

## Aspects of 'Representation' and the Making of Historical Discourse in Local History Museums, C.1900-1990s.

“Most people have little or no say in the depiction of their own history in textbook, libraries and research institutions [museums]. The meaning portrayed about black people is painful to recall. Our museums represented the kind of heritage which glorified whites' activities and colonial history.”

(Nelson Mandela, 1997)

### Introduction

Museums tell stories. They reflect the society in which they exist. Museums do this with their powerful narrative displays and exhibitions. They serve to represent the past and the present. Museums always involve the cultural, social, and political business of negotiations and value judgements and they always have cultural, social and political implications. In KwaZulu-Natal most local history museum have been established in historical monuments and that make them to be what Meltzer called an 'ideotechnic'<sup>1</sup> artifacts. Due to their historical intimacy they have been manipulated to become political arenas in which definitions of identity, representation and culture is asserted, and thus becoming sites of contestation where the hegemonic 'ideology' is always predominant. They serve to disseminate selected knowledge and further illustrate how museums have a major role in the construction of knowledge. The kind of knowledge being produced is not neutral. Knowledge that museums produce cannot be reduced to the realm of pure meaning because museums operate in a historically and politically situated milieu. In the process of knowledge construction in museums the question of whose voices are privileged and marginalised, and the nature of power relations involved in the process will always come out when examining the exhibition.

The history of museums in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, as it is known today, dates back to 1887, when the Durban Museum was opened to the public. In 1904, sixteen years later, another museum was official opened in Pietermaritzburg, the Natal Museum. These two museums, both located in former Natal's big cities were devoted to natural sciences and historical artifacts were seen as peripheral. This paper does not intend to provide a history of museums rather it seeks to understand their role within the conceptual framework of historical and political discourse. It is crucial to stress that as museums began to evolve in the late nineteenth century in Natal, their role was to focus on scientific and deductive matters. Nevertheless, this trend began to collapse as history became more imperative in the justification and institutionalization of white settlement in Natal. When museums started to include

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<sup>1</sup> D. J. Meltzer, 'Ideology and Material Culture, in R. A. Gould and M. B. Schiffer (eds.), *Modern material culture: The archaeology of Us*, Academic press, New York, 1981, p.114.

historical artifacts, they entered a terrain which was influenced by a racism, segregation and then apartheid. Thus, they became centres of both historical and political discourse, and mirrors of white domination in South Africa. This paper argues that in KwaZulu-Natal museums have been used as the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) with the objective of celebrating the ‘success story’<sup>2</sup> of the whites at the detriment of the indigenous people, Africans in particular and other non-white minority groups. The paper further demonstrates, by giving examples of exhibitions and items collected, how museums became the institutional symbols and sites where an authorized singular version of the past, which became ‘institutionalized as public memory’<sup>3</sup> was created, modified, and entrenched in museums. I examine three museums as case studies (Natal Museum, Voortrekker Museum and Durban Museum).

### The growth of historical consciousness in Natal museums 1900-1970s

The first twenty years of the twentieth century witnessed robust changes in the sphere of museums. There was a great interest in history within museums. As a result museum collections began to grow and therefore more space was needed.<sup>4</sup> The establishment of the Natal Museum in 1903 was a milestone. This is because it was the Natal Museum which also contributed enormously in shaping the nature of politics of exhibiting since it enjoyed the privilege of being a national museum.

The two eldest museums in Natal (the Durban and Natal Museums) were founded as natural science museums. These museums expanded significantly and became major centres of ‘scientific knowledge’ in a short while.<sup>5</sup> However, this changed as they started to sense the necessity to include historical evidence. In this section, I demonstrate how museums were concerned about the conservation and a collection of a biased history of Natal which only registered the triumph of whites (both English and Afrikaners) and the marginalisation of the indigenous knowledge. These museums promulgated the pervasive idea that ‘pre-European societies were static’ and located displays of Bushman and Zulus alongside natural history exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> The concept of pre-colonial knowledge systems and history was discarded and history became relevant only when there was contact with the white people.<sup>7</sup> Among its first collection of historical artifacts in 1916, for example, the Durban Museum purchased a collection

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<sup>2</sup>J. Wright and A. Mazel, ‘Controlling the past in the museum of Natal and KwaZulu’, *Critical Arts*, vol.5, no.3, 1991

<sup>3</sup> P. Davidson, ‘Museums and the shaping of memory’, in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The making of memory in South Africa*, Oxford University press, 1998, p.145; also see L. Witz and C. Rassool, ‘The dog, rabbit and the reluctant historians’, *South African Historical Journal (SAHJ)*, vol.27, 1992; C. Hamilton, ‘Against the museum as chameleon’, *SAHJ*, no.31 1994; M. Martin, ‘Bringing past into the present-facing and negotiating history, memory, redress and reconstruction at the South African National Gallery’, (unpublished conference paper, 1996); S. Jackson and S. Robins, ‘Miscast: The place of the museum in negotiating the Bushman past and present’, *Critical Arts*, vol.13, no.1, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/2/651.

<sup>5</sup> CSO/1896/1910/550, NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/3/602, NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/2/328.

<sup>6</sup> J. Wright and A. Mazel, ‘Controlling the past’, p. 63.

of photographs of historical interest. These photographs were of Durban and other parts of Zululand and Natal. Places included were Rorkes Drift and Isandlwana taken shortly after the battles in 1879.<sup>8</sup> It is undoubted that these photographs were to serve a particular ideological function. Another case is the signal gun which belong to George Cato. This gun was handed in Durban Museum in 1917. When receiving it Ernest Chubb, the then Director, commented that:

This is a very interesting relic of the early days of Durban and I shall be pleased to receive it for exhibition among similar articles of local historical interest.<sup>9</sup>

The development of historical interest within local history museums in Natal was not a coincidental rather it was well-orchestrated phenomenon. The decade of the 1920s was very important in the history of white settlement in Natal. In 1924, a centenary celebration of the arrival of the first settlers in Port Natal in 1824 was to be commemorated. It was for this reason that museums, as ideological state apparatus, embarked on aspects of cultural history rather than to be natural science institution. In 1920, the Natal branch of the South African National Society expressed views that museums should become major role players in celebrating the centenary.<sup>10</sup> In response to this, exhibitions in both Natal and Durban Museum were mounted on the similar theme of the 1824-1924 centenary. In Durban Museum, this had a profound contribution as it led to the massive expansion of artifacts of historical nature. An exhibition with a special reference to centenary was planned. The purpose was to preserve records of historic or artistic nature including pamphlets, documents, photographs, furniture, paintings or other relating to early Durban.<sup>11</sup> These artifacts were to be displayed in an exhibition which was named the 'Old Durban Room'. In a Durban Museum booklet it is stated that:

This room is devoted to the history of Durban. It was in 1824 that the first European settlers came to Natal and made their homes at the site of the present Durban.<sup>12</sup>

As early as 1921 Chubb reported that the Old Durban Room was proving to be of great interest especially to the older inhabitants and was hoped that it would prove equally interesting to the then rising generation and serve to engender a spirit of 'civic pride in them.'<sup>13</sup> This was attributed to the untiring work of the South African National Society. Amongst the displays in the Old Durban Room was a portrait of Henry Fynn who with F. G. Farewell and J. S. King were the leaders of the 'original

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<sup>7</sup> Authors' interview with P. Tichman, 24 May 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Minutes of the Town Clerk, 3 October 1916, 3/DBN/4/1/2462

<sup>9</sup> Letter by Chubb to the Town Clerk, 29 January 1917, Town Clerk files, NAR.3/DBN/4/1/2/462.

<sup>10</sup> Annual Reports of the Natal Museum, 1920/1921.

<sup>11</sup> Minutes of Town Clerk, May 1920, NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/2/462.

<sup>12</sup> NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/3/601.

<sup>13</sup> Report of the curator for the month of September 1921, NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/2/462.

heroic little band of pioneers.’<sup>14</sup> As the exhibition’s aim was to coincide with the 1824 Centenary, it served to register the settlement of whites in Natal. It is vital to note that by that time there was nothing which registered Africans’<sup>15</sup> existence prior to the white settlement. Therefore as Merriman argues, museums were transmitting specialized messages with the aim of comforting the powerful group. As Merriman continues, museums transmit ruling ideologies which ensures that certain atrocities are overlooked while romanticizing the histories of rulers and colonial warfare.<sup>16</sup>

The decade of the 1930s was characterized by the resurgence of Afrikaner heritage. This was due to the Great Trek centenary. It is vital to point out that although schisms and misunderstandings between the Afrikaners and English speakers have occurred in the past due to political reasons, their heritage was displayed in museums without demonstrating any political differences. Museums forged identities based on color rather than on linguistic or cultural differences. It is against this background that the Natal and Durban Museum displayed the arrival of Farewell and his party and during the 1930s displays based on the great Trek were mounted.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the Voortrekker Museum, which will be discussed later on in this paper, placed considerable emphasis of the Great Trek and the centenary. In the Voortrekker Museum there was great increase of donations during the decade of the 1930s. Among these donations were: the bible belonging to Sarel Celliers; jacket of the wife of Pretorius, the Voortrekker leader; the photograph of the place where Piet Retief and his party were killed in 1838; knobkerrie which is said to have been used by King Dingane’s amabutho; the folding table which is said to have been used when the controversial treaty between King Dingane and the Retief was signed; the chair which is said to have been used by King Dingane.<sup>18</sup> There is a controversy surrounding the authenticity and history concerning the chair as well as the table. Official records and some published sources assert that when the Voortrekkers arrived at uMgungundlovu, which was the King’s palace, it

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<sup>14</sup> There is a considerable debate about who these individuals were. Although they have been regarded as heroic pioneers, they may have been crooked businessmen. Other historians have regarded them as probably looking for a ‘a fast buck’ at the very last, see J. Pridmore ‘Henry Francis Fynn: An assessment of his career and an analysis of written and visual portrays of His role in the History of the Natal Region’ (unpublished PhD, University of Natal, 1996); NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/3/601.

