Abstract
The article begins with a brief history of anthropological collections of African material culture at the Smithsonian from the 1860's to the present. It then, analyses the history of permanent African exhibits at the Smithsonian and the relationship of each exhibit to specific anthropological theories. The museum's first permanent exhibit was on view from the end of the 19th century to the 1960’s. Its second permanent exhibit opened in the late 1960s and was closed in 1992 amid public controversy. The final section of the article examines the development of the current permanent exhibition, African Voices, which is scheduled to open in late 1999. It explores the issue of representation of Africa and Africans in public museums and examines the development process for the new exhibit. This process has involved the active participation of various stakeholder communities in the conceptualization and realization of the exhibition.

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Document généré le 02/06/2016
From the Diorama to the Dialogic:

A Century of Exhibiting Africa at the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History

Over the past two decades renewed scholarly interest in African material culture, in conjunction with critical histories of African museum displays have generated a significant and growing body of literature. Scholars have addressed the life history of African objects in public collections, the politics of representation, the relations of power, and the historical practices which underlie the appropriation of African objects into Western collections and their subsequent recontextualization and interpretation in public displays. (Arnoldi & Hardin, 1996; Cannizzo 1989; Coombes 1994; Mack 1991; Schildkrout & Keim 1998; and Vogel 1988). These studies of the history of anthropological representations of Africa and Africans in museum displays have analyzed the concepts which frame these displays and the ways that these exhibits, as the public face of anthropology, have shaped the Western popular imagination about Africa.

In analyzing the relations of power and the politics of museum display, Ivan Karp noted that “The sources of power are derived from the capacity of cultural institutions to classify and define peoples and societies. This is the power to represent; to reproduce structures of belief and experience through which cultural differences are understood” (Karp, Kreamer & Lavine 1992: 1-2). Over the past century museums had confidently and authoritatively proclaimed that their cultural exhibits were based on the most current anthropological thinking of the day. However, in most large museums, permanent exhibits remained on view over several generations. Whether because of a lack of money, staff or the will to change, most major museums’ anthropology exhibits have a life span that extends well beyond the viability and legitimacy of the anthropological theories they espouse.

The Smithsonian over this past century has suffered from this same inertia. Over the last hundred years there have been only two permanent exhibits which featured African objects at the Museum of Natural History. The first permanent exhibit was installed in the opening decades of this century. In 1922 it was modified when a portion of the original African

_Cahiers d’Études africaines, 155-156, XXXIX-3-4, 1999, pp. 701-726._
section was displaced and a new exhibit was installed which featured 2,700 Congo artifacts which were donated by the artist/collector Herbert Ward. The original ethnology exhibit and the 1922 Ward Congolese exhibit, which was installed in a separate gallery space adjacent to the older African displays, remained on view until the 1960s. In the 1950s the Museum launched an ambitious program to renovate its exhibits and in the early 1960s it closed the old African exhibits and began planning the installation of a new permanent hall dedicated to African Cultures. The new exhibit, “The Cultures of Africa”, was completed in 1967. It remained on view with few modifications for a quarter of a century, until it was dismantled in 1992.

The decision by the Natural History Museum to close The Cultures of Africa exhibit was the result of an increasingly vocal public criticism of this exhibit. The criticism began in the 1980s with groups of professional Africanists. In the early 1990s the critique gained public notoriety when local African and African American communities began to register their displeasure with this exhibit through a well orchestrated letter writing and media campaign. As public pressure mounted the Museum was shaken out of its inertia and complacency. In 1993 it moved to develop a new African exhibit (Kreamer 1997: 52-53). In his introduction to Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture, Ivan Karp noted that “...museums are not exempt from history, and the communities that have been eliminated from museums or denigrated by them now insist that museums rectify their errors—errors that can be viewed in out-of-date-exhibit halls” (Karp, Kreamer & Lavine 1992: 12). I have a very, pragmatic and immediate interest in the history of African exhibits at the Smithsonian because of my own curatorial involvement in the development of a new permanent African exhibit at the Museum of Natural History.

