African Voices : A Dynamic Collaboration between the Museum and Its Communities

Session 1 A New Attempt in Cultural Exhibition: The Smithsonian's
Challenge

African Voices: A Dynamic Collaboration between the Museum and Its Communities

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In December 1999, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History celebrated the opening of the *African Voices* exhibition. After six years of work, the Museum had kept its promise to open a new permanent hall of African history and cultures (Figure 1). *African Voices* was developed with substantial community input and it expresses a broad national consensus regarding how to represent African and the African Diaspora to Americans. The main messages of the exhibition emphasize Africa's diversity, its dynamism and its global connections throughout its long history and continuing today.[1]

Figure 1   The *African Voices* installation looking into the Work in Africa gallery and down the Walk Through Time. Photograph by Chip Clark.

From 1993 to 1999 when the exhibit opened, the Museum worked closely with a diverse Extended Team. The Extended Team was made up of professional Africanists, who were academics, development professionals, journalists, etc., as well as African and African American community members. The active participation of a broad range of Africans and people of African descent was critical if the Museum hoped to meet the local, national, and international audiences' cultural and educational needs. Despite a wide range of scholarly and political perspectives, which occasionally resulted in heated discussions, the process worked relatively smoothly primarily because the Extended Team actively participated in every phase of the exhibit development. The Extended Team were central players from the onset in establishing the very goals, objectives, and the tone of the exhibit. In retrospect, the Museum agrees that the counsel of the Extended Team — which numbered about 120 during the project's early years and was reduced to an active working group of about 60 during later phases of the project — resulted in a better final product than would have been achieved had Museum curators worked in isolation.[2]

The first task for the Museum's team was to identify the audience for the exhibit.[3] The exhibit's primary audience is inter-generational family groups from around the United States, who are the majority of the Museum's seven million visitors each year. Many of these visitors spend an average of about an hour in the Museum as part of their day-long visit to the larger Smithsonian complex which includes seven Museums on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Many of these visitors are likely to devote only fifteen minutes to the *Africa Voices* exhibit, if they visit it at all. The second audience includes local, regional, national and international "stakeholder" audiences of Africans, African-Americans, and others interested in Africa, who make *African Voices* a primary destination when they visit the Museum of Natural History.

As we began to develop the exhibit, it was critical that the team understand what our primary audience knew and did not know about Africa. We called upon the expertise of the Extended Team, many who are engaged in teaching about Africa in American schools. We also drew upon the experiences of Africans on the extended team, who on a daily basis, engage with their neighbors throughout America in discussions of African cultures and histories. The majority of the Museum's American visitors have only a vague knowledge about Africa drawn largely from exotic, "timeless" depictions of African cultures popularized in television programs and magazines or through current media coverage that tends to emphasize only Africa's problems. One of the main criticisms of the Museum's previous Hall of African Cultures, and more generally of many cultural exhibits, is that they present Africa in a timeless ethnographic present with little or no discussion of Africa's modernity, its global connections or Africa's current relevance. In *African Voices* stories were consciously developed to highlight human agency in all aspects of African's historical and contemporary lives. The exhibit title,

African Voices, is emblematic of the philosophy that created this new hall. One of our goals was to make African and African Diasporan voices the central voices of authority within the exhibit. Africans' voices literally resound in the hall through excerpts from literature, songs, poems, proverbs and quotations from Africans — historical and contemporary. These "voices" personalize the stories and make the exhibit experience much more immediate for the visitor.

The team faced several logistical problems regarding the space for the exhibit. *African Voices* is located in a long rectangular hall. There are two entryways (one at each end), meaning that there is no single "entrance" or "exit" into the exhibit. In response to the dual entrances, we developed an orientation section at both ends of the hall; each contains both entrance and exit messages.[4] We also chose an open design plan that made maximum use of the limited exhibition space (about 6,500 square feet) and that allowed visitors to move through the hall along a number of different pathways, stopping at objects and stories that interested them.