<sup>15</sup> I use the term to refer to black indigenous people of Africa. I am aware of the controversy and the debate concerning the term ‘African’.

<sup>16</sup> N. Merriman, *Beyond the glass case: The past, heritage and the public in Britain*, Leicester University press, London, 1991, p. 81; S. R. Butler, *Contested Representation: Revisiting into the heart of Africa*, Gordon and Breach publishers, Amsterdam, 1999; S. A. Crane (ed.), *Museums and Memory*, Stanford University press, California, 2000; S. C. Dubin, *Displays of Power: memory and Amnesia in the American Museum*, New York University press, New York, 1999; P. L. Ravenhill, ‘The passive object and the tribal paradigm: Colonial museography in French West Africa,’ in M. J. Arnoldi, *African material culture*, Indiana University press, Bloomington, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Annual Report of both Natal and Durban Museum, 1930-1940 are useful resources with regards to exhibitions they mounted during the decade of the 1930s.

was already in flames. The question of how the chair survived still becomes a challenge in the interpretation of museum collections. Indeed these collections served an ideological purpose of entrenching the idea that Afrikaners were the noble and innocent migrants who were in the pursuit of civilization and christianization.

In South African historiography during the 1930s, aspects of settler history prevailed.<sup>19</sup> This was because the Great Trek Centenary was to be commemorated in 1938. As there was a great demand for histories and artifacts which justified Afrikaner nationhood and settlement in Natal, museums therefore, became more conscious of their role and contribution in history. While the Centenary celebrations and the inauguration of the Voortrekker monument in 1939 took place in Pretoria, in Natal aspects of the Voortrekker history gained momentum.<sup>20</sup> In a monthly report, Chubb asserted that the museums had contributed in the remembrance of the spirits of those who died in 1838 conflict by putting temporary displays which focused on the Voortrekker history. While, on the other hand artifacts of such historical nature were not prominent in the Natal Museum, it mounted a temporary exhibition on the 1838 Trekker victory over the Zulu.<sup>21</sup>

Museums played an instrumental role in fostering myths of empty land prior to the arrival of whites. This idea of justifying whites' land ownership is also vividly articulated at the Fort Durnford Museum, for example, where an exhibition on 'early settlers' shows that Africans and whites came at approximately the same time in South Africa.<sup>22</sup> It is important to assert that appraisal policies of the Natal museums were Eurocentric and draw upon to a colonial history of Natal as its reference framework. Nevertheless, during the 1930s a group white liberals who believed in the inclusive perspective advocated for African artifacts to be displayed in museums.<sup>23</sup> While the Durban Museum was preoccupied with the 1838-1938 centenary, African' related displays were included in the Old Durban Room. However, they were exhibited with the aim of proving that their historical roots were outside the boundaries of the country they occupied, therefore also settlers. Their history became relevant when it was in relation to that of the whites or serving the needs of the whites' perspective. In a monthly report of September Chubb reported:

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<sup>18</sup> Voortrekker Museum inventory book since 1912 is a useful source about items which were donated to the museum; Voortrekker Museum papers which are still at the custody of the museum also contains documents and letters of the council and annual reports.

<sup>19</sup> See K. Smith, *The changing past: Trends in the South African historical writings* Southern Books publishers, Johannesburg, 1988, p.70.

<sup>20</sup> See NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/3/601 and PM/1939/2732.

<sup>21</sup> Natal Museum annual reports, 1937-38, 1938-39.

<sup>22</sup> This is what the research observed from the Fort Durnford Museum, in Estcourt.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from William Campbell to Town Clerk dated 29/07/1937, NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/3/601.

The exhibits devoted to the manner and customs of the Zulu race were furnished with 27 printed informative labels under the following headings: origins of the Zulus, kinship and social organization, status of wives, etc. These printed labels, together with the objects, models and photographic illustrations that comprise the exhibition serve to enable visitors to readily acquire a general knowledge of habits, customs and mode of life of this interesting native tribe living in proximity to us.<sup>24</sup>

It is apparent that the main aim of exhibiting blacks was to outline their origins and history and show how static they were in comparison to the ‘civilized’ white people. The decade of the 1930s witnessed vigorous attempts by the Natal museums to improve their displays on white seniority and heroism. For example in 1939 a replica of Bartholomew Diaz cross, obtained from the Department of Works, was placed on exhibition in the Old Durban Room.<sup>25</sup> It is vital to note that although many relics and artifacts were added to the Old Durban Room, what remained unchanging was its representativity and exclusiveness of important aspects of Africans’ history. The history that these museums produced and (re)presented was from a whites’ view point.

The decade of the 1940s witnessed a new scenario in museums. This was because of rapid industrialization that drew an enormous number of Africans to the city thus marking the era of profound changes. It is noted by Ken Smith that during this decade a major focus of attention among liberals was the black welfare.<sup>26</sup> Despite vigorous attempts by liberals to persuade the Durban Museum to include African displays, the Durban Museum did not change its exclusive policy of displaying. During the 1940s despite the failure of their attempts in the 1930s, these liberals were agitating for the establishment of the Native Museum. Among the prime movers for the establishment of such an institution was Mr. W. A. Campbell. This museum was going to be named ‘Mashu’ after his late father, Sir Marshall Campbell.<sup>27</sup> After many deliberations John McIntyre, the then town clerk commented favorably about the Native Museum. However, this museum did not materialize and the reasons are not clear in the archival documents. One might speculate that the failure of the establishment of the museum could be attributed to the Second World War which was at its peak during the first half of the 1940s or simply lack of support and popularity.

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<sup>24</sup> Monthly Report of October 1939, Chubb, 3/DBN/4/1/3/601.

<sup>25</sup> Monthly Report of October 1940, Chubb, NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/3/601.

<sup>26</sup> K. Smith, *The changing past*, p. 103.

<sup>27</sup> See a letter to the town clerk by W. A. Campbell dated 2 May 1944; Memorandum for the Native Administration committee, dated 23 July 1945; Letter to the town clerk by W. A. Campbell, 22 November 1944; and Memorandum by John McINTYRE, Town Clerk, dated 2 February 1945, DAR, 3/DBN/4/1/3/607.

It is vital to note that while the Natal museums were expanding in size, the nature of their focus did not change. The year 1942, for example, marked the Dick King Centenary.<sup>28</sup> A special temporary display made up of maps, documents and illustrations was mounted. The Albany Museum lent a rare lithograph of the city of Port Elizabeth, where Dick King stayed in 1842 and a house which King is believed to have stayed on his arrival. The Natal Land Colonialization Company lent two letters bearing King's signature. The sole purpose of exhibiting the artifacts was ideological, that of registering whites' importance and their contribution in the making of history.

The late 1940s witnessed major changes in the South African political arena. The victory of the National Party in 1948 changed the nature of the South African political landscape. It also marked the institutionalization of apartheid. This had a tremendous influence in museums, as history became more popular within them. As a result, historical artifacts increased dramatically and it became clear, in the case of Durban Museum, that these items could no longer be accommodated within the existing premises of the museum. On the other hand the Natal Museum, although also experienced this massive growth, its partnership with other science institutions ensured that history still receive little attention than science.<sup>29</sup>

As historical collections grew apace in Durban Museum, it became apparent that the Old Durban Room could no longer be accommodated within the Durban Museum and thus there was a great need for a new building. Although the main idea was to relieve the Durban Museum, which was meant to focus on science, the ideological assumption was that historical artifacts would play a role in infusing and indoctrinating racial stereotypes.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, it was believed that if the artifacts were within science museums, their value and exposure might be overshadowed by the science exhibitions. From a political point of view, one might argue that the expansion of local historical artifacts and gaining of a popular focus could be attributed to the political strategies of the National Party regime which sought to establish its dominance and assert its hegemony. After one year in power the National Party (NP) proved to have a much more sophisticated idea about the future of museums. The transfer of museums from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Education, Arts and Science meant that they wanted to broaden the role of museums particularly their role in education and

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King's role in 1842 is very important and it has its place in the history of Natal. He rode a horse with Ndongeni ka Xongo to Grahamstown to call for help to relieve the besieged English men in what become know as the battle of Congela.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes of the Natal Museum Council, 1950-1954, Natal Museum Files.

