

## ‘Community voices, curatorial choices’: community consultation for the 1807 exhibitions

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### Abstract

This paper argues that community consultation is not always a democratic process as power often resides with museum staff members who decide which community views to accept and which to ignore. Drawing upon a series of semi-structured interviews with community members, community officers, curators and other museum staff as part of the *1807 Commemorated* project, I attest that consultative group members often experienced frustration, anger, and disappointment during and after the development of the 1807 exhibitions. These emotions were primarily driven by the communities’ unmet needs and expectations as well as by a clash between object-centric curatorial choices and people-oriented community voices; members of the African-Caribbean community viewed their participation in the consultation meetings both as a means of empowerment of their communities and as a gesture of acknowledgement, social justice and recognition. Thus, it is imperative that community consultation is replaced by active negotiation and engagement that is aimed at shared power and ownership.

**Key words:** community consultation, negotiation, ownership, identity, social justice

### Introduction

‘the approach [in the museums] is that they’ve already got a set programme and are not listening to what the needs ... of the people might be’ (07comC110 2008).<sup>1</sup>

This paper derives from the *1807 Commemorated project* and explores the consultation process that was undertaken by seven museums<sup>2</sup> during the development of their 1807 exhibitions. The paper presents the consultation models employed at the seven museums and analyses the feelings and perceptions of community group members who got involved in the consultation processes. The paper further focuses on the tensions that arose between museum professionals and community members due to the unmet needs and expectations of communities. Tensions also arose between the ‘object-centric’ curatorial choices and the ‘people-oriented’ community concerns. The participants of consultation panels expected active dialogue, which often did not occur. Community consultation, I argue, should be replaced with active negotiation and engagement that is aimed at shared power and ownership.

Addressing the human needs for shared ownership, belonging, justice, and empowerment proved to be a major challenge for some museum professionals who worked with community representatives and members for the development of the 1807 exhibitions in 2007. A further challenge was to address the legacies of the idea of ‘race’ (Littler 2005; Naidoo 2005; Waterton in this issue), which often involved an uncritical approach to imperialism and a tendency to uncritically celebrate a contemporary multiculturalism (see also Littler 2008: 93; Naidoo 2005: 45). As a result, the *1807 exhibitions* that attempted to engage with racism and other legacies of enslavement tended to do so in a gestural fashion resulting often in tokenistic and celebratory representations of multiculturalism (see also Waterton in this issue). It is not then surprising that anger and frustration often occurred. Taking into consideration the fact that an individual’s sense of justice is connected to the norms, rights, and entitlements that are thought to underlie

decent human treatment (Deutsch 2000: 44) community members viewed these exhibitions as an opportunity for recognition and social justice. For the community members of the consultative groups, social justice was meant to be attributed through an honest, transparent representation of the painful history of enslavement in its 'wholeness' and 'trueness'. However, despite the commitment of many museum staff to address social inclusion policies and a real philosophical desire to consult with communities, the dominant perception of museum consultation practices of community representatives interviewed for this study was negative. They report a sense that museum staff often approached consultation as a 'tick-box' exercise that simply aimed to justify funding requirements or was seen as a means to avoid controversy and tension.

### The whys and hows of community consultation

The term 'community' is one of the most elusive and vague terms in sociology (Abercrombie *et al.* 2000: 64 cited in Watson 2007), and it 'can change its guise to suit different circumstances and purposes' (Brent 2009: 204). Museum professionals have in turn, comprehended this term in different ways. Museums often identify or even create the communities with which they want to collaborate, and therefore they are in a position of power in representing these communities (Watson 2007: 3). A core element of a 'community' is the sharing of certain criteria such as ethnicity, socio-economic status social disadvantage, gender, age and geographical location (Mason 2005), to mention just a few. Regardless of the criteria that a community may share 'communities are fluid and unstable and people belong to more than one at any time' (Watson 2007: 4). Thus, communities 'alter in different contexts in almost chameleon-like fashion' (Crooke 2006: 173; see also Goldberg 1993: 3). The processes of generating a sense of ownership and belonging as well as of constructing identities are dynamic and complex and, often, reflect the aspirations, needs and values of community members.

It is not only the term 'community' that is elusive, but the idea that museums work with communities is itself problematic. As Watson (2007: 18) points out, museums work mainly with individuals within communities rather than with communities per se, and those individuals, in turn, establish partnerships with other specific individuals from within the museum rather than with the institution as a whole. Consequently, ownership, control and power are shared among a limited number of individuals from the community and specific museum staff.

A further problematic perception is that museums work with community representatives. While this is true for few individuals who have been selected by their communities as representatives, it does not always apply that any 'representative' considers themselves, or can be defined as, 'representative'. The responsibility of representing a community can be a significant burden, as one 'community representative' observed:

For a long time I felt myself, I don't represent a community ... In the same way I represent masculinity or anything else or fatherhood because I am these things. At the same time, I can't speak for all fathers and all men (07comC108 2008).

The term 'consultation' is potentially problematic since it provides the space for museum professionals to simply consult rather than engage with their communities. As the literature on community consultation reports, 'consultation' is often conflated with just 'telling' communities about what will or what will not occur (see Greer *et al.* 2002; Derry and Malloy 2003; Smith 2004; Swidler *et al.* 1997).

Museums consult and otherwise engage with their communities for a range of reasons (Canning and Holmes, 2006: 278). Funding bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), for instance, require museums to consult with their local communities and socially excluded groups. From a marketing perspective, museums also actively seek to increase their visitor numbers and develop programmes that are appealing to a wide and diverse audience, particularly as they face competition from other leisure activities (Rentschler and Gilmore 2002). Targeting new audiences does not only fulfil marketing goals, but it also complies with the social inclusion and community cohesion governmental agendas (Crooke 2008: 417). Although there are often pragmatic reasons for consultation, there are also genuine political and democratic motivations for some museums and their staff. Within this context, museums are encouraged to be agents of social inclusion

(Sandell 2002). Although social exclusion has been understood and defined in different and often contradictory ways, the various definitions imply that 'social exclusion is not only about material poverty and lack of material resources, but also about the processes by which some individuals and groups become marginalised in society' (Millar 2007: 1). Within this remit, museums may be seen as places in which marginalised groups can actively participate and feel creative. Thus, museums strive to consult with 'hard-to-reach' underrepresented groups in order to identify and then overcome the barriers that prevent these groups from visiting museums. In these attempts, museums often focus on hitting numerical targets that are measurable and meet the strategic targets of the Department of Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS). Consequently, social inclusion museum policy has been criticised as 'a routinized gestural signifier used rather freely by the institution as a box-ticking, PR exercise with some significant financial implications' (Tlili 2008: 143). Further, as Smith and Waterton (2009: 107) argue, current social inclusion policies tend to be assimilationist. That is, there is a tendency to assume that it is 'good thing' if museums and other heritage institutions can encourage the excluded to simply embrace dominant cultural values and narratives, while dominant ideas of history and heritage remain unquestioned. To overcome these issues, the democratic case for community consultation holds that museums should seek to share ownership of their projects with their communities enabling individuals to participate fully in the cultural life of their community with the aim that the position of museums as hegemonic institutions will be overcome (Canning and Holmes 2006). In giving voice to the excluded, a process of self-discovery and empowerment will take place in which the curator becomes a facilitator rather than a figure of authority (Witcomb 2003).

Funding requirements, marketing concerns and social inclusion policies are not the only factors that drive museums to work with minority communities. Interviews with museum staff revealed that in the lead up to 2007 some museums entered into consultation with individuals and groups from African Caribbean communities to help avoid or alleviate the possibility of tensions and conflicts with community groups. For some museums, consulting with communities, academics and artists was partly regarded as a means for eluding tensions with African communities providing, it was hoped, a safer way to display a contentious, unspoken, hidden history (Wilson and Fouseki 2008) and ensuring avoidance of public controversy (Watson 2007: 2). By sharing authorship with academics and community members, museums not only addressed wider social issues, but they also mediated and, occasionally, negated issues of contention (Wilson and Fouseki 2008). As one curator observed, 'we were trying to avoid anything that we know is too controversial' (07comM6 2007). However, a real concern for some museums was the recognition that they were dealing with hidden histories, histories that curatorial staff were not themselves informed about. Consequently, some staff considered that consultation with African and African-Caribbean British communities was an important process in understanding the significance and impact of this history. At some museums, consultation was also promoted by a perceived lack of objects related to the history of enslavement in their collections. In this context, consultation was envisaged as a remedy for this absence.

The over-representation of the museum staff by white, middle-class, well-educated 'experts', was considered by museum professionals as a potential source of controversy. As a result, community officers of African descent were occasionally employed by museums in order to mediate between museums and communities minimising or eliminating potential internal and external tensions.

The second thing is that we knew from the outset... that this gallery could only work if the Afro-Caribbean visitors recognised the stories in what we were going to tell, and of course [we are both] white, we couldn't do that. So we needed to have an organization within the structure of the process that would actually help us to do that (07comM90 2007).

However, as will be shown below, the role of the community officers as mediators was often obliterated by the dominant object-driven curatorial attitudes.

Although the driving forces that led to consultation with community members were similar across museums, the ways in which African-Caribbean members were consulted differed. Four consultation models were employed in the seven museums who participated in

the 1807 Commemorated project. These consisted, firstly, of small consultative focus groups of 4-5 people. These were formed through personal invitations from museums to selected individuals. Secondly, large discussion groups of 30-40 people formed by open invitations advertised in local newspapers. The third model tended to employ a combination of interviews with identified key community individuals and focus-group discussions. Fourth, specific sub-projects, sometimes running along side the exhibition (such as art projects, oral history projects etc), were organized in conjunction with communities and museums. Some museums also developed academic advisory committees and/or cultural advisory groups to focus or supplement community consultation. The participants of the cultural consultative groups were often artists, community leaders and faith group leaders. Either the cultural groups had a consultative role regarding the exhibition development or they created their own work that was displayed in the galleries. The nature of community consultation depended on the size and structure of the museum institution, as well as previous experience of museum staff with communities. National and more complex institutions employed a combination of consultation models while at smaller institutions, partly due to lack of funding and partly due to less hierarchical structure, consultation was conducted, in most of the cases, directly by the curator.

Each of the above consultation models had their own advantages and disadvantages. The small groups proved to be an effective way for generating a sense of shared ownership within the consultative group, although members from the wider local community, sometimes felt excluded from the process. For instance:

When I was consulted in the initial process...it wasn't put to the wider community, it was just segments, parts of the community that were involved in the community consultation (07comC78 2007)

The larger groups were more diverse in terms of education, ethnicity, age and occupation, but the development of a shared sense of ownership was difficult to achieve and it was not uncommon for some participants to withdraw from the process.

Finally, groups that developed a small-scale project displayed in the main exhibition space - such as art works or oral history projects - seemed to have had an impact upon the lives of the participants in terms of the skills that they gained and the psychological effect of such activities upon their self-esteem. It needs to be said, though, that the majority of these sub-projects were located in the periphery of the exhibition, a point noted by some community representatives interviewed for this project.

Despite the aim of museums to avoid controversy by using consultation panels, tensions were unavoidable. It is important to stress that the main source of tension and conflict reported by many community representatives was the degree to which museum staff misunderstood the aspirations and needs of community groups.

### Understanding community needs

...you have to involve the community and show them that they have owned this project as much as you own it ...in this programme they were not allowed to own it (07ComC77 2007).

One of the central issues that were pointed out by the majority of interviewees from community groups was the need to gain a sense of *holistic, shared and equally distributed* ownership of *all* exhibition stages. This included the initial application for funding, content development, writing of the text, selection of the objects and images, the final designers' stage, and, generally, the critical decision-making processes that revolved around the development of the exhibitions. In most 1807 projects, community consultation involved only *fragmented* involvement, that was limited to the selection of objects and editing of text. The lack of this sense of *holistic and shared ownership* led to tensions, frustrations and withdrawals from consultation meetings because participants felt they were not being heard properly and actively. However, when *holistic ownership* occurred this was mentioned positively:

I was able to [give] feedback, it felt to me that it was yours, they said to me this is not our[s], ...but this is your exhibition (07comC742007).

Only in two cases, were community representatives provided with the opportunity to be involved actively in shaping the content of the exhibition, although even in these instances none of the community participants were involved at the final stage of installing objects in the showcases. A number of community representatives interviewed felt that the fundamental decisions regarding the exhibition process and its aims had been decided prior to the commencement of the consultation processes and thereby their involvement was a 'box-ticking exercise':

I said the museum had the mindset *already* decided, everything was decided, you were there to tick boxes, this is what exactly what's happened... (07comC112 2008)

What became clear to a lot of delegates, a lot of the people participating, even though the people working with us didn't view it that way, it was a rubber stamping exercise (07comC107 2008)

In addition to a sense of ownership, particularly of the final stages of exhibition development, the preliminary stages were also highlighted as being crucial. Most of the interviewees stressed that consultation should start at the 'very early stages ... just to find out about how people feel about the very early stages of the exhibition' (07ComC101 2007). While museum staff 'should have been open and prepared to take on the views' (07ComC77 2007) of community groups.

Generating a sense of shared ownership between and within communities and museum staff proved to be a complex process. Internally, community officers were often marginalised:

[community officers were often] an afterthought or you are thought about in the beginning and then you are marginalized, or you are pushed aside or you are dropped kind of thing and that has happened (07comM105 2008)

Externally, community members represented by individuals in the consultative groups often felt excluded since the process 'wasn't put to the wider community' (07comC113 2008). Not surprisingly, contradictory experiences have been described by individuals who participated in the same consultative groups reinforcing the idea that methods for capturing the individual voice in consultation are essential. A comparison of contradictory experiences is shown in the quotes from community representatives below at 'Museum X':

[the museum staff said to me] listen we want you to feel that this is **your gallery** as much as our gallery, we want **you** to have a sense of ownership (07comC89 2007, interviewee's emphasis)

This quote clearly demonstrates the positive experience of the interviewee who felt that he owned the gallery space. The sense of ownership was generated since the participant was able to actively intervene in the space and see his suggestions listened by the museum staff and implemented.

In addition to the need to own holistically the exhibition project, the interviewees referred repeatedly to the significance of social justice and the recognition that such exhibitions could provide both to themselves personally and their communities generally:

We started with the narrative, what is it that we want to tell ... there was a big debate and [Name of participant] was saying I want 'the pain, there is this pain that I am carrying and my people are carrying that we need to tell. London needs to know about this pain and it's one of the main problems of many of my people'. There was an immediate resistance from [Name of participant 2]...no, this [exhibition] will be about the untold history of [Place of city where museum is located] (07comM106 2008).

The lack of recognition of the consequences of this traumatic history identified by the speaker above brought criticisms from community group members:

I would like to mention that I am a bit disappointed with the exhibition because ...I felt that ...the space is ...very white and clinical ...and when you speak about slavery ...you should try to make the viewer see how horrible it was (07ComC102 2008)



Indeed, the representation of 'violence' and 'trauma' proved to be one of the most debatable issues during consultation meetings. On the one hand, it was felt by a few group members that a representation of 'suffering' ultimately victimises enslaved Africans. On the other hand, the representation of 'pain' was viewed by some as a form of 'memorialised violence' or as Ashworth terms it, 'psychological "settlement of memory" through mourning and closure' (2008: 236). Such a closure helps shape group identity and provides internal cohesion and external demarcation (Ashworth 2008:239). It is within the framework of social justice and recognition that communities also stressed the importance of narrating the legacies of this history:

I just wanted this message, this is what Africa was like, this is what the transatlantic slave trade did to it, and this is how it looks like now, and this is the Caribbean and this is how the Caribbean looks like now (07comC101 2008).

A further issue that interrelates to the need of social justice and recognition is the issue of positive representation of Africa and Africans (see also Walker 1997). Interviewees highlighted the significance of the representation of African culture and of providing positive role models for educating younger generations:

I would like to see how the history is revealed though the street names and the people who contributed positively to the city, and they still do...We wanted local heroes, we want the average postman, the local doctor, the solicitor, dentist, those people who were doing well to the society and brought [the society] to the top...I want people to be aware that there is some fantastic history of queens and kings of the time ... when an English person sees you next time is not just seeing a black colour, they are seeing ...a person who ... played a part in developing the world (07comC742007).

The representation of African-Caribbean role models can boost identity and self-esteem, eliminating stereotypical representations and depicting 'accurate images of black life that satisfactorily reflect the variety and vitality of African contributions' (Small 1997: 62) as one of the interviewees stressed:

there was a bit of criticism about the pictures they [museum] wanted to put on of black people, ...like people doing a fireplace or just dancing, you know all these stereotypical sort of primitive images (07comC102 2008)

Social justice is not inseparable from issues of identity (Markell 2003) and, in this specific context social justice and recognition are linked in the 'personal identity journey' that the majority of visitors and community consultative members endeavoured to achieve as part of their involvement in the exhibitions:

Only Friday, Thursday sorry, I found out about my great, great grandfather; who owned him as a slave, and that only came out of the slave records, which were released last year ...so I'm still on an emotional rollercoaster right now. ...That's part of what I wanted to say. Just to say we need justice not necessarily anything else ... (07comC114 2008)

The importance of seeing the personal and identifying with the content of exhibitions is evident in the following:

...this exhibition is about ...the ancestors ...something that gave the sense this is also about my ancestors, I didn't feel as much as I wanted, ...it was very historical, which is good, but I wanted a **sense of my ancestors** there, that it was about the lives of all these people and how that came about (07comC101 2008; emphasis added)

What the above quotes illustrate is that emotions of anger and frustration were often unavoidable since the needs of ownership, belonging and social justice were either not listened or misunderstood. Indeed, needs are 'ontologically grounded in emotions' (Sites 1990: 16) and, if unmet, tensions emerge (Burton 1990; see also Fisher 1990; Roy 1990; Terrell 1989). Sites

argues that 'human needs can be tied realistically to human emotions' and thereby, human needs can be seen as analogues of 'primary emotions', thus giving needs a naturalistic basis (1990: 7). Sites, as well as other human needs theorists, are distinguishing between 'primary' and 'secondary' emotions claiming that there are a few ontological emotions that are universal across all cultures and eras. Kemper for instance has narrowed down primary emotions into fear, anger, depression and satisfaction (Kemper 1987). Secondary emotions are then being taught to name more specific feeling states and can thus be traced to either one or a combination of primary emotions (Sites 1990: 8). For instance, Kemper sees guilt as a form of fear and shame as based on anger. Sites' analogue of the emotion of anger and the need for meaning (mostly experienced by communities) can be useful in understanding the community's reactions.

Anger arises when people feel that they have not been rewarded, or have been mistreated, or experienced unpredictable and harmful actions. Unpredictable and harmful actions render the world 'senseless' (Sites 1990: 18). Indeed, frustration was caused because community members were not rewarded or benefited from their involvement and, more importantly, because they faced 'unpredictable' actions by museum staff or, in other words, actions that did not match the community's expectations. Anger, of course, results from unmet needs such as the need of ownership, belonging, justice, recognition and empowerment. Furthermore, as shown below, anger was inevitable due to the lack of active dialogue on social and political issues, issues that were often overshadowed by object-centric curatorial attitudes. Community voices were often 'objectified' in order to fill up 'empty' galleries; they were a means of contemporary collecting, a process that did not allow voices to be heard and negotiated.

### **Community voices, curatorial choices: people-oriented versus object-centric community consultation**

In this section, I argue, that 'narrative driven' exhibitions (by which I mean exhibitions in which the narrative defined the selection of objects and images) provided a more democratic consultation process in comparison with the 'object-driven' exhibitions (that is, those exhibitions whose narrative was shaped by the existing collections). This analysis does not intend to underestimate the power of objects displayed in museums in meaning making and therapeutic use (the power of objects has been analysed in various works including Paris 2002; Chatterjee 2008; Dudley 2010). Rather, I intend to illustrate how the communities' needs were diluted during community consultations since discussions centred on the selection of 'appropriate' and 'relevant' objects, rather than on engaging with wider social and political issues and the needs and expectations of the community. Indeed, one would agree that a debate that pitches objects against people is unproductive and is a perspective based on 'a utopian curatorial past which never existed' (O'Neill 2002: 20).

Despite the criticisms within the *New Museology* of the hegemonic nature of museum institutions and the necessity to democratise museums and encompass alternative voices (see for example, Witcomb 2003), the 1807 example reveals that object-centric curatorial attitudes are still dominant. The dominance of the *thing* questions the extent to which curatorial practices have indeed been democratised. It also calls into question the extent to which current courses and training at universities for future 'curators' and museum practitioners have indeed embraced the ideal that museums should be viewed by curators as 'ideas based' rather than as focused only on the object (Weil 1990). Indeed, it is essential that museum professionals overcome the belief that because they work with *objects*, their knowledge claims are necessarily *objective* (Witcomb 2003:86).

The fetishization of material culture (Macdonald 2002), and its prevalent position at consultation meetings angered some community representatives who felt that their expectations and needs, and those of their communities, were not fulfilled by simply discussing displayed objects. It was felt by some that in-depth discussions about the meaning and consequences of the history of enslavement should have preceded the selection of objects. Consequently, the curatorial focus on objects as a major determining factor of the exhibition development process clashed with the people-oriented focus and needs of the communities. A community member for instance was shockingly surprised to realise that:

people at the museum just had a fascination about all the objects they got, 'oh

*look at this object'*, you know, and not thinking so much about the people who were talking in the museum (07ComC102 2008, original emphasis).

Even in cases in which peoples' stories dominated the exhibition space, this was regarded mainly as a means for filling up 'empty' museum galleries. Indeed, the lack of objects that related to the history of enslavement and its legacy constituted a major concern for the majority of curators, and, thus, the production of artwork and oral history displays by the communities themselves was reckoned as an effective way of *contemporary collecting*:

I mean from our point of view the consultative group is really the core of the whole project ...because we knew from the outset as a museum that we had a couple of big problems; the first one is that **we had virtually no slavery collection at all** ... [communities were important] to actually help us assemble a collection around which to build the story of the gallery we were going to tell (07comM90 2007; emphasis added)

...that was frustrating because we just did not have the objects. How do you create an exhibition without any objects? All we've had is the written word and that's why we've tried to use the written word as an interactive (07comM3 2007)

The risk that was inherent in 'filling up the galleries' with peoples' voices and stories was that of objectifying and thus sterilising their political and emotional content. A sensitive way to display community experiences and stories had to be found.

Object-driven exhibitions often failed to engage positively and actively with their communities, while narrative-driven exhibitions adopted a people-oriented approach which was received in a much more positive and constructive way by consultative group members. For instance, the following illustrates the reaction of a community representative who felt that the narrative of the exhibition they were working on was determined by the existence of the collection without leaving space to accommodate new ideas or the aspirations of the community group:

What became clear to a lot of delegates, a lot of the people participating, even though the people working with us didn't view it that way, it was a rubber stamping exercise... we've already chosen the pieces, and we're only working with the artefacts in our collection.... As a result I pulled out, I refused to take any of their money, and that financially hurt me (07comC107 2008).

This contrasts markedly with these responses to narrative driven exhibitions, which as these museum professionals attest, provided more flexibility and the space to negotiate and create a shared narrative:

Actually what we did, we had an idea and we thought how does this object relate to the idea we've already got, so things could fit in with that ... rather than have the objects and say we'll tell the story of this object (curator: 07comM90 2007).

I think what people [in the museum] have learnt is that people know a lot, they underestimate them, they think that the historian or the curators are [the experts]... people know so much that they can teach you a lot, and I think it really humbled people and the whole of new way of looking at knowledge and I am very much on experiential knowledge and the recognition of that... (community member: 07comM106 2008)

In object-driven exhibitions what was emphasised during consultation meetings, as those interviewed reported, were the 'power of the thing' as well as the notion of 'authentic', 'unique', 'real' objects, which reflects to some extent the traditional perception of museums as hosting 'collections of universal value' and as being repositories of uncontested value (Clifford 1997: 213). This is illustrated by the emphasis some museum staff placed on the object:

But secondly also museums are in a unique position in that they can display



objects. ... people can actually see really special objects which again, is very important in terms of making it real. What you're offering is the evidence (07comM6 2007)

And you try and think there's a degree to which you can think about the things you have in your collection to try and tell different stories about them, I think that's fine but at some point it is the power of the thing, people want to see the thing (07comM97 2008)

This stress, however, was contradicted by community interviewees who stressed the power people's voices and experiences:

And then they came back with some quite interesting things they said, we wanted more people, you can talk a lot about trade and commerce and ships but we want people in the story (07comC90 2007)

Listening and integrating alternative and diverse voices into the gallery space challenged the authoritative nature of museum institutions, the role of which has traditionally been regarded as conveyor of absolute and accurate, scientific truths:

if it [exhibition] was to have any meaning at all it was about finding a way to enable those voices [voices of underrepresented groups] to be heard to be able to challenge so called authoritative histories (07comM48 2007)

### Consultation as a negotiation process

What the above analysis revealed is that lack of active dialogue between community groups and museums, and a resistance by museums to negotiate ideas with the community members. This ultimately led to anger and frustration for community representatives. What this suggests is that 'consultation' may be constructively replaced by 'negotiation' as negotiation assumes the existence of diverse voices and thus the existence of latent or active disagreement between and within museum staff and communities. It also presupposes the possibility of changing peoples' perceptions or an openness and willingness to change. Negotiation thus allows constructive and equitable dialogue. It is imperative to keep the dialogue alive, to negotiate and renegotiate and thereby move positions forward in each separate case of community involvement (Lagerkvist 2006: 60). Negotiation should also mean mutual benefits for all involved parties:

The community has to recognise how the museum has something for you. The museum has some materials that we want access to... So... part of the negotiation has to be to bring out the material that is related to maybe a museum project (07comC114 2008).

Negotiation also implies that heritage, history and the past can potentially be dissonant; this is why they are negotiated. What negotiation also connotes are the diverse and possibly conflicting voices and wills of participants. Indeed, each community voice may be potentially different from other voices, and thus, while museums may function as 'contact zones' – as sources of knowledge and as catalysts for new relationships (Clifford 1997; Peers and Brown 2003: 5) – they may also operate as 'diversifying zones' due to the multiple and different values that they encompass. However, diverse values and their potentially emerging dissonance should not cause fear among museum staff, but should rather be viewed as an opportunity for constructive dialogue and negotiation.

At this point, though, it is worth stressing that negotiation is a complex process. Negotiating and working *with* rather than *for* communities is not an easy task. It is widely known that museums are largely perceived as distancing, authoritative institutions, and thus mistrust towards such institutions does exist among communities (Fouseki 2008). However, developing mutual trust is a long-term process and this is why some museums in the case of the 1807 exhibitions employed staff members from the communities. Sustaining trust and relationships is also a long-term, time-consuming process, but, more than that, it is, or should be, an ethical, long-term commitment. Sustainable relationships and mutual trust require mutual benefits and

partnership collaborations. If museums do not work in partnerships and share power or control, then there is the risk for museums 'of institutionalizing their marginalization as "the other"' (Merriman and Poovaya-Smith 1996:183). Equitable partnership and shared power should not be diminutive between a museum staff member (i.e. development officer) and the community; communities want to work with all museum staff, including the senior staff members; they need to feel that they are an integral part of museum organizations. If such collaboration is lacking, then community participants are likely to feel excluded from the wider social systems to which museums belong and may feel that they encounter the same kind of prejudice and even racism in the museum as in other parts of the society (Lagerkvist 2006: 60). Thus, museums will simply replicate the wider societal agendas of discrimination and social exclusion as well as the wider social hierarchical structures that want the powerful and authoritative to make final decisions in the absence of the grassroots communities with which they are, in theory at least, working (Davis 2007: 72).

Acknowledging the contested nature of heritage and the fact that conflict can be a constructive process can be a way forward to develop equitable and sustainable partnerships with communities. As Jenkison states (1994:53) partnership and collaboration with people will be a useful source 'of new energy, new ideas and new museum meanings'. The formation of partnership requires constant dialogue and negotiation that the narrow meaning of 'consultation' does not allow. Therefore, principles of equitable partnership, shared ownership, empowerment and sustainability should guide museum work with communities.

There are still though, some key challenges that need to be addressed and further researched. The first challenge relates to the issue of diverse and, often, contradictory voices within communities and the necessity of museum staff members to be equipped with appropriate negotiation skills. Negotiation training is imperative for heritage practitioners (Fouseki 2007), and thus it should constitute an essential component of university modules relevant to museum and heritage studies. In addition to negotiation training, diversity training for museum staff is important for working with diverse audiences and understanding their needs. Research, also, on the dynamics of consultative groups within and outside the museum context will facilitate museum professionals in their work with the communities and community representatives. In addition, research on the long-term social and cultural benefits that community participants and the wider community gain from museum activities is imperative. Such initiatives should not have deadlines; rather they should be long-term initiatives (Kelly and Gordon 2002).

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## Notes

- 1 This is a project reference where 07Com refers to the name of the project; C (where this occurs) refers to 'community', M (where this occurs) to 'museum staff'; while the following number is the sequential number of the interview undertaken during the project, that is this was interview 110; 2008 refers to the year of the interview.
- 2 Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol; the British Museum; the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool; the Museum of London Docklands; the National Maritime Museum; and Wilberforce House Museum, Hull.

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