In the exhibit there is a history corridor, A Walk through Time, which serves as the central spine of the exhibit. Off of this corridor are four main galleries. Three of these galleries are devoted to continental Africa and are organized around the themes — Living in Africa, Working in Africa, and Wealth in Africa. The fourth gallery is devoted to Global Africa and its stories emphasize the dispersion of people's of African descent worldwide. Within all of the thematic galleries, contemporary stories are emphasized, but they are historicized and complement stories presented in the history corridor. We chose stories from both urban and rural settings throughout Africa and within the African Diaspora to provide a balanced representation of people's contemporary life. The decision to emphasize contemporary Africans' lives in this exhibit presented interesting challenges. It effected story development, object selection, and exhibit design and choices of technologies. While these different elements were closely intertwined, I would like to discuss them separately in order to highlight some of the strategies we employed and decisions taken.

The Exhibit Stories

The team decided to organize the exhibit thematically rather than by geo-ethnic units which are more commonly used in cultural exhibits in most museums. A thematic organization, we hoped, would subvert the static representations of African societies, where societies or ethnic groups are imagined as self contained and unconnected from one another through time and in space. It also allowed us to explore connections among contemporary African societies across the continent and the world, while at the same time develop specific stories that address locally and regionally distinct ways that the themes are articulated in communities with different cultural traditions, social practices, and historical experiences.
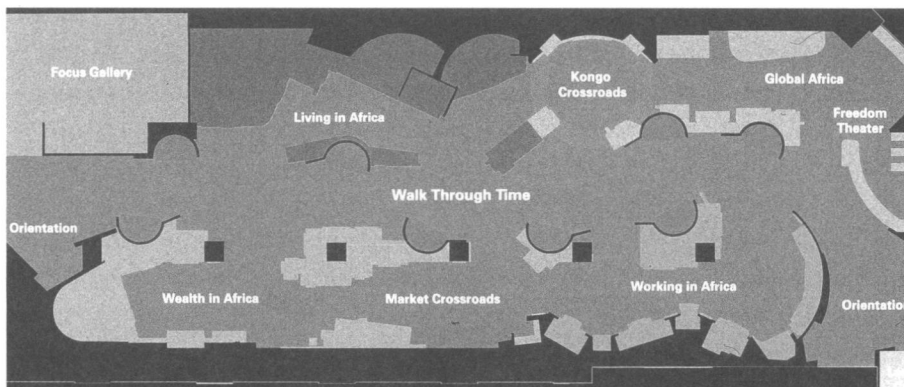
Figure 2 Map of the exhibit.

In the exhibit we strove for the broadest regional representation and for stories that underscored key messages of the exhibit — Africa's dynamism, diversity and human agency. Three African cultures — the Mande, Akan, and Kongo — do appear more frequently within the exhibit. This choice was deliberate. First, members of the Museum's content Team had particular expertise in these areas, and secondly, many members of our American "stakeholder" audience of African Americans trace their origins to one of these larger cultural groups. By telling these stories we hoped they would find a particular resonance with the exhibit.

We developed many of the stories working directly with individuals and communities in Africa and within the African Diaspora. These include stories of market women in the Makola market in Accra, Ghana[5], interpretations of a Chewa masquerade by high school students in Malawi[6], a dialogue by Tanzanians over the competition over land in the Ngorongoro Crater[7], the story of nomadic lifeways in Somalia[8], and the story of African inspired religions in the Americas[9]. (Figures 3, 4, 5)

The Walk Through Time features 10 history moments including a number of contemporary stories bringing Africa's long history into the present. It begins with the Emergence of Humans in East Africa and moves through Africa's long history ending with two contemporary stories — the 1994 South African elections, and a moment called Africa Today which focuses on the challenges communities face in providing healthcare for their children in Kenya. The Africa Today moment is designed to be changed on a regular basis and each year we hope to present a new story on a contemporary African issue or challenge in this case. Each History story whether drawn from the distant past or from more recent history is brought into the present by a label titled "History Matters." This short label is intended to alert the visitor to the contemporary relevance of each of these historical events or moments.

Figure 3   The installation of Ernestina Quarcoopome's cloth stall in the 31 December Makola Market gallery. Photograph by James DiLoreto.