<sup>30</sup> Minutes of the 'Old House' advisory committee, 7 may 1953, NAR, 3/DBN/1/3/14/1/1.

indoctrination. The increment of grand-in-aids under the new department meant the NP wanted to strengthen the role of museums.<sup>31</sup>

The year 1954 was a centenary of the formation of the Borough of Durban. The intended museum was thought of as providing significant material for the celebrations and also of being a 'historical reference to the white population and as an acknowledgement of Durban's Borough.'<sup>32</sup> The museum was thus supposed to predate the centenary celebrations. Notable is that whenever there was something of historical significance for whites, museums were manipulated to become useful resources. This could be traced back to the early 1920s, as has been mentioned earlier

The opening of the Old House Museum came to fruition in 1953, a few months before the centenary celebrations. It is also significant to point out that the house which was transformed into the museum is also of great importance to mention. Located in St. Andrews Street, this house was used by the settlers in the nineteenth century and is built in a Victorian style. By transforming it into the museum it was also ideological as it served to register settlers' permanency in Natal, Durban in particular. The director of the Durban Museum argued:

The Old House Museum was intended to be part of a much larger scheme which the council [Durban Museum Council] was to undertake in due course. The present building [referring to the building which was designated to house the Old House Museum] should house a Settlers or Folk Museum.<sup>33</sup>

When the museum was opened in 1953 the emphasis was on how it would be a useful resource for the then forthcoming centenary.<sup>34</sup> The question of a museum playing a role in the centenary celebrations was not a coincidence but well orchestrated to the extent that even grants were requested by the director of the museum from the Borough as well as the Executive Committee of the centenary celebrations.<sup>35</sup> It is not clear whether these grants were received or not. Nevertheless, the museums played an instrumental contribution toward the centenary celebrations. This is evident in Strutt's account when she asserted that:

The fact that 1954 was a centenary of the formation of the Borough of Durban was fortuitous, for commercial firms and pioneer families alike were searching for information for celebration projects and made their

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<sup>31</sup> Authors interviews with P. Tichman, former curator of Durban Local History museums 24 May 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Minutes of Old House advisory committee, meeting held on the 7th May 1953, NAR, 3/DBN/1/3/14/1/1

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> See Government Gazette, November, 1975, p.22. The museum was declared a national monument in 1975.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of the Old House Advisory committee, 15 May 1953, NAR, 3/DBN/1/3/14/1/1.



way to the Old House Museum as a sort of desperate last resort and were surprised to find that quite often help could be given.<sup>36</sup>

It is clear that this newly established museum was to play a significant role in enforcing an ideological view of whites' early settlement in Natal. Bennet shows how museums can be subjected to manipulation, as happened in the case of Old Durban Room. She argues that the museum presents a social history of the country or a region in which they are located. Thus the making of the past as it is materially embodied in museums is inescapably the 'product of the present which organizes and maintains it.'<sup>37</sup>

As the Old House Museum was the first of its kind to be established by the municipality where space was not a hindrance, there was a necessity to expand the collection. Items that were included into the collection were also in line with the then prevailing ideological viewpoint. However, archival documents and reports do not provide with the detailed information about the content of the collection and history behind that collection. The account of Strutt is instrumental in understanding nature of the collection. She asserted that:

In 1953 the content of the Old House Museum consisted of a collection of local historical material, mainly Durbaniana, and an equal-sized collection of Natal pioneer personalia, pictures, period costume and family records.<sup>38</sup>

The annual report of 1954-55 reveals that among the donations to the Old House Museum was the facsimile of the treaty between Piet Retief and Dingane in 1838,<sup>39</sup> with other interesting books, pictures and documents, presented by Richard Currie; documents, books and photographs, including the first minutes book relating to the Natal Harbour Board.<sup>40</sup> The reasoning behind the depiction of the Retief-Dingane treaty was to register the myth that the whites' ownership of land was legitimate. Although the Old House Museum was intended to be a local history institution it became a site for contestation and played a pivotal role in neglecting the history of Africans and asserted certain stereotypes. From the mid-1950s it is not clear what exhibitions were mounted because there is dearth of records of the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s in either the provincial archives or museums themselves.

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<sup>36</sup> D. H. Strutt, 'The part played by Cultural History Museums as a source of local history', in *SAMAB*, vol.11, no.6, 1975, p.234. She was curator of the Old House Museum from 1953 until 1983.

<sup>37</sup> T. Bennett, 'Museum and people', in R. Lumley (ed.), *The museum time machine*, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> D. H. Strutt, 'Cultural history museums,' p. 234.

<sup>39</sup> The original copy of this facsimile was produced on a massive scale by the Voortrekker Museum; The treaty between Dingane and Retieff has been challenged by J. Naidoo, *Tracking down historical myths*, A. D. Dontier publishers, Johannesburg, 1989.

The decade of the 1960s witnessed the further expansion of artifacts in museums of Natal. In the case of the Natal Museum, artifacts of local historical interest grew apace under the archaeology department of the museums. In a lecture held at the Natal Museum Mr. A. E. Trollip, the administrator of Natal and a descendent of the 1820s settlers, said the great deeds and history-making events of the past which were glorified should be shared by two great white sections of the population.<sup>41</sup> Although the decade of the 1960s witnessed the mushrooming of liberal Africanist history, museums remain rigid in depicting Africans as subjects of history. Museologists of this era acknowledged the pervasive idea of African history as timeless and static. Museum exhibitions often consisted of jumbled, meager and badly displayed collections of artifacts.<sup>42</sup> In the case of Durban, the Old House Museum became overcrowded, and by the 1960s it was difficult to function at its premises. In 1965 Durban's Old Court House in Aliwal Street was revamped and transformed into a museum. It is in this building where a new home of the Old House Museum was found. This marked the birth of a new museum. The Old House was fitted and re-arranged as a Natal settler homestead and all historical material was moved to the Old Court House. It became the Local History Museum. The museum was opened to the public by the Administrator of Natal, Mr. Theo Gardener on the 24th of June 1966.<sup>43</sup>

During its first year of existence the museum mounted exhibitions which did not differ from exhibitions of the previous decade. The exhibitions on the 'Birth of Natal,' told the story of the 'discovery' of Natal and its history before settlement.<sup>44</sup> This exhibition referred to pre-colonial people as barbaric and uncivilized. An exhibition on 'From settlement to colony', covered the period from the arrival of the first voluntary settlers in 1824 to 1845 when Natal had become a colony.<sup>45</sup> The experience of Africans and challenges whites encounter during their conquest of Natal and the relationship with the Zulu kings which deteriorated and degenerated into conflict and war did not feature. And lastly the display '1849 to 1879' covered the period of the main influx of settlers to Natal, and a large portion of the collection housed in the Local History Museum related to the period mentioned above.<sup>46</sup> The Natal Museum mounted a temporary exhibition of the 1820s settler relics as a contribution to the 150th anniversary celebrations during September 1969.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Durban Museum and Art Gallery Annual Report, 1954-1955.

<sup>41</sup> *Natal Witness*, 07/04/1960.

<sup>42</sup> J. Wright and A. Mazel, 'Controlling the past', p.63 and J. Wright and A. Mazel, 'Bastions of Ideology', 1987.

<sup>43</sup> Strutt, p. 234-237 and also see Durban Old Court House Museum file 545.612.

<sup>44</sup> Durban Museum and Art Gallery Annual Report, 1965-1966.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Annual Report of the Natal Museum, 1968-1970

During the early 1970s local history collections grew rapidly in history both in Durban Local History Museum and Natal Museum in Pietermaritzburg. In the case of the Durban Local History Museum this was necessitated by the 150th anniversary celebrations of the arrival of Durban's first settlers. The city's contribution to the celebration was the arrangement of an exhibition of archival and historical material in the Local History Museum. This exhibition was a highlight of the settlers' activities in Natal, Durban in particular.<sup>48</sup> In the opening of the exhibition, Mrs. Shepstone, represented the Shepstone family, made a speech and provided some historical possessions of the Shepstone family for display. These were exhibited in the museum and their aim was to register the close ties between history of Natal and the white settlers' rightfulness of the occupation of Natal.<sup>49</sup>

During the decade of 1970s a new international trend, which was trying to reform the past inequalities with regards to ethnographic displays, gained momentum in global museology. In 1972, participants at the meeting of International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Santiago, Chile, argued that museums should become integral part of societies around them. Furthermore it was agreed that indigenous cultures should be given equal status.<sup>50</sup> While global museology introduced new trends, Natal museums did not consider those policies passed by international bodies as important.<sup>51</sup> They continued to consider only the histories of whites as vital. In 1973, for example, as part of the festivities to celebrate the 150th year of white settlement in Natal, the Natal Numismatic Society, together with the Philatelic Society, staged an exhibition at the Natal Museum. The exhibition included military medals relating to Natal units and the Zulu Rebellion of Natal; token icons of Natal; unusual items from Ceylon; medical medallions, badges, etc relating to the coat of arms of Natal prior to the Union of South Africa.<sup>52</sup>

The establishment of the Natal Provincial Museum Service in 1973 changed the existing situation in Natal museums and marked the beginning of profound changes in the poetics of exhibiting. Ostensibly, it was set up to provide financial and technical aid to existing local museums and establish new ones, and co-ordinate administration and policy making.<sup>53</sup> The formation of the museum served an important role in ensuring that museums were becoming part and the broader ideological agenda.