The Department of Anthropology African Collections, 1867-1998

The first African collections came into the Smithsonian in the late 1850s and the most recent collections have been accessioned within the last month. Currently there are over 13,000 African objects in the anthropology collections at the Museum of Natural History. By comparison the department’s holdings in Native American objects numbers well over 100,000 objects. The largest single African collection is the Herbert Ward collection of 2,714 Congolese objects which was donated to the institution in 1921.

Prior to the Ward donation in 1921, there were only 2,805 African objects on record comprising 173 accessions. Two-thirds of these accessions included under ten objects and there were only five accessions of more than 200 objects. Fifty-five of these early accessions included objects from North Africa, Egypt and the Sudan; twenty-nine were from
West Africa primarily Liberia; twenty-five were from Central Africa; twenty were objects from southern Africa primarily South Africa and thirteen included objects from East Africa and Madagascar. The donation of the Ward collection in 1921 nearly doubled the number of African objects housed at the museum.

Objects came into the collections from a variety of sources. A number of the earliest accessions were objects from Liberia which had originally been donated to John Varden’s Washington City Museum. These included African objects collected by Commodore Matthew Perry and by Reverend Ralph Gurley among others. Between 1842-1845 Perry commanded a United States naval squadron which was assigned to patrol the West African Coast to seize illegal slaving vessels and return captives to Africa. Reverend Gurley was an agent for the American Colonization Society in Liberia and first visited the region in 1824. He donated a group of objects from Liberia to John Varden’s Museum. Varden’s museum operated in Washington in the 1830s. The collections were transferred to the National Institute for the Promotion of Science in 1841 and beginning in the late 1850s the Institute’s collections were given over to the Smithsonian.

Other early collections included those donated by members of the Eclipse Expedition (1889). The United States “Eclipse Expedition” sailed to southern Africa aboard the Pensacola in October 1889 to view a total eclipse of the sun. The expedition returned with hundreds of ethnological objects from Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Zaire, Angola, and South Africa. Individual members of the expedition who also donated objects to the museum included zoologist William Harvey Brown and the missionary and linguist Heli Chaterlain.

Throughout this early period individual donors to the collections included diplomats, military men, commercial agents, missionaries, biologists, ethnologists, and purveyors and collectors of ethnographic materials. Hoffman Philips, who had been the first American consul to the court of Menelik II in Ethiopia presented the museum with his collection of Ethiopian materials which included among others items a number of painted scrolls. Emory Taunt and Richard Dorsey Mohun, American commercial agents in the Congo, made collections of several hundred Congolese objects for the museum. The museum acquired Reverend E. H. Richards’ collection of over two hundred objects in the early 1900s. Richards had worked as a missionary in Mozambique and the objects he collected were from the Chopi-Tonga peoples. In 1889 Talcott Williams, journalist and educator, made a collection of Moroccan musical instruments for the museum. In addition to the musical instruments he donated utensils, pottery, tools, and costumes.

The early African collections were augmented by objects obtained from world fairs and expositions including the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the Columbia World Exposition in Chicago and the New Orleans Exposition. The Department also regularly engaged in the stand-
ard practice of exchanging objects with other museums and educational institutions. African objects were brought into the collections from American institutions including Oberlin College, the Cincinnati Museum, and the Glenn Island Museum of Natural History, as well as from European museums such as the Trocadero in Paris, the British Museum in London and the Volkerkunde Museum in Leipzig. In several of these transactions, the museum exchanged Native American objects for African objects.

Unlike Fine Arts museums the collecting mandate for African ethnology was broad and included the full range of “arts and industries of mankind”. African objects in the anthropology collections include textiles, costumes and jewelry, domestic objects such as furniture, pottery and baskets, as well as, tools and equipment related to various local industries such as metalworking, weaving and items associated with animal husbandry, hunting, and fishing. There are a number of weapons in the early accessions, for example, the Ward collection consists of over 1,700 spears, knives, arrows, etc. By comparison there are a relatively small number of carved masks and statues in the early collections.