Figure 4   The installation of a Chewa *Kasiyamaliro* mask in the Living in Africa gallery. Photograph by James DiLoreto.

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Figure 5 The installation of the Brazilian religious shop, Tenda Omolu, in the Global Africa gallery. Photograph by James DiLoreto.

Object Selection

Object selection was also a significant challenge. *African Voices* features more than 400 objects, most of which belong to the Museum's collections. The Museum's Africa collections are relatively large for an American museum, although well over 60% of its 15,000 objects date from before the mid-20th century, with the majority of these dating from the late nineteenth century. Since the mid 1980s curators have made a concerted effort to collect more contemporary objects, such as a Somali nomadic house, a Chewa antelope body mask from Malawi, children's wire toys from Mali, Congo, Rwanda and Ghana, and Malian mud dyed cloth textiles, artist's paintings and haute couture fashions. As the script developed, however, it was clear that additional contemporary objects would be needed. The Museum Team developed contemporary stories with particular objects or constellations of objects in mind. To realize these stories, we either borrowed objects from museums or individuals, or purchased them in Africa and the African Diaspora. These include recycled materials from Bamako; industrial housewares and textiles from Ghana; raffia ritual regalia for Omolu and other Candomble religious objects from Bahia, Brazil. We also commissioned major works from artists in Africa and the African Diaspora including

Figure 6   The installation of Paa Joe's airplane coffin in the Wealth in Africa gallery. Photograph by James DiLoreto.

an airplane coffin from the artist Paa Joe in Ghana (Figure 6), and Candomble ritual regalia for the deity, Oxum, from Eneida Sanches in Brazil. Nearly 70% of the objects that are on display in African Voices were made between 1960 and 1999, and, wherever possible, we made an effort to include objects whose maker's identities are known. We adopted this strategy in order to counter the prevailing stereotype of the anonymous African artist or craftsperson that most visitors encounter in museum displays.

We also chose a number of historical objects from our collections, such as the early 20th century house doors carved by Ali Mohammed Helewa of Lamu and a shrine pot by the Yoruba artist Abatan made in the 1930s for inclusion in the galleries. In order to remain faithful to our charge to highlight contemporary Africa, the stories that these older objects tell are historically contextualized. They were chosen because these objects highlight either consistencies or changes in objects' forms or in social practices current in the contemporary period.

In the Wealth in Africa gallery we developed a story that highlights how people use material culture to register change in social status. The objects in this story include a Luba chief's staff from the late 19th century, a Tunisian bride's costume from the early to mid 20th century, a Mende Sowei mask from the mid 20th century, and a

contemporary graduation cap and gown and diploma from the University of Ghana. We knew that our visitors expected to see the carved Luba staff and the Sowei mask in an cultural anthropology exhibit, but we hoped, to surprise them with the Ghanaian graduation cap and gown and diploma in order to encourage them to see Africa and African societies in new ways. The dates for all of the objects whether historical or contemporary are included on the labels in the exhibit. We used text and photographs on the labels for the Luba chief's staff and the Sowei mask to show how objects, either the same or similar in form, are still being used among the Luba and Mende, respectively, to mark change in social status. We note that in the case of the Tunisian wedding ensemble, this elaborate embroidered tunic and headdress has largely been replaced by other bridal ensembles in current marriage practices. The university graduation cap and gown, in the style of Western university regalia, serves to introduce the visitor to a new category of objects — and one with which they are all familiar and marks the same rite of passage and change of social status that Americans undergo through their own educational system.

As the stories developed we periodically tested them with visitors to the Museum[10] This testing helped us identify the ambiguities in our presentations, and it helped us sharpen and clarify the messages we hoped to communicate through constellations of objects, texts and photographs. In one instance, our testing revealed that many American visitors had no idea that Africans use modern, paper currency as members of the global economy. Surprised and dismayed by this discovery, we decided that we had to address this misunderstanding directly. We, therefore, changed a planned installation of the Museum's historical collection of African currency to a family-oriented, low-tech interactive of contemporary African paper currency. As part of the interactive exercise we then asked visitors to match political, cultural, educational, technological and ecological scenes with those found on examples of African paper currency from throughout the continent. The goal of the interactive was twofold. It was intended to introduce our visitors to the fact of Africa's integration into the global economy, and it was meant to highlight through imagery on the bills, the values that Africans place on their natural and cultural resources and the aspirations they have for their futures.