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<sup>48</sup> Durban Museum and Art Gallery Annual Report, 1973-1974.

<sup>49</sup> Natal Museum Annual Reports, 1969-1970.

<sup>50</sup> For more discussion on this see, 'Museums and Cultural Diversity: Draft ICOM policy statement,' <http://www.icom.org/devirsty.html>

<sup>51</sup> This is evident in the exhibitions that the museum mounted during the period under discussion, see Natal Museum annual reports, 1970-1978.

<sup>52</sup> Natal Museum annual reports, 1973-1974.

<sup>53</sup> H. Ridley, 'KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Museum Service, 1974-1995: A brief history', (MA thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1997).

This is because the second half of the twentieth century witness the massive increase of small local history museum in villages and in small towns. Wright and Mazel noted that displays prior to the formation of the Museum Service often consisted of collections of colonial and ethnographic artifacts ‘haphazardly organized and poorly displayed.’<sup>54</sup> By contrast, displays produced since its formation was technically more sophisticated. As a result the exhibition’s messages come ‘across much more clearly and efficiently.’<sup>55</sup>

In the Durban Museum and Art Gallery annual report of 1975 it is apparent that the centenary of the death of Thomas Baines, the famous artist and explorer, on the 8th May 1875, was remembered throughout South Africa. As Baines spent his last years of his life in Durban, and buried in West Street Cemetery, it was suggested by both Frank Bradlow, premier authority on Baines, and the South African National Society that the commemorative exhibition be held in Durban's Local History Museum.<sup>56</sup>

Up to now the question of Indian and Coloured representation had not been mentioned. It should not be forgotten that the twentieth century witnessed major struggles by Indians who came to Natal from 1860 as indentured labourers. There are no records of any exhibition mounted by the either Durban Local History Museums on Natal Museum on the question of Indians in Natal as 1960 marked the centenary of the arrival of Indians in South Africa.

The official opening of the library and the museum at the Gandhi Settlement in Phoenix, near Durban in 1973 is crucial in the politics of representation in the heritage landscape. This museum emerged to represent the underrepresented Indians and the main focus was on Gandhi and his policy of ‘satyagraha’ in Natal. Unfortunately, the settlement was destroyed during the political turbulence of the mid-1980s. Some of the remains of the artifacts which belonged to this museum are now in the custody of the Durban Local History Museums.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> J. Wright and A Mazel, ‘Controlling the past’, p. 69 and also see the annual report of the Natal Museum Service, 1974-1975.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>56</sup> Durban Museum and Art Gallery Annual Report, 1974-1975.

<sup>57</sup> This museum does not exist now, but its photographs were taken by Mr. Chetty during the 1970s and they are of great significance in providing the content of the museum. The photographs are at the custody of Mr. Chetty, Documentation Centre, UDW.

The year 1979 was characterized by the commemoration of the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War. Numerous activities were staged throughout Natal and KwaZulu.<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to point out that during the time of the centenary, radical work by academic historians who were critical of the colonial interpretations of the war flourished. Historians including Jeff Guy and John Wright became critical of the colonial views of the battle of Isandlwana.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the University of Natal hosted a conference around the interpretation of the war. Museums, both Natal and Durban Local history Museum, mounted exhibitions on the 'Zulu' War. The opening of this exhibition in Durban Local History Museum was performed by his worship the mayor of Durban, Councilor Haydn Bradfield, on 22 January 1979 and after the ceremony S. Bourquin, of the Natal Native Administration Board, spoke on various aspects of the Anglo-Zulu War.<sup>60</sup>

It is interesting to note that since their establishment, the Natal Museum, the Old House Museum and the Local History Museum registered white settlement only and legitimated and justified whites' domination of Natal. This was done through exhibitions which were made to celebrate centenaries of their arrivals and the death of stalwarts in the struggle for colonial domination.

#### The changing ideological viewpoint of museums:

#### Transformation, Museums and the role of the state

The 1980s marked the turning point in the history of museums not only in Natal, but also throughout South Africa. The decade was characterized by mass involvement of academics in the heritage sector while the public gained interest in issues of representation. It was against this background that museums felt obliged to transform themselves. The future of national museums (Natal and Voortrekker Museums), was also reconsidered by the state, as they fell under the jurisdiction on the national government. In 1983, the tri-cameral parliament introduced new terminologies (General and Own Affairs) in the administration and management of museums. Museums controlled directly by the state were classified into General Affairs and Own Affairs. The Natal Museum became a General Affairs<sup>61</sup> while the Voortrekker Museum became an Own Affairs institution. As a General Affairs, the Natal Museum was then mandated to adopt a mere inclusive approach in its exhibition. However, this only meant the display of Africans and other hitherto marginalised but no attempt were made to transform the ideological assumption behind displays.

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<sup>58</sup> S. M. Leech, 'Twentieth century images of the "Zulu": Selected representations in the historical and political discourse,' (MA thesis, University of South Africa, 1995).

<sup>59</sup> J. Wright, 'Beyond the washing of the spears', *Reality*, 1979 and J. Guy, 'The British invasion of Zululand: Some thoughts for the centenary year', *Reality*, 1979.

<sup>60</sup> Durban Museum and Art Gallery Annual Report, 1978-1979.

<sup>61</sup> Annual Report of the Natal Museum, 1982-84.

The Durban Local History Museums were also involved in transformation. In 1985, major changes occurred in its governing structures. While previously the advisory committee of the museum was combined with that of the Old Fort, this was separated and the Local History section formed its own advisory committee, the Historical Museum Advisory Committee. While previously the committee had only whites as its members, the new committee witnessed the inclusion of prominent Indians and academics with very broad expertise. Important among these was the inclusion of Joy Brian, eminent scholar and the then professor of history at the University of Durban-Westville. In the academic arena her special interest in Indian history allowed the study of the Indian of 'Natal Indians at last to gather momentum.'<sup>62</sup> Her influence in the poetics and politics of exhibiting was enormous and by 1986 the museum mounted an exhibition of photographs related to Natal Indian community history, socio-economic, and cultural and religious life.<sup>63</sup>

The decade of the 1980s was characterized by the call for transformation not only to museums but to the larger heritage sector. Academics, civic organizations, churches were against to what was displayed in museum. The decade of the 1980s marked the beginning of a 'new museology' in the museum discourse in South Africa. Prior to the 1980s museums were conservative in their displays and see themselves as only concerned about the activities of the powerful groups which featured whites as dominant in the processes of the production of knowledge. The new museology focused on the deeds of those who have not been prominent in museums. This was brought about by a number of factors which could be attributed to the nature of political consciousness that overwhelmed in South Africa. During the 1980s it became apparent that apartheid could not survive and state begun to reform itself. This kind of political instability that the apartheid regime created for itself influenced the thinking paradigm in history museums of South Africa and Natal in particular. Thus, when it became apparent that the winds of change were blowing and democracy was imminent, museums started to transform themselves in order to be politically correct. Further, this decade witnessed changes in museums from being elite orientated institutions which have traditionally reflected sectional interests and neglected important aspects of our country's heritage,<sup>64</sup> to being 'places of delight'<sup>65</sup> attempting to featuring all parts of our colourful history. While prior to the 1980s, museum claimed to occupy a neutral zone

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<sup>62</sup> A. Duminy and B. Guest, 'Introduction,' in A. Duminy and B. Guest, *Natal and Zululand: From earliest times to 1910, A new history*, University of Natal press, 1989, p xxi.

<sup>63</sup> Minutes of the Historical Museum Advisory Committee, 1985-1987.

<sup>64</sup> Speech by the deputy minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST), Mrs. Brigitte Mabandla, at the opening of Coert Steynberg Museum, Pretoria, 18 May 1996.