Many of the early collections had little or no documentation associated with the objects. Over the last quarter century, however, a greater emphasis has been placed on acquiring documented research collections. In the late 1950s Dr. Gordon Gibson, the department’s first Africanist curator, was hired. During his tenure in the department he made several field collections of Herero and Himba materials and he sought out gifts of well documented collections. He was involved in acquiring the Lamb collection of 1,500 West African textiles and looms which is jointly owned by the Department of Anthropology and the National Museum of African Art. More recently field collections of contemporary crafts from Niger and Kenya, industrial roller print textiles from West Africa, and recycled materials from West and East Africa have been added to the department’s holdings.

Smithsonian Ethnology Exhibits: the late 19th century to 1960

The museum’s first ethnology halls included a small section devoted to Africa. During the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, ethnological research and exhibits in the anthropology department were in a large part shaped by the scientific philosophy of Otis T. Mason, the Museum’s first curator of anthropology. Mason’s early training was in the natural sciences and his subsequent approaches to ethnology were firmly rooted in its methods and theories.

Mason’s system of museum classification was an elaboration of Gustav Klemm’s “Kulturgeschichte”. Klemm’s method was based in the natural sciences and it demanded first that a subject be analyzed in all its developmental variety and from these particulars the larger historical
picture—through the stages of savagery, barbarism and enlightenment—could be drawn. (Hinsley 1981: 88). In Mason’s version of the Leipzig model, his primary focus was on the notion of invention.

“[...] Mason defined invention broadly: as changes in materials and processes; as modifications in structure and function of artifacts; as changes in the inventor of society. The concept referred, in fact, not merely to mechanical devices but to cultural processes [...] All people invented, but primitive man saw dimly and thought imperfectly [...] This vision produced an ambivalent judgement in which such peoples received credit as human participants, but clearly inferior ones” (Hinsley 1981: 88-89).

Although Mason’s strongly developmental scheme and his biologically inspired belief in the underlying unity of all objects was already being seriously challenged by Boas in 1887 (Jacknis 1985: 77-80), nevertheless, on an 1889 visit to Europe, he found confirmation of his theories and methods in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, at the Musee Guimet in Paris, and in Dresden (Hinsley 1981: 109). Mason’s developmental scheme continued for decades to be an important influence in the ethnology exhibits at the Smithsonian.

On this same European tour, Mason was also influenced by other approaches to exhibiting which he saw in various European museums and at the Paris World Fair. Mason incorporated some of these ideas in the plan for the Smithsonian’s American Indian exhibits at the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exhibition. In collaboration with William Henry Holmes, anthropologist and artist, and with advice from the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian anthropologists constructed a series of dioramas of American Indian groups based on “geo-ethnic” units. These life-sized and realistically rendered mannequins represented specific groups of American Indians engaged in various activities in daily life or ritual in the appropriate environmental settings. These life group dioramas enjoyed a tremendous popular success at the Chicago World’s Fair, and they subsequently became one of the key features of government anthropology exhibits and were quickly embraced by other American museums (Hinsley 1981: 108-109; Jacknis 1985: 81-82).

In 1902 Holmes published an article in which he laid out the organization and philosophy of the Smithsonian’s ethnology exhibits. According to Holmes, the arrangement was by geo-ethnic units and the center piece of each section was a family life group diorama. These family groups were purported to be representative of “primitive” people prior to contact with civilization. Most showed “families” or groups of people of different genders or ages engaged in some characteristic activity illustrative of their lives. Extending out from the central diorama on each side were cases organized in parallel rows in which objects illustrating the arts, industries and history were arranged in descending order of their importance to the culture being featured (Holmes 1902: 356-357). These
early Smithsonian life groups were intended to link the prevailing ideas by Smithsonian anthropologists about environmentalism with theories of race and evolution. The implied standard of comparison was always contemporary Western civilization and the “primitives” were carefully defined as developmentally inferior in every category.