When and What Technology to Use

It seems increasingly fashionable to develop exhibitions utilizing high-end technologies with little thought to how audio-visual and computer-interactive elements enhance the visitor experience and reinforce the major messages of the exhibition. In *African Voices*, we use audio and video components selectively. Throughout the development process we discussed each choice of technology and a solid case for the ways it reinforced the main messages and enhanced the object displays had to be made before it was considered.

One place where we agreed that technology critically enhanced the exhibit was in the two orientation sections at each entrance to the exhibit. We chose a multi-screen video presentation to give a contemporary feel to the exhibit. These videos are relatively fast paced kaleidoscopes of changing images of people, objects, and places set against a background of contemporary African music and voiced narration by African men and women (Figure 7). These orientation videos are meant to be impressionistic and are designed to give an immediacy and energy to the exhibit which is carried forward inside the hall by stories and object displays that continually highlight contemporary life in Africa and are primarily told through the voices of Africans and people of African descent, themselves.

In the Living in Africa gallery we invested in a life sized video display as a key interpretive element in the story of a contemporary Somali nomadic house, the *aqal*. The house, which dates from 1984, allowed us to introduce the nomadic lifestyle and to present an architectural form that had been developed over centuries and remains viable today in Somalia in the early 21st century. The house, designed for portability, serves as an example of technological sophistication, economy of form, and human ingenuity.

As the idea for the story took shape, a number of American and some African advisors on our Extended Team were uneasy about using this house at all in the exhibit. They felt that it would be misread by Museum visitors as an example of a "primitive" dwelling. Abirahman Dahir, a Somali member of the Extended Team, had grown up as a nomadic herder and he addressed the group and spoke eloquently in
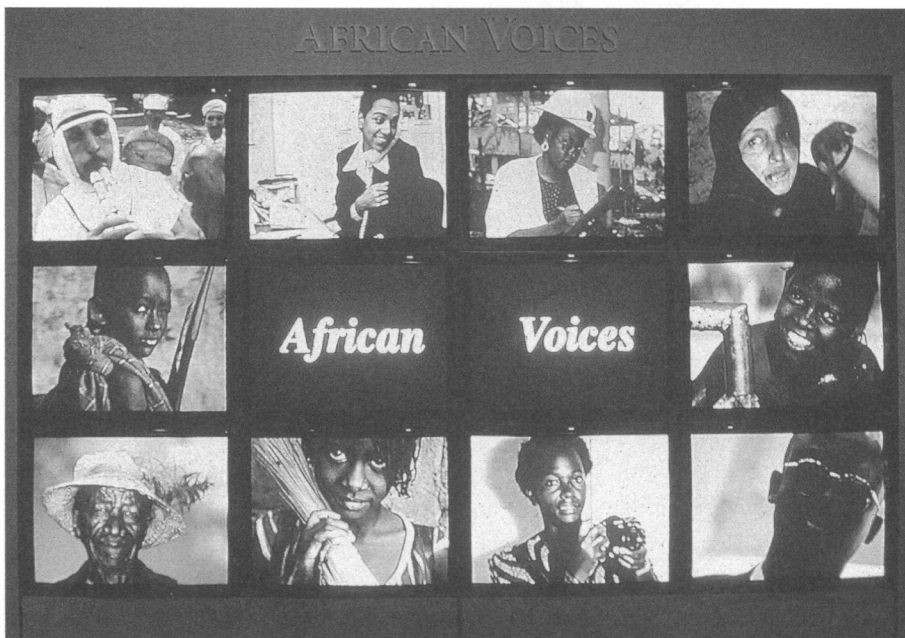

Figure 7　The video wall in the Orientation gallery. Photograph by James DiLoreto.

favor of exhibiting the *aqal*. He explained that for Somalis in Somalia and in the diaspora, the aqal is a central symbol of Somali family life, marriage, history, and cultural identity. His discussion of the Somali nomadic house as an object of cultural memory was compelling and it inspired us to shift the interpretive perspective of the display from an emphasis on the technology of the house to one of cultural memory. If we could communicate the centrality of the *aqal* in the Somali imagination, it would work to transcend the "primitive" trope for our visitors.

We placed a life size video screen outside the platform next to the house. Two Somali Americans, Abirahman Dahir and Faduma Mohammed, both of whom grew up living a nomadic lifestyle, worked with the Museum to create a script based on their memories of everyday life in an *aqal*. The film is presented in a series of short sequences. Abdi and Faduma appear separately, and each is dressed in contemporary Western attire — choice they made for the presentation. Life size — they speak directly to the Museum visitor. In one sequence Abdi states "When I think of Somalia, I think of the three most important things in my culture: poetry, camels and the *aqal*. As a Somali American, these will always be a part of my life." In other sequence he discusses the technology of the aqal, he shares a personal story of the role the aqal played in his own marriage celebration, and he recites a poem in Somali that speaks of a man welcoming strangers to his *aqal* — a poem that celebrates the high value given to hospitality in Somali culture. Faduma shares her memories of growing up in a nomadic camp and playing with her sisters. She recalls learning to make her first mat as a young girl, and she compares the artistry of Somali women's mats which cover the house to the artistry of American women's quilts. In one sequence she says, "Just as Somali women sing songs to their camels — apologizing for burdening them with their home and thanking them for carrying it safely to the new camp, they also sing directly to their *aqal* — praising it for its strength and asking it to protect their family." (Figure 8)

In the Somali installation we used objects, texts, and film to tell different stories about the house — as a technologically sophisticated dwelling adapted to its environment, as a gendered object made and owned by women, as a focal point for key cultural values and social practices for Somali families, and as a central object of memory in the Somali imagination. Anecdotal evidence and formal observation of visitors in the exhibit reveal that the life size video is hard to ignore and that the personal testimonies of Abdi and Faduma engage the visitor. We have found that most people spend some time at this display.

One of the stories which we felt needed to be told in *Africa Voices*, but could be told more effectively through film than through an object display, was The Struggle for Freedom. Through interviews and archival footage this 18 minute film presents the story of the Pan-Africanist movement's struggle and ultimate triumph over European colonialism. It also explores the commonalities between the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. The film emphasizes
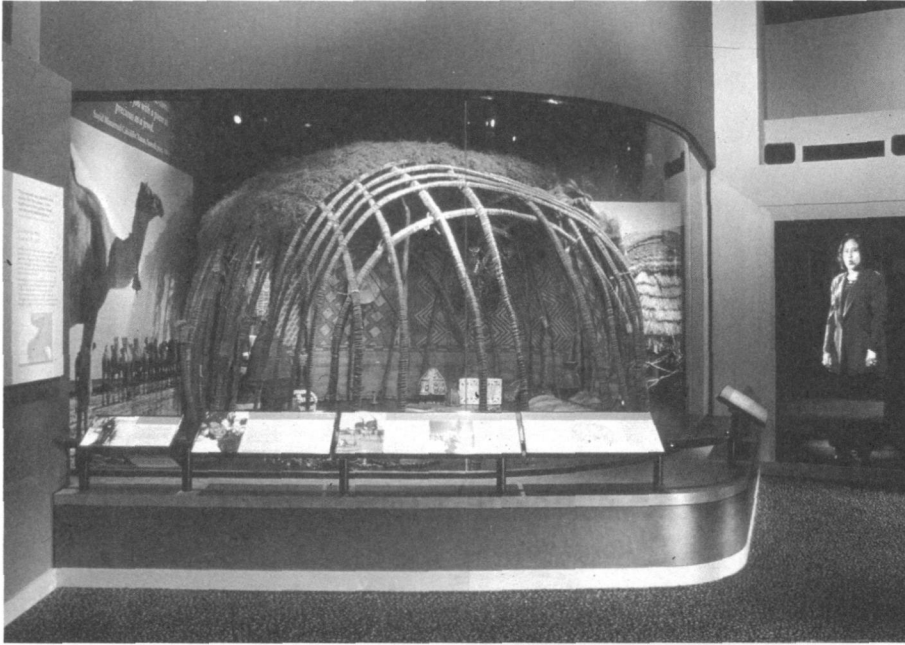
Figure 8 The installation of the Somali *aqal* in the Living in Africa gallery. Photograph by James DiLoreto.

the human dimensions of these powerful stories — the struggle for freedom and self-determination. This film is shown in a small self contained theater which seats about 20 people and is located within the Global Africa gallery.

In the relatively small exhibit hall that is the home of *African Voices*, audio-visual elements compete with each other. For some visitors, the effect is cacophonous, and continuous adjusting of audio levels remains part of a continuing challenge for the Museum. That being said, the decision to fill *African Voices* with sounds and moving images was a calculated one, designed to energize visitors about Africa and to negate any sense of a quiet and passive approach to exhibiting and experiencing African history and cultures. As one colleague said to us on opening night, "This hall is rich, lively and complex — just like Africa."

African Voices, original research, and community collaboration united in a portrait of Africa unlike any other cultural exhibit at the Museum. In fashioning this exhibit, we wanted objects to be joined with African's voices in texts, in soundscapes, and in video and film to tell the story of Africa's contemporary relevance and vitality. *African Voices* came about as a result of a powerful partnership between the Museum's research and exhibition staff and a dedicated Extended Team. The exhibit's vitality, however, owes its greatest debt to the many individuals and communities in Africa and the Diaspora, who brought the exhibit to life by telling their stories and sharing their aspirations with the Museum visitors.

Notes

1) Closed in 1992, the old hall was criticized for outdated, static displays and interpretations of African peoples and cultures. See "African Voices" by Christine Mullen Kreamer in *Museum News* (November-December 1997): 50–55; and "From the Diorama to the Dialogic: A Century of Exhibiting Africa at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History" by Mary Jo Arnoldi in *Cahiers d' Études africaines,* (XXXIX–3-4) 1999: 701–726.

2) The museum worked with communities in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States to develop the exhibition stories. The Smithsonian Institution has had several projects focused on the social and cultural life of African immigrant communities in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The African Immigrant Project, organized by Diana N'Diaye at the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies, supported *African Voices* in many ways. This project, in turn, was based on an earlier model that Mason and N'Diaye developed for the Black Mosaic Project at the Anacostia Museum. Both projects included extensive training and active participation in exhibition development for community scholars and many of these African community scholars joined the *African Voices* Extended team. In addition, hundreds of Africanist and Diaspora colleagues on the African continent, in the Caribbean and Brazil, and in the United States participated in the exhibit's content development. People generously shared their sources and expertise, and they read and critiqued the script at various stages. We are also most grateful to the many colleagues, who allowed us the use of their photographs and films, and who lent or donated objects for the exhibit.

3) The Museum's Core Team included the curatorial team which included art historians, anthropologists, historians, and political scientists with expertise in Africa and the African Diaspora to the Americas, the designer(s), a project manager, an educator, the community research specialist, and a writer. There were three critical stages in the script development for *African Voices*: the Idea Statement (1993); Concept script (1995) and Final Script (1998).

4) The museum conducted visitor surveys that identified for us which entrance the majority of visitors would likely use-the one off the Asia Gallery on the Constitution Avenue side of the building. We treated this as the major entrance, but knew that both entrances had to function as both entrances and exits.

5) Several years into the exhibition planning process, Kreamer, accompanied by textile specialist Mary Impraim of Ghana's National Museum, made an exploratory visit to the market. She met with Ms. Ernestina Quarcoopome, a vendor of blue and white factory-print cloth, and her daughter Marjorie Botchway; Ms. Adama Salifu, the market's "kola queen;" Ms. Adjoa Kwakyewa Dwamena, a successful young housewares vendor managing her father's shop; and Ms. Comfort Kwakye, the market's assistant "yam queen." In separate meetings, the women recounted their experiences of tourists coming through the market with cameras, taking photographs of them without their permission. Because they were dressed for work and, thus, not properly attired for photographs, the women imagined that when the tourists returned home, photographs of them and the market would be discussed in ways that suggested that the market was a dirty, disorganized, and impoverished place. These women were proud of their work and their contributions to their communities, but they felt that photographs and uninformed opinions by foreigners did not afford them an opportunity to tell that story.

   In each case, Kreamer and Impraim addressed the concerns of the women. Over the

next several years the women reviewed and corrected both draft and final exhibition text, and they determined how they wanted to represent themselves photographically in the exhibition.

6) The guiding philosophy adopted by the *African Voices* team was that the displays of African rituals and ceremonies would only include objects or information that were publicly displayed or discussed. Thus, esoteric knowledge or secrets that were limited to full members of a society or association would not be included in the museum display. In the Chewa case, David Gainer, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi, put the team in touch with teacher Adam Michaelides at the Dowa Secondary School, Mporela, Malawi. He ran an essay contest asking students to write about what they would like Americans to know about this masquerade. The winning essays were sent to the team. Excerpts from the essays provide the interpretive content for the masquerade display. A photograph of the winning essayists is included in the installation. At a later date we hope to put the full texts of the students' essays on the African Voices web site.

7) The "Work in Ngorongoro Crater" story explores the competition for space and the diversity of work in the crater among Maasai herders, wildlife conservationists, and the tourist industry. The story developed with the participation of three colleagues from Kenya and Tanzania: Dr. Naomi Kipury, a Maasai anthropologist living in Nairobi and working on development issues in Tanzania and Kenya; Deo-Gratias M. Gamassa, ecologist and professor at Mweka College of African Wildlife Management; and Paul Mshanga, Head of Tourism at the Ngorongoro Crater. Our intention is to present a contemporary debate in Tanzania and to give our visitors a sense of the different points of view without suggesting any final outcome. The story line was discussed with the three individuals prior to their agreeing to work with us. We used quotations from the participants which were taken from extensive conversations with each of them, either by telephone or in person in Tanzania. All participants were given the opportunity to comment on the development of the story line, to edit their quotes, and choose how they wanted to be represented within the display.

8) Arnoldi began working with Hassan Gure from Washington's Somali community, and he secured the participation of several knowledgeable women. They came to the museum, and together with museum staff we did a first rebuilding of the aqal. We also showed the women the domestic objects in our collections and made the selection after consultation with them and other Somali advisors. The objects installed in the house are intended to be a representative sample of objects found in a contemporary aqal. Objects include carved wooden head-rests as well as water and milk containers woven from grasses that have been made and used in nomadic households for generations, but there are also a short wave radio, a brass tray and coffee pot, and textiles imported from the city. The women were eager for us to include a spear and shield, which they identified as potent symbols of Somali heritage. Other Somali scholars and members of the community also insisted that we include a modern automatic rifle. While these advisors appreciated the symbolism of the shield and spear, they noted that for protecting the herds and the family's camp, many men now have automatic rifles.

9) Mason traveled to Brazil and collaborated with various members of the Candomble religious community to create the display. The exhibit features a religious shop which introduces visitors to the African deities of the *Candomble* tradition through objects and narratives. Quotes from the leading priestess Mae Stella de Oxossi and object's commissioned from the artist Eneida Sanches convey the traditional meaning and dynamic vitality of the tradition. Within this story, a video shows other African-based religions. Mason worked with practitioners of

Cuban Santeria, Haitian Vodou, and Brazilian Umbanda in New York to create the film in which they discuss the ritual and social practices of these religions as they exist in New York City in 1999.

10) The Team benefited from "Beyond the Elephant," a study completed by the Smithsonian's then Office of Institutional Studies that established the general demographics and behavior of visitors to the Museum of Natural History. A variety of specific studies provided additional front-end evaluation (1992–1994), with an emphasis on visitors' knowledge base and expectations. Formative evaluation (1994–1998) of the exhibition as it developed focused on testing the affective, cognitive, and behavior goals of the exhibition; the unintended messages communicated by images of Africa; and appropriateness of proposed text copy and design graphics.

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