<sup>65</sup> G. Dominy, 'From 'dead zoos to sources of delight': New directions for old collection-changing exhibitions for new purposes,' (paper presented at the History Workshop, University of Witwatersrand, 16-18 July 1996).

where knowledge was generated and communicated to the public during the 1980s it became an open secret that museums were places of political and historical discourse and institutions of 'selective memory that collective memory.'<sup>66</sup>

Although the ideological assumptions of museums had become clear by the 1980s, some museologists still emphasized museums' research role and were reluctant to recognize the relationship between knowledge, power and privilege.<sup>67</sup> Davidson argues that predominantly white museum professionals regarded their work as objective and apolitical. In this regard Davidson's argument is echoed by a group of museologists of KwaZulu-Natal who still assert that museums are apolitical and the changes that took place in museums emerged intrinsically from the museums themselves. This group opposes the view that museums are manipulated and their argument is that museums undertake research with the purpose of restoring, documenting and preserving knowledge. This group further focused entirely on education role and tend to avoid the question of the involvement of politics and ideological. I do not agree with this view of analyzing museums' exhibitions with a narrow-minded view that look at museums as isolated entities without any external ramifications. In this paper, I view museums as part of society's activities and thus cannot escape external influences. It is vital to emphasize that it was not until the 1980s when the political nature of museums was identified and reached all the spheres of public debate. This could be attributed to the growing interest among academics, especially historians, who had previously distanced themselves from museums' debates and projects. In Natal, an academic historian, namely, Professor John Wright together with museum professionals, Drs. Graham Dominy and Aron Mazel, embarked on projects that focused entirely on museums and their politics and poetics of exhibiting. This signaled a growing momentum to tell hidden histories that had been suppressed or distorted by museologists of the time. Dr. Graham Dominy vehemently challenged these museums on a large scale. In a college lecture, for example, at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus he argued that KwaZulu and Natal museums 'must stop thinking themselves as white institutions serving blacks.'<sup>68</sup> These museums avoided controversy and saw themselves as simple 'chroniclers'<sup>69</sup> of events rather than agents of social change.

Another contributing factor was the South African Museums Association (SAMA) conference which was held in Pietermaritzburg. In the conference Dr. Kinard, an American guest, argued that Natal

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<sup>66</sup> S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee, *'negotiating the Past'*, p.144.

<sup>67</sup> Information derived from personal interviews and research; Also see P. Davidson, 'Museums and the shaping of memory'.

<sup>68</sup> *Natal Witness*, 6 June 1991.

<sup>69</sup> G. Dominy, 'From dead zoos'. p. 12.

museums were based on an ‘overseas model’ and tended to reflect a ‘Euro-centric view of the province’s history.’<sup>70</sup> It was in this conference that the idea of transformation in the museum sphere became apparent. This conference is still perceived as a milestone in the history of museum movement in KwaZulu-Natal. This is because for the first time the conference drew a number of delegates from both public and private organizations and was devoted to transformation in the museum field. Moreover, out of the many papers that were delivered, many of them called for museums to change from being elitists and exclusive to become more inclusive in their approach. It is important to point out that the 1987 SAMA conference is significant in the history of SAMA conferences. Since 1936 when SAMA was established, museologists gathered for the first time in 1987 with the intention of looking at change and representation in museums.<sup>71</sup> Dr. Kinard argued that museums should look at the future through the eyes of the present and should not only be a chronicle of the past. Kinard’s accusation of museums caused schism among the delegates as the large portion of them, mainly whites, decided to leave while Kinard was delivering his presentation. This protest serves to testify that transformation was not an intrinsic phenomenon in museums. Commenting on the results of the conference Dr. Stuckenberg, the then director of the Natal Museum, said the conference had brought museologists to realize that they had not developed museums to show the diversity in South African society, and were not serving all sections of the society. He further argued that:

People have come to perceive that our museums are very much cast in the European mould. The time for change is long overdue if museums are to serve as valuable cultural resources to all sectors.<sup>72</sup>

It is apparent that the late 1980s witnessed a situation where museums started to look for new perspectives in line with transformation. It then became clear that museums were previously manipulated and served certain elements and for them to survive they would have to change. It is worth quoting a Natal Witness reporter who pointed out that:

Until fairly recently the depictions have reflected, more or less, white perspectives. But as education has broadened to embrace more fully the cultural communities once relegated to the background, glaring gaps in perceived history and cultural knowledge have become apparent.<sup>73</sup>

By the turn of the decade, Dr. Stuckenberg pointed out that museums can be instrumental of social change and national reconciliation and were able to reflect all segments of society honestly and fairly.

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<sup>70</sup> See *Daily News*, 16 May 1989.

<sup>71</sup> See *The Mercury*, 7 May 1987, *Natal Witness*, 7 May 1987 and the *Daily News* 13 May 1987.

<sup>72</sup> See the *Natal Witness*, 13 May 1987.

<sup>73</sup> *Natal Witness*, 13 May 1987.



The beginning of the decade of the 1990s marked the beginning of a significant political process in South Africa's history. It marked the demise of apartheid and the rise of new perspectives in South Africa's politics. A new president, F. W. de Klerk was at the political helm of the country. He released the world famous political prisoner, Nelson Mandela, unbanned liberation movements and scrapped most of his party's apartheid laws, thus marking the beginning of transformation which led to the birth of the new dispensation.<sup>74</sup> Although South African museums had already started to discuss issues of transformation, no document had been prepared which outlined the museums' approach towards transformation. There had been slight changes in the exhibitions of Natal museums, however most of these museums were still operating with the legacy of apartheid, which segregated Africans. Also important is that this decade witnessed a growing number of people who became involved in museums. By this time many political activists and intellectuals became more involved in day to day projects in museums. Museums responded by appointing them to their board of trustees and as chairpersons of their councils.

In Durban, a major event took place. This was the time when the proposal for the creation of KwaMuhle Museum was submitted to the Durban city council. It is vital to understand what really KwaMuhle was and its importance and contribution to the history of Durban and KwaZulu-Natal. The building was used as a Native Administration Department by the Durban City Council to control the movement of Africans who entered Durban seeking work. The administration of passes, labour bureau, housing, health, beerhalls, and so forth centred on KwaMuhle. KwaMuhle functioned until 1986 when all administration boards were disbanded and their functions reorganized and taken over by the relevant government and provincial administration.<sup>75</sup> By the late 1980s when plans for selling the KwaMuhle building did not materialize, the City Council wanted to demolish the building. A group of academics and concerned individuals mobilized communities, political parties and non-government organizations to lobby against the demolition of KwaMuhle. Their view was that KwaMuhle should be transformed into a museum.<sup>76</sup> In drawing upon a proposal the following people participated: Prof. Colin Webb, Drs I. Edwards, M. Padayachee, P. Zulu, Ms G. Berning and Mr. D. Claude. Many other people supported the initiative and their role is acknowledged in the first page of the proposal.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Sowetan*, 27 August 1997.

<sup>75</sup> See the Kwa Muhle Museum proposal, 1991, p.4.

<sup>76</sup> See interview with Professor Seleti, 7 June 2001.

<sup>77</sup> For more information see the Kwa Muhle Museum proposal, 1991.

While the focus on South African politics was still concentrating on the transition to democracy, Museums for South Africa, known as the MUSA, was launched in 1992.<sup>78</sup> This was a major step in a process of analyzing and consultation that aimed at putting museums on a firm footing in a new South Africa. MUSA was an attempt to revitalize the role that museums would play in the wider context of South Africa. Some 40 people were involved in the establishment of MUSA. These people were appointed by the then Department of National Education. They consisted of specialists from academic departments, museums and non-government organization. MUSA produced a document that became a blue print for restructuring museums in the new dispensation. This document contained numerous recommendations that were seen as guidelines for any prospective museum of the post apartheid era. Although the MUSA was seen as a step forward towards transformation, it was criticized by the ANC. It argued that the MUSA document's producers did not come clean about the past and the role that the Department of National Education (DNE) played in it.<sup>79</sup> The ANC argued that the DNE and the South African museum fraternity did not challenge past inequalities in the apartheid South Africa. Odendaal pointed out that:

A document emanating from this source [MUSA] cannot, therefore, be broadly trusted to be in the best interests of all the people of South Africa and needs to be viewed critically. In the interests of legitimacy, among other things, it is imperative that any national policy document should originate from a far broader spectrum of museum workers, administrators and community groups.<sup>80</sup>

While the ANC vehemently rejected MUSA and its recommendations, it launched its own policy for museums. It is worth quoting part of the ANC policy to show how it differs with the MUSA. The ANC's policy assert that the role of museums is:

To overcome the legacy or inequality and injustice created by colonialism and apartheid, in a swift, progressive and principled way.<sup>81</sup>

While the MUSA document did not highlight the question of the relationship between the state and museums, the ANC policy stated categorically that museums are supposed to play a major role in fostering national unity.

While administrative and structural transformation was taking place, a more co-ordinated approach between the years 1990 to 1994 at a national level, museums in Natal were redressing their politics and

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<sup>78</sup> J. C. Pauw, 'Museums for South Africa', *SAMAB*, vol.22, no.1, 1994, p.4.

<sup>79</sup> For more information on the MUSA see A. Odendaal, 'Working document: Comment on MUSA intersectional investigation for national policy', *SAMAB*, vol.22, no.1, 1994, p.7; Dr. G. Dominy reflected on the failure of the MUSA document and attributed its failure to the intransigent nature of the then DNE, see G. Dominy, 'Give a dog a bad name, or how to turn museums into sleek pussy cats: Some reflections on transformation in the museums and heritage sector,' *CLIO*, December edition, 2000, pp.2-10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> G. T. Sirayi, 'The ANC policy for museums', *SAMANTIX*, no. 15, 1993.

poetics of exhibiting. In Natal, museums started to focus on exhibiting previously marginalised groups. In the Natal Museum for example, an exhibition on Indians was mounted. The invitation cards were not dated but since the commemoration was for the 130<sup>th</sup> arrival of Indian anniversary it is clear that the year was 1990. The invitation cards were written as follows:

The chairman and the council of the Natal Museum have pleasure in inviting you to a function on Thursday, 15 November at 19:30 to commemorate the 130th anniversary of the arrival of Indian Settlers in South Africa. The gathering will be addresses by Professor Joy Brain, history department, University of Durban-Westville. You are also invited to view the special exhibition 'Glimpses of India.'<sup>82</sup>

It is essential to note the presence of Professor Joy Brain as a guest and an expert in the field of Indian history in South Africa is the evidence of the development of partnership between museums and various roleplayers. This further validated the involvement of academics in the museums.

Museums were also developing links with communities. In Durban Local History Museums aspect of Indian representation had already emerged by 1985.<sup>83</sup> This was because artifacts of Indians taken from the Gandhi Settlement in Phoenix were at their disposal. KwaZulu-Natal museums started to recognize the significance of Africans as well as other racial groups in the construction of social memory. Thus, exhibitions which were about Africans' experiences gained momentum. Africans were soon recognized as producers of history rather than victims of circumstances.<sup>84</sup> Also during the 1990s an appeal for museums to become participants in a comprehensive project to change the educational and cultural practices of South Africa and the building of a new nationhood became the dominant agenda in the museum movement.<sup>85</sup> Museologists realized that somehow the role and the function of museums in the new dispensation needed to be re-determined.

The months before the all race elections of April 1994 witnessed various statements and the emergence of many suggestions about the future of museums not only in KwaZulu and Natal but also in South Africa at large. South Africa was seen as facing the challenge of taking museums to the people and make them places which they would enjoy visiting. On the other side, Peter Mokaba, the then Chairperson of the ANC's forum for Arts and Culture asserted they had plans to open a museum

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<sup>82</sup>This invitation card is at the disposal of the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre, at UDW.

<sup>83</sup> The involvement of Professor J. Brain, the University of Durban-Westville head of the department of History, in the opening of the museum' 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition to mark the arrival of Indentured Indians in Natal is an example. See minutes of the Mayor, City of Durban, 1985-1986.

<sup>84</sup> See interview with Paul Tichman, 24 May 1999.

<sup>85</sup>See the proceedings of the SAMA conference held in Durban in 1992, also the *Daily News* have a full coverage of the event, see *Daily News*, 23 June 1992.

of apartheid, which was supposed to offer an overview of the events during the apartheid.<sup>86</sup> However, they did not envisage destroying the existing colonial structures.<sup>87</sup>

The general election of 1994 marked the triumph of democratic principles in South Africa. A new dispensation was born, and new ministry, the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST), was created. Museums that were previously called national museums were relocated to the new ministry while other museums affiliated to their provincial departments of education and municipalities. The Natal Museum's director, Dr. J. Londt argued that museums exist for the use of everyone regardless of the level of literacy, and foster a culture of learning, enlightenment and education.<sup>88</sup> The meant from then on, museums had the new scope of being inclusive and representative of all South Africans.

When the Government of National Unity came to power in 1994, it launched a positive approach towards the re-development and transformation of museums. SAMA and its stakeholders recognized that the time was opportune for museums to reposition themselves strategically as the custodians of the heritage of all South Africans within the context of 'world heritage'.<sup>89</sup> The establishment of the Art and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) by the DACST is also evidence of transformation in the heritage sector. ACTAG was initiated because MUSA was criticized since it was not the product of a process of widespread consultation.<sup>90</sup> The promulgation of the ACTAG report in 1995 was significant in the history of museums. The report acknowledged that policy-making in museums had been compartmentalized and museums had been supportive in propagating the previous inequalities.<sup>91</sup> In his address at the opening of a museum in Pinetown, Dr. Mdlalose, the then premier of KwaZulu-Natal, pointed out clearly that:

Museums have been too Eurocentrically orientated in the past and this is probably an accurate and understanding assessment. However, recent years have seen strenuous efforts to address this imbalance and our museums in KwaZulu-Natal have become not only more accurate in reflecting our culture and heritage but also more meaningful to our broader population.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> A similar museum of this kind came into fruition in 2001.

<sup>87</sup> See *Mercury*, 26 February 1994.

<sup>88</sup> *Natal Witness*, 2 December 1994.

<sup>89</sup> See the presidential comments in the *SAMAB*, vol.22, no.2, 1998.

<sup>90</sup> For further discussion on the critique of the MUSA see, G. Dominy, 'Give a dog a bad name', *Clio*, (December edition, 2000), pp.2-10.

<sup>91</sup> See Art and Culture Task Group (ACTAG), Draft proposal for heritage, 20 March 1995.

<sup>92</sup> Speech by the premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Dr. F. Mdlalose, at the opening of the Pinetown Museums, 23 February 1995

While such debates were being held, the proposal for the KwaMuhle Museum was approved. The opening of the museum is a good example of trying to cater and provide an alternative view for hitherto marginalized groups. This is a museum of resistance, which features permanent displays on the Durban system and Cato Manor. It examines hardships that were caused by Durban authorities, and the Cato Manor Riots. These riots took place in 1949 due to racial conflict which deteriorated and led to the looting and destruction of Indian property in Cato Manor. The museum also features life in Cato Manor (uMkhumbane) up to its demolition. It was demolished between 1958-1963.<sup>93</sup> Thus, a new museum that was devoted to the struggle by the previously neglected group set a new mark in museology. Moreover, numerous exhibitions were mounted in different museums that registered the idea of inclusivity and transformation in museums. A good example is the exhibition at the Old Court House Museum, called The 'Movers and Shakers.' The then provincial minister of Tourism and Economic Development, Mr. Jacob Zuma opened the exhibition on September 24, 1996. One should note the importance this day has in KwaZulu-Natal's heritage. Historically the day was mourned by the Zulu for the death of King Shaka, and was formerly known as Shaka's Day in KwaZulu. After 1994 a more inclusive approach was adapted and this day became a national holiday and known as Heritage Day, when all South Africa's heritages are remembered for their instrumental and pivotal role that they played in the construction of a common heritage. Thus, the exhibition includes people who contributed to the construction and shaping the history of KwaZulu-Natal, specifically Durban. People like King Shaka, Mpande, Dingane, M. K. Gandhi, Gibson, Dick King, Albert Luthuli, and Sir Benjamin D'urban, are among others features as prominent in the display.

Transformation in the museums did not only become the task of the government departments but SAMA also took the responsibility of preaching the gospel of change. In a SAMA conference held in Pietermaritzburg in 1997, the core theme was that of reviewing progress that have been achieved by museums since the early 1990s. In his keynote address, Dr. Ngubane, the then premier of KwaZulu-Natal, emphasized that museums should mirror society's identity.<sup>94</sup> He further argued that more than anything else museums should capture nation's social identity. According to Ngubane as the South African society has been through a 'political transformation, so museums must transform themselves to be able to mirror the new changing reality.'<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Many studies have been conducted which document the reasons for the demolition of Umkhumbane. These covered the responses of residents and the involvement of political parties, especially the ANC in the resistance activities which took place. For more information see, Ladlau L. K, *The Cato Manor Riots, 1949-1960*, Unpublished MA thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1975; Edwards I, *Mkhumbane our home: African shanty town society in Cato Manor Farm, 1946-1960*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Natal, 1989.

<sup>94</sup>*Natal Witness*, 24 April 1997.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*

In wider South African museology, the year 1997 marked another development. This was the official opening of the Robben Island Museum, in Cape Town. In the case of KwaZulu-Natal, this trend of being accommodative and responsive to society's needs gained momentum. The Natal Museum was entirely focusing on previously neglected groups. While that was taking place in Pietermaritzburg, the Local History Museums in Durban also became proactive in lobbying for Africans' history to be the focus. Indian history was not neglected. In the Natal Museum, plans were in progress for the mounting of the exhibition entitled 'Threads in Time' which focused on the history and cultural diversity of Indians in Natal.<sup>96</sup>

### Museums, History and Transformation: A case of the Voortrekker Museum

The history of the Voortrekker Museum in Pietermaritzburg is traced back to events that were part of the Great Trek of the 1830s. When the relationship between Dingane and the Trekkers deteriorated and reach a state of confrontation,<sup>97</sup> it was a belief in God that led to the erection of the church that would later become a museum. When a state of conflict became inevitable after the assassination of Piet Retief and his group, the trekkers began to prepare for conflict. The causes of the conflict, which were centred on the question of land, are not the focus of this paper. It is crucial to point out that the Trekkers' victory over Africans in this war was so immense that it was going to determine their fate and existence in the region. This served to provide determination and courage for a victory. It then justifies the reason for a vow that Trekkers undertook. The vow read thus:

Here we stand before the holy God of heaven and earth to make Him a vow if he will protect us and deliver our enemies into our hands we will observe the day and date each year as a day of thanks like a Sabbath, and we will erect a church in his honor wherever he may choose and that we will tell our children to join with us in commemorating this day also for coming generation. For His name will be glorified by giving Him the honor and glory<sup>98</sup>

There are two contesting accounts of the vow. According to some accounts, the vow was made on the 17th December 1838, at Danskraal beyond Ladysmith, by the Dutch commando under Andreis Pretorius with a view of punishing Dingane for his 'treacherous murder'<sup>99</sup> of Retief and his party and

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<sup>96</sup>See *Natal Witness*, 1999; This exhibition became permanent in the Natal Museum, see I Bornman, 'The threads in time: A community project', paper presented at the Injobo SAMA conference, Newcastle, 2000 and was published in the *Clio*, pp. 23-27.

<sup>97</sup> This has been well noted by S. Ndlovu, 'He did what any other person in his position would have done to fight the forces of invasion and disruption: Africans, the land and counter memorization of King Dingane-'the Patriot – in the twentieth century, 1916-1950s', *South African Historical Journal*, 1998.

<sup>98</sup> This prayer is one of the plague in which the church of vow was created to fulfil, see the original Voortrekker church, Voortrekker Museum. It is also interesting to note that inside the church itself the vow has be enlarged to the extent that a human being looks up to. This on its own is ideological since it perpetuates the myth that the history of Natal is influenced and shaped by the vow.

<sup>99</sup> Recent historical accounts do not subscribe with this idea, for further information see S. M. Ndlovu, 'He did', 1998.

women and children subsequently.<sup>100</sup> If one take into cognizance the purpose of the prayer it is highly unlikely that the vow was taken after the battle in 1838. This could be the reason for the emergence of an alternative viewpoint that stipulates that the vow was a well-orchestrated phenomenon. It was taken on December 9, 1838 on the banks of Blyle River until December 15, 1838 before the eve of the battle. It was Sarel Cilliers who repeated the vow that if the Lord could give them victory; they would consecrate and keep his holy.<sup>101</sup>

It is imperative to always bear in mind the relationship between the church of vow that houses the Voortrekker Museum and the Blood River incident. The battle's historiography has changed dramatically and is subject to various historical interpretations that have recently emerged. Currently most radical historians of KwaZulu-Natal know the battle as *Impi yase Ncome*. The history of the battle and its consequences are too well covered to be mentioned in this paper.

In his report on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1838, Pretorius stated that the victory should be attributed to the Almighty, whose assistance they had invoked, and that a place of worship should be erected to His Glory.<sup>102</sup> Immediately after the battle, peace having been restored, the Trekkers proclaimed Pietermaritzburg as the capital of the newly created republic of Natalia.<sup>103</sup> As early as 1839 they began to embark on a campaign to garner funds and material for the erection of the promised church with the aim of fulfilling the vow. By mid 1839 they had collected approximately £4000. In addition, several individuals contributed their building materials with the objective of keeping the obligation they made during the wartime. The foundation stone was laid towards the end of 1839.<sup>104</sup> The building was furnished in about January 1840. They were certain events that are not mentioned in the archival data that delayed the church service to be held as soon as the church was finished in 1840. Later in March 1841, the first service was held.<sup>105</sup> It was then used for religious purposes for twenty years until 1861. Subsequently, the building proved to small for the requirements of the congregation. On the 5th April 1855, it was decided to erect a new church away from the main street and steps were taken to obtain

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<sup>100</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, Untitled document, A81/ 1908-1938/, Voortrekker Museum files.

<sup>101</sup> E. Delmoth, 'The Voortrekker Monument: Monolith to myth,' in *SAHJ*, vol.29. 1993; also J. Naidoo, *Tracking down historical myths*, A. D. publishers, Johannesburg, 1988; A. E. Cubbin, '*Retief's negotiations with Dingana: An assessment*,' Natal History Workshop Paper, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1990; *Natal Witness*, 06/08/1987.

<sup>102</sup> This is well articulated in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, Voortrekker Museum Files, A81/1840-1890; Voortrekker Museum pamphlet written in 1982. Thanks to Henriete Ridley and Dr. Ivor Pols for providing me with other instrumental information regarding the history of the Voortrekker Museum.

<sup>103</sup> For more details, see the *Riders' Digest: Illustrate History of Southern Africa*, The real story, Reader's digest Association, Cape Town, 1988.

<sup>104</sup> Archival Data does not provide with any exact dates for early years of the Voortrekker church, they keep on approximating.

<sup>105</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, Voortrekker Museum Files, A81 (6), A letter to the editor of the Cape Times from the Secretary of the Voortrekker Museum, 28 August 1923.

the portion of the Market Square where Voortrekkers had originally intended to build their permanent church. This request was refused and the erection of the new church commenced in 1856 on the plot adjoining that of the Church of the Vow.<sup>106</sup> The new church was completed after five years and the last ceremony in the old was held on the 6th April 1861. From the 7th April 1861 the new church became the parent of the Dutch Reformed Church in Natal and it served as such until the 5th June 1955. The original building (the old church) was rented by the government as a school and placed at the disposal of other religious denominations that had no church of their own.<sup>107</sup> Owing to stringent financial difficulties, the Church Council was compelled to sell it for £700. It was sold on condition that it was to be used for licensed victuallers' purposes. The firm of blacksmiths and wagon makers, which carried on business therein for many years, acquired it. Towards the beginning of the 1890s, it was utilized as a chemist. As from 1900 it occurred to a few individuals with ardent spirit that this building was not only of historical importance but that the association connected with it would form a valuable tradition for future generations. They felt that it was to be rescued from losing its identity and preserved for the wellbeing of Afrikaner heritage. A meeting was called with the aim taking a decision about the future of the building. One of its resolutions was to take immediate steps for the collection of funds for the purchase of the building. However, it was not until 1909 that a committee was formed to raise subscriptions.

It should not be forgotten that the beginning of the twentieth century witnessed hardships, the worst being the Anglo-Boer/South Africa War of 1899-1902, which led to many traumatic experiences for the Boer nation. Moreover, the war ended with the Boers being forced to sign a humiliating treaty of Vereeniging in 1902. This degraded them as a nation, and thus despair and hopelessness prevailed. The restoration of an institution like the Church of Vow was an attempt to redevelop the national Boer pride that they had lost in the war. Therefore, the role of this church became important for Boer consciousness.

The negotiations which resulted into a Church of the Vow being restored and converted into a museum were rooted in manipulating the church's historical image. The General Committee appointed in 1909 brought all the decisions to fruition. The appeal for funds was directed to the Dutch people in South Africa only, because it was felt that the church was their responsibility and it was their duty to wipe out the stigma attached to the sale of building of a sacred nature, 'erected by the pious on the strength of a

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<sup>106</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, Voortekker Museum Files, A81 (9), Report on the development of the church of the vow, undated; see *Natal Witness*, 19/11/1970.

<sup>107</sup> Voortrekker Museum pamphlet.



solemn vow.<sup>108</sup> To assist with the collection of subscriptions, a Ladies Committee was formed. This was very successful, since subscriptions were received from Orange Free State, Transvaal, Cape Colony, Rhodesia, East Africa and even from students of South African nationality in Holland.<sup>109</sup> Jansen summarized the motives attributed to the renewal of the church and its transformation to be a museum as follows:

It is intended that the building is to be utilized as a museum of historical objects of interest, representative of the customs, dress, furniture and pursuit of the immigrants and an appeal has been made for the donation of such articles, as well as weapons used for defense, official documents, books, etc.<sup>110</sup>

From 1910, the building was restored as near as possible to its original form. It was equipped and established as a museum exclusively for the Voortrekker artifacts and on the 16 December 1912, it was officially opened as a government institution in ‘trust for the people of South Africa.’<sup>111</sup> The opening of the church was a splendid occasion. The ceremony lasted for four days and many people attended. Mr. Christopher Bird, principal Under-Secretary-for the Colony of Natal, opened the programme with a lantern lecture in the City Hall on the ‘Voortrekkers, who they were and what they did.’ On following morning, the new museum was filled with a temporary exhibition of historical portraits and pictures of the old Cape houses.<sup>112</sup> From the onset, the museum fulfilled its role of being a hub of Afrikaner chauvinism. Among the first donations that came into the museum in 1910 before it was officially opened was the bible of Sarel Cilliers which he might have used during the *impi yaseNcome*.<sup>113</sup>

From the time of its restoration as a heritage institution, the Voortrekker Museum became a historical resource in the landscape of the Afrikaner heritage. In 1938 the museum became a centre of centenary celebrations of the 1838. Moreover, its focus was on fostering settler heritage by focusing entirely on romanticizing the Voortrekkers history and viewing any opposition to it as aggressive.<sup>114</sup> During the 1950s the museum continued to display artifacts of the Voortrekkers with the view of restoring their heritage. In 1951, for example, the museum acquired a brown coat that belonged to the wife of Gert Maritz, the Voortrekker, after whom the Maritzburg is named.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, numerous artifacts were displayed in the museum during the 1950s. These include the following: In 1953 Afrikaners presented

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<sup>108</sup> Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, Voortrekker Museum Files, A81/1908-1938.

<sup>109</sup> Obviously those students were the sons of Afrikaners, see Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Voortrekker pamphlet, also see the letter written by H. B. Shaw, acting secretary for interior, dated 27<sup>th</sup> February 1912.

<sup>112</sup> See Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, Voortrekker Museum files, A81/1908-1938; the Daily News, 23/04/1955.

<sup>113</sup> Voortrekker Museum’s inventory book which is in the storerooms of the museum.

<sup>114</sup> Voortrekker Museum Annual Reports 1938-1939.

<sup>115</sup> *Natal Witness* 11/05/1951.

a number of treasured historical artifacts which were at their disposal and hitherto hidden away in private homes to the museum. Among the exhibits was a chair, which once belonged to Piet Retief. Another exhibit was the trunk in which the wife of Gert Maritz used to keep baby clothes.<sup>116</sup> Also in December 1955 the museum housed many religious services in the original Church of Vow. In December 16, the day of covenant, according to the old South African calendar, a celebration was staged in the museum and a foundation stone for a new addition, E. J Jansen Extension was laid.<sup>117</sup> These activities were an attempt to promote settler heritage and the museum was used as the reference point for the development of the Afrikaner nationalism.

Museum annual reports of the 1960s and 1970s do not include developments in the museum except that of grant-in-aid from the government and increases in staff. However, the *Natal Witness* articles show that the museum continued to view African participation in Voortrekker history as peripheral, and thus did not deserve to be exhibited. During the 1960s the museum exhibited a collection of Dutch biblical tills dating back to about 1800.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, by the beginning of the 1970s the museum still continued on its quest to acquire more artifacts of the Republic of Natalia (1838-1842).<sup>119</sup> Thus from its establishment in 1912 until the late 1980s, the museum was exclusively displaying Afrikaner artifacts despite major trends that were forcing KwaZulu-Natal museums to adapt to transformation.

The developments of the 1980s are crucial in the history of museums in Natal. While other museums were involved in transformation agendas, either positively or negatively, the Voortrekker museum was expanding. The demolition of the origin house of Pretorius House in George Town (Edendale) in the late 1970s was important in consolidating Afrikaner heritage in Natal. This house was restored in the premises of the Voortrekker Museum next to where the Church of the Vow stands. Further, the Voortrekker Museum took over the control of Majuba historical site as well as the Zaaylaager farm.<sup>120</sup> In 1987 the museum also took control of the old Voortrekker House situated in Boom Street in Pietermaritzburg. This expansionist approach adopted by the museum board of trustees and the then director were a means of ensuring that since the museum was declared a own affairs institution, it played an instrumental role in the promotion and conservation of the Afrikaner heritage.

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<sup>116</sup> *Natal Witness* 03/04/1963.

<sup>117</sup> *Daily News*, 07/03/1955.

<sup>118</sup> *Natal Witness* 08/06/1968.

<sup>119</sup> *Natal Witness* 09/04/1971.

<sup>120</sup> Zaaylaager farm was the farm on which the Voortrekker leader, Gert Maritz formed his laager in February 1838. It is situated on the banks of the uMtshezi River, Estcourt.

Many white museologists have opposed the argument of the state as the major manipulator in the museum displays. Their viewpoint suggests that museums do not have a relationship with the state since they belong to local authorities. On the contrary, a radical museologist believes that the state plays a pivotal role in influencing the nature and the politics of exhibiting in museums.<sup>121</sup> It is in this context that the role of the state is vividly seen in influencing the museum. Since from its establishment the Voortrekker Museum was declared a national museum, receiving its subsidy directly from the state. Although the 1920s decreased grant-in aid for museums, the Voortrekker museum did not experience the severe financial problems that the Natal Museum and the Durban Museum were experiencing. This is because while Afrikaner donors continued to contribute more funds and material for displays, the state treated the Voortrekker Museum as a unique institution that deserved certain attention. To substantiate this point, by the mid-1920s there was a proposed merger of museums in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Although this did not come to fruition the Voortrekker Museum was not included in this venture.<sup>122</sup>

The nature of politics of the early 1990s influenced the politics of displaying in the Voortrekker Museum in particular. The museum accelerated its pace of putting more mental energy in to the hitherto marginalised histories and their significance in the construction of public memory. Thus, exhibitions that were from the victims' experiences started to appear in many displays. An example is the display entitled 'The birth of democracy' which depicts the struggles by former liberation movements in South Africa during the twentieth century.

The state and the general public has been proactive in ensuring that Voortrekker Museum is transformed. The appointment of the new council in 1999 is significant in the history of the Voortrekker Museum. It was the first council to include Africans, and chaired by an African, Professor Maphalala, at that time who was attached to the University of Zululand. Professor Maphalala is an advocate of the idea of speaking in the liberation of isiZulu language and its use in public places. He was officially appointed on as the chairperson of the council on the 12th April 1999.<sup>123</sup> It is vital to point out that both Professors Mzilikazi Khumalo and Langalibalele Mathenjwa from the University of Zululand serve in the council. The appointment of the council marked another turning point in the history of the Voortrekker Museum. This council has been termed the 'transforming council' by

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<sup>121</sup> This became apparent in interviews which I conducted.

<sup>122</sup> The cut down in grant-in aid from the national government started to be seen from 1922 see minutes of the town clerk 1922-1923; NAR, 3/DBN/4/1/2/642.

<sup>123</sup> Author's interview with professor Maphalala, 06 September 2001.

Professor Maphalala.<sup>124</sup> During the first council meeting Professor Maphalala greeted everybody in both Zulu and English. He continued saying that

‘This is the first meeting of the transformed council. Previously council had always consisted of whites member only.’<sup>125</sup>

Among the achievement of the council, in 1999 a resolution was adopted that museum will use Zulu, English and Afrikaans as its official languages. That meant that exhibitions were to appear in the above mentioned three languages. This is a good way of promoting multilingualism and pluralistic ideas. The introduction of IsiZulu is signal of transformation and the extent to which the museum dedicates itself in representing and drawing patronage from the Zulu speakers whose ancestors fought in the *Impi yase Ncome* (battle of iNcome). Thus the museum is geared to serve the needs of its visitors. The museum subscribes to multilingualism, which is the basis of the South African society. The museum is now an integral part of society around it.

Once an icon of Afrikaner heritage the Voortrekker Museum has changed to become the symbol of hope and reconciliation in a new South Africa. Rather than depicting the histories, activities and triumph of Afrikaner nationalism, the museum has taken its rightful place in a diverse society, that of championing the experiences of blacks who form part of the heritage of the province. Bearing in mind its Afrikaner image as early as 1912 when it was opened, the museum used Afrikaans in its inscriptions. In a report to the new council in 1999, the museum pointed out clear its objectives as following: to improve tolerance, understanding and mutual respect among the diverse groups in KwaZulu-Natal; to interpret and display the Voortrekker history in a holistic and more objective manner; to display cultures of all the peoples of KwaZulu-Natal; to provide educational services to all groups of the community and; to provide an outreach programme to all groups of the community.<sup>126</sup>

The nature of displays in the museum draws on multiculturalism as its reference framework. The museum is a product of its time and its fits well in to the current political climate. This is shown by the erection of the Shiva Temple and the Zulu hut within the premises of the museum.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

The twentieth century witnessed major changes in both the politics and poetics of exhibiting. Once regarded as the ‘arsenal for the social reproduction of the colonial ideology’<sup>127</sup> museums have changed to reflect both historical and political ideologies of the present. KwaZulu-Natal museums are well placed to take long-term perspectives on ‘complex issues surrounding the shaping of cultural identities.’<sup>128</sup> By reflecting on critical issues about the past, these museums show how national identities are constructed and how they change over time. This paper has argued that museums are dynamic institutions, dynamic in a sense that they have shifted to being community conscious. This has required museums to move far from being specialized, inward looking and ‘object-centred’ to being highly creative, outward looking and people centred, seeking aspirations from the people they serve rather than the collections they hold. This is a very exciting change since it is forcing museums to look very carefully at what they are and how they operate and this has the potential to make them more lively, interesting and vital institutions. This paper has demonstrated that KwaZulu-Natal museums echo an official versions of history, and museums are not neutral places, nor do they exist in a state of political independence somehow suspended above the wash of dominant ideology, they embody the distinctive view of those who hold control. They cannot be ‘divorced from their own times and circumstances.’<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> K. Asmal, Opening speech in the South African National Cultural Heritage colloquium, University of Witwatersand, 2002.

<sup>128</sup> Davidson, ‘*Museums and the shaping of memory*’, p. 153

<sup>129</sup> J. Canizzo, ‘How sweet it is: Cultural politics in Barbados’, in G. Kavanagh (ed.), *Museums provision and professionalism*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.26.