The African section contained only one diorama. This diorama featured a Zulu family which had been originally created by Smithsonian anthropologists for display at the 1915 Pan-Pacific exposition in San Francisco. Following the exposition it was reinstalled in the Smithsonian’s permanent ethnology halls (Fig. 1). The label which accompanied the Zulu diorama made the theoretical linkage between environmentalism, race and evolution quite clear. It read:

“The Zulu-Kaffir and related Bantu tribes live in the semi-arid southern extremity of the African continent. They are physically strong and energetic and not as dark as the true Negro. In respect to military and social organization they are superior and in arts and industries compare favorably with other Africans. They depend upon maize, and wild fruit principally for their vegetal food supply and on cattle, goats, chickens and wild game for their animal food. The group shows a section of the house with a doorway; a fireplace on which a woman is cooking mush; a woman dipping beer from a large pottery jar; a woman from the field with a hoe; a water carrier poising her jar on her head; a man playing the marimba or xylophone; and a boy driving a goat. The group represents these people as they existed some years ago before they were affected by contact with white men” (National Anthropological Archives).

According to the department’s exhibit plan, second in importance to the central life group diorama’s were the miniature diorama’s of dwelling groups. These miniatures were intended to illustrate key features of the environment and to illustrate types of housing and home arts and industries. Surrounding the model dwelling were cases consisting of objects intended to illustrate these activities. The label for the model Zulu dwelling read:

“Dwelling Group of the Zulu, South Africa
The Zulu are representative of the populous and powerful Bantu family. They live in a semi-arid country and subsist on maize, wild fruits, domestic animals and game. They inhabit well-planned villages under the rule of a chief. Their villages are circular and surrounded by a fence. The houses have dome shaped frames thatched with grass. The family occupations are carried on outside the houses. Storehouses, small houses for animals and other purposes are scattered among the dwellings. The Zulu make pottery, baskets, wooden vessels, brew beer and work iron into weapons and agricultural implements” (National Anthropological Archives).

Installed in the vicinity of the life group diorama and the model dwelling was a single figure of a Zulu man. The label accompanying this mannequin read in part “their strong political and military organization
and prowess in war have brought them prominently before the world”. It is noteworthy that several of the Zulu labels included descriptors like “well-organized villages under the rule of a chief” and “strong political and military organization” and “prowess in war”. These descriptors alluded to the 1879 Zulu defeat of the British at Isandhlwana which was widely reported in the European and American press and which contributed to the characterization of the Zulu in the popular imagination as a militaristic society and surprisingly worthy adversaries. While these descriptors played into certain tropes about the nature of “savages”, they also inadvertently undermined, without necessarily overcoming, these same tropes by highlighting the political and military sophistication of Zulu society.

Because the Department’s African collections were relatively small, seven single figures, which were created to represent different racial types in Africa, took the place of the full fledged dioramas in the remaining African sections (Fig. 2). Installed geographically from north to south, these figures included a Berber man and a Berber woman who were identified in the label as the white race; a Somali man identified as belonging to Hamitic stock; a Wolof Man and a Bambara man who were classified as Sudanese Negroes; a Chagga man and a Zulu man identified as Bantu stock. Clearly implied in the orientation from north to southern Africa in this installation was a racial hierarchy.

The life group dioramas and model dwellings which served as organizing features of the ethnology exhibits, however, did not overturn Mason’s original taxonomic and developmental orientation to the study of material culture. As Hinsley notes: “Although Mason to some extent transcended the bald evolutionism of the Klemm model of ’Kulturgeschichte’, the life groups orientation that he and Holmes pioneered in Washington served rather than questioned the superiority of Victorian American culture” (Hinsley 1981: 112)

The Installation of the Ward Congo collection, 1922

In 1922 a section of the older African ethnology hall was removed to make room for a permanent exhibit of the Herbert Ward Congo collection (2,714 objects). This new display represented a shift in the style of ethnology exhibits, but not in their interpretative intent. The Smithsonian curators consciously worked to capture some of the drama that Herbert Ward had achieved in his private installation of his collection in Paris (Fig. 3). To this end they hung curtains over the windows to recreate a somber atmosphere evocative of a “jungle”. They mounted antelope and elephant heads on the walls, surrounded by African weapons and other objects arranged in decorative patterns.
Fig. 1*. — Zulu diorama. Smithsonian ethnology exhibit, circa 1915.
* For all figures: copyright © Smithsonian Institution.

