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Decolonising Museology in Namibia: Reinterpreting Ethnographic Displays at the Owela Museum

This lecture explores the ongoing process of decolonising museology in Namibia by focusing on the reinterpretation of ethnographic displays at the Owela Museum, a display centre of the National Museum of Namibia. The lecture aims at highlighting both the theoretical and practical aspects of confronting colonial narratives in museums. This presentation seeks to contribute to a broader international discussion on ethical museum practice. It offers a southern African perspective on how heritage institutions can become agents of change through inclusive interpretation.

The lecture engages critically with Laurajane Smith's concept of Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD). This framework helps explain how colonial museums curated knowledge in ways that privileged Western perspectives while silencing or distorting those of local communities. In the Namibian context, this was manifested in dioramic 'Man in his Environment' displays that depicted local communities in static and ahistorical ways in the same gallery as wildlife. Post-independence, these displays have posed an interpretative challenge: how to dismantle entrenched colonial narratives without erasing the material traces of history? Using the Owela Museum as a case study and based on my published research titled 'Towards a Decolonisation of the Ethnographic Displays at the National Museum of Namibia,' the lecture critically discusses collaborative approaches undertaken to reinterpret these displays in a culturally sensitive and community-centred manner. These efforts involved consultations with community members, traditional knowledge holders, and heritage professionals to integrate indigenous perspectives into the museum's storytelling.

The session directly speaks to the Summer School's focus on heritage interpretation and community engagement. It offers a concrete example of how post-colonial museums struggle to transform from sites of representation to spaces of dialogue and empowerment. Furthermore, the lecture demonstrates how community collaboration is not only essential for achieving decolonial aims but also for ensuring relevance and inclusivity in heritage interpretation.

Objectives of the Lecture: (1) To critically examine the legacy of colonial museology through the lens of the Authorised Heritage Discourse; (2) To present a case study of decolonial practice in Namibia that centres local voices and community participation; (3) To explore challenges and opportunities in reinterpreting ethnographic displays in post-colonial contexts; (4) To stimulate dialogue on the relevance of decolonial museology globally and inspire similar transformative practices.

Goodman Gwasira completed his PhD on the history of Namibia's archaeologies at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, in December 2020. He holds a Master of Arts in Culture and Environment from the University of Cologne (2011), which focused on the rock engravings of the Domschlucht, Brandberg, as a core element for world heritage status. He worked as a curator of archaeology at the National Museum of Namibia before joining the University of Namibia, where he is a senior lecturer of archaeology and heritage studies. Goodman coordinates the university's Museum Outreach Programme (MOP). He has twenty-seven years' experience in the museology of Namibia. He has developed the Postgraduate Diploma in Museology and Heritage Studies at the University of Namibia. He is a member of the Human Remains Advisory Committee for the Iziko Museums in South Africa. Goodman's current research critically reassesses colonial museum practices with a particular emphasis on developing culturally sensitive and community-centred collaborative approaches.

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