2004; Taylor, 2011). Even though the use of theatre at museums and historic locations has long been a contentious practice, several studies lend credence to the fact that its benefits far outweigh the shortcomings. Jackson and Kidd (2007, p. 2) in their longitudinal study have discovered that museum theatre may enhance interpretation by “offering insights into the social meaning of artefacts and animating the inanimate”. Museum theatre can be useful in interacting with a varied audience that does not feel connected to the cultural displays. Historically, the theatre can contextualise knowledge and museum objects artistically, spiritually, expressively and rationally as opposed to only providing mere information (Allsford & Parry 1991).

The educational potential of museum theatre has also been emphasised, particularly concerning linkages to contemporary social, political, and personal realities, as well as about illuminating the richness of museum narratives and enabling multi-vocal interpretations (Jackson & Kidd, 2008). Theatre has a special position in museums, or what Hughes (1998, p. 12) refers to as “the museum theatre,” as a result of the shift in emphasis from items seen as being apart from people to artefacts seen as being indicative of people’s experiences. Hughes finds that the museum theatre, when used in conjunction with a play, can facilitate discussions that tackle difficult subjects without making audience members feel threatened or accountable for what they have to say. This also gives visitors multiple perspectives to examine a story told by the actor and a collection of objects. For instance, all museum objects or artefacts such as the Peace Pipe at the Manhyia Palace Museum in the Ashanti Region of Ghana tell a story. As students who visit the Manhyia Palace Museum relate their own experiences to those in the story, role-playing may be employed as a strategy to improve their comprehension and appreciation of the narrative. Drama, in the opinion of Barton and Booth (1990), enables the children’s subjective worlds to enter the picture, assisting them in comprehending the meanings of the narrative as they actively participate in the drama. Kelin (2007) in her study explored how theatre techniques like role-playing may help children

connect with a character's experience by relating it to their own, allowing them to approach every circumstance with a similar feeling of wonder and pleasure. The integration of learning in museums and theatre creates an interdisciplinary atmosphere with an emphasis on developing scholastic and personal skills, drawing on Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligence (1983). The skills produced in an interdisciplinary setting would have a far deeper influence on the well-being of the museum visitors or participants rather than merely communicating a chosen set of museum objects that may appear irrelevant and lifeless to certain visitors. Theatre facilitates real-time connections and individual stories that give a museum's collection life. In this way, the museums may be seen as a dynamic, object-based stage that is replete with unending intellectual resources and a wealth of history and culture.

The museum theatre concept can also be a useful strategy that museum curators and managers might employ to attract new visitors to museums, monuments, and other heritage sites (Hughes, 1998; Kidd, 2007). Combining museum experiences with living history, storytelling, participatory or interactive drama, dance, music, and other mediums can increase the number of visitors to the museum while broadening their perspectives. As espoused earlier, a written play or other theatrical techniques are characteristic of a museum theatre performance which is frequently presented in front of students for instructional objectives. The benefits of participating in museum theatre are numerous and go beyond the institutions' statutory educational and outreach duties. Performance is connected to a variety of additional advantages of visiting museums, such as improvements in empathy and curiosity, the growth of personal identities, or the establishment and strengthening of communities. The theatrical performance can be considered a means for the museum to increase revenue and awareness, potentially raise the site's profile or, perhaps more crucially, broaden its visitors' demographics. In addition to enhancing the visitor experience, enhancing learning outcomes, and bringing the site to life, museum theatre also benefits the site's business by bringing visitors in, ensuring their quality of experience, and generating valuable word-of-mouth publicity to bringing in more and possibly different visitors (Kidd, 2007). It has been discovered that the museum performance has the power to breathe new life into a location in this way as well (Merritt, 2017; Taylor, 2011). Museum theatrical displays are seen as important and useful method of pondering over the place identities and contributions of societies to the world.

In palace museums and shrine houses, new perspectives and narratives to the exhibits are brought to life by performers while complex historical events could be made easy to assimilate, thus, heightening their intrinsic satisfaction from the experience. A major concern for these tourist attraction sites is low levels of publicity and sensitisation resulting in low patronage. For instance, the caretaker of the Besease Shrine House reports an average of forty (40) visitors per month, irrespective of its strategic location along the Accra – Kumasi highway. The introduction of museum theatre, however, helps to attract visitors from diverse backgrounds. Museum theatre becomes an appealing force to even people who have little or no interest in cultural and rural tourism. The satisfaction gained by these visitors sets the tone for word of mouth marketing for these sites. Empirical studies in tourism studies have revealed strength of Word Of Mouth (WOM) in decision making to visit a tourist destination. Widayati et al. (2020) examined the tactful use of word of mouth in making decisions regarding visits to tourism destinations in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. They found out that the word of mouth of previous visitors significantly impacted the decisions of prospective visitors to a tourism destination. Similarly, Reza and Samiei (2012) noted strong impact of word of mouth on tourists decision to visit various Islamic destinations in Iran. They noted that future tourists decision pivots on the number of recommendations and endorsement of the tourism site by previous tourists. Likewise, Wu (2017) noted a positive correlation between Word-Of -Mouth (WOM) and brand intention and brand trust in the tourism industry in the Asia-Pacific Region. Thus, Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) from person(s) who have experienced museum theatre would act as a proxy for an individual's decision making to visit a museum (Harris, 2014). The increase in patronage to these sites means a boost in rural tourism with its trickling down effects on the local economy of the respective towns, thus, promoting tourism and economic development. This will not only improve the lives of the indigenes, but also help them to better appreciate their culture and promote its continuity. Museum theatre equally serves as a bridge between the past and present, ensuring that Ghana's cultural heritage is not only preserved but also celebrated and shared with the current and future generations.

Overall, museum theatre is a crucial and indispensable intervention for museum sustainability in Ghana as it promotes the preservation of cultural heritage, eliminates language barrier, engages visitors from diverse backgrounds, enhances educational and entertaining experience and boosts the local economy and improves the lives of the people in benefiting communities.

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Dickson Adom (PhD) is a pluridisciplinary researcher and senior member in the Department of Educational Innovations in Science and Technology, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. His research niche focuses on place identity history and Rural community participation strategies for conservation of heritage sites such as museums, nature reserves and parks. He was part of the presidential committee that developed the new chapter document on Ghana's Museums and Cultural Heritage in 2020.

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