Fig. 2. — Wolof man. Smithsonian ethnology exhibit, circa 1915.
Fig. 3. — Installation of the Ward Collection in Paris, circa 1911.

Fig. 4. — View of the Ward collection exhibit, National Museum Building (now the Natural History Museum), circa 1922.
In Washington, however, museum curators separated the Congolese objects and the zoological specimens from Ward’s bronze sculptures. The Congolese objects were organized by type and material in cases which ran around the perimeter of the exhibition space more closely in line with the taxonomic interests of the museum. The museum placed text labels in each of the cases for the edification and education of the public. The label text reinforced the visual relationships set up as typological developmental sequences. For example, one label, *Native Fetiches and Wood Carvings*, read:

“The African native displays much skill in carving wood. He does not hesitate to boldly attempt the fashioning of the human form in his fetiches and this barbaric sculpture achieves what to him are satisfying works of art and which convey their interest to civilized man. Stools, headrests, and domestic utensils are worked with a view to pleasing forms and decoration” (NAA, Smithsonian Institution).

The nineteen bronze sculptures representing Congolese played a major role in this exhibit (Arnoldi 1997). Rather than being integrated with the African objects as they had been in Ward’s Paris display, the bronzes were all positioned in the open space within the gallery forming a secondary exhibition within the larger display (Fig. 4). Without a tremendous leap of the imagination the bronzes could be comfortably read as “life groups”. Although the Ward sculptures are self-consciously European Fine Art and clearly not ethnographic “life-groups” they do share a formal and philosophical kinship with the Smithsonian’s “life-groups”. Like the “life-groups” their realism is arresting. In his book on the *Image of Blacks in Western Civilization*, Hugh Honour noted.

“Ward’s statues are life-size, sometimes larger, and so disturbingly life like that they give the impression of truth to nature—though not the whole truth. His choice of subjects, the ways in which he posed the figures, and the facial expressions he gave them, reflect his belief that the Congolese were in a state of arrested development [...]. They are not images of ‘savages’ so much as of ‘savagery’ as understood in his time—of scientific, technological, social, artistic and religious ‘backwardness’” (Honour 1989: 220-222).

Ward’s bronzes shared with the Smithsonian life group diorama’s the same hyper-realism and the same implicit narrative about the “primitives”. The “life-group dioramas” developed by Holmes generally presented lifeway scenes which always depicted “primitive people” before contact with “civilization”. Installed as a group the Ward sculptures, like *The Tribal Chief and The Idol Maker*, could have been read as “life groups” supporting the Museum’s narrative about race and evolution. Romantic ideas about lost innocence after contact would have been further reinforced in Ward’s sculptures such as *The Fugitives and Distress*. William Henry Holmes wrote of the Ward bronzes: “Thus Ward’s genius has presented in an attractive, even a fascinating manner, a people whose
status, according to his own story, is at the very bottom of the ladder of civilization, a people living in a manner hardly above that of the beast of prey and excelling the brute in brutality, for the lowest brute does not systematically hunt and kill and feast upon the bodies of his own kind” (Holmes 1924: 125).

For Holmes and his fellow curator Walter Hough, the inclusion of the Ward bronzes along with the African objects was considered a visually powerful developmental sequence. Holmes had devoted much of his research to the study of “primitive” art and he held strong views about the progressive evolution of Art. For Holmes, art had evolved “from geometric, nonideographic to delineative forms; from motives of religious superstition to refined sense of beauty, from imitation to spontaneity” (Hinsley 1981: 105). No lover of modernism, the Ward sculptures must have represented to Holmes examples of the highest achievement in Western Art. By placing the bronzes alongside the decorated weapons and the African carvings, the public could see for themselves the evolution of Art. Reaffirming this point of view, Walter Hough, wrote: “The maker of an African sword and Praxiteles were one in the effort to express themselves in terms of art. The steps from the aboriginal craftsman to the sculptures of Mr. Ward are plain to those who study the development of art” (Hough 1924: 41).

What is especially ironic is that the theory of cultural evolution emphasized in the anthropology displays was already being seriously challenged as a viable theory in American anthropology in the very decades that these early exhibits were installed at the Smithsonian. How much more outdated and pernicious they become, when one remembers that they stood as the public face of Smithsonian anthropology for over 60 years.

The Cultures of Africa Hall, 1967 to 1992

In the 1950s the Museum of Natural History embarked upon an ambitious two decade plan to renovate and update its exhibits. The impetus for change came primarily from inside the museum. Curators and administrators recognized the outmoded style and content of all of the Natural History’s exhibits. Planning for the new African exhibit began in the early 1960s and the new exhibit opened to the public in 1967. The orientation of the new hall was primarily regional beginning with North Africa and ending with southern Africa echoing the geo-ethnic organization of the earlier African displays. Nearly 60% of the displays were organized by ethnic group (Fig. 5). Other cases were organized around topical themes such as money and markets, home industries, musical instruments, objects of leadership, etc. (Fig.6). The approach to the objects was essentially a functionalist one where short text labels highlighted the object’s context of use. The objects were not dated and no attempt was
made to distinguish between those objects no longer used and those in current usage. Little attempt was made to extend the displays to include reworked and appropriated objects that were in use everywhere in Africa in the mid 20th century.

The design of the hall did depart from that of the earlier ethnology halls. Displays were installed in regional groupings within a series of concentric circles. West and Central Africa occupied the largest areas in the Hall, a reflection of the greater numbers of objects from these regions in the African collections.

The museum chose to draw an analytical distinction between “traditional” and “modern” Africa and between rural and urban sites, in line with museum thinking of the day. While the opening paragraphs of the exhibit brochure acknowledged a complex and diverse contemporary Africa, the museum chose to ignore this reality and to focus on a “traditional” Africa in its displays. The exhibit brochure set the orientation and tone for the hall: “There is, however, another Africa—where the visitor will find little to remind him of home. This is rural Africa, traditional Africa, most of Africa. Here, where outside influence is only beginning to penetrate, most Africans still follow their traditional cultures, or ways of life, which are little known or understood by the rest of the world.”

The phrase “where outside influence is only beginning to penetrate” was a romantic and indefensible notion in the 1960s when this exhibit was conceptualized. Despite the few labels in the hall and portions of the exhibit brochure copy which acknowledged Africa’s long and dynamic history and its global connections, the overwhelming message created was an Africa outside of time.

While diversity among “traditional” African cultures was foregrounded in the exhibit, this diversity was primarily explained in terms of adaptations to different environments and ecological niches. This cultural ecology approach was well suited to the museum’s naturalist paradigm. Diversity within any one African society, however, was essentially ignored. Individual African societies were presented as holistic and unified in their beliefs, values, and practices, echoing the normative ethnographic accounts published from the 1930s through the 1950s. Like its predecessor, the anthropological framework of this new Africa hall was already outdated by the time it opened, and its displays did not engage newer anthropological theories current in the 1960s (Ortner 1984: 126-166). While it was certainly the museum’s intention to valorize African “traditional” cultures, the reification of an idealized “traditional” Africa, not surprisingly, reinvented a contemporary variation of the primitivism paradigm of the earlier ethnology displays.

Life size dioramas and smaller scale models remained a popular feature of the new hall. These dioramas, were, however, not the center pieces of the exhibit narrative, but were interwoven throughout the case displays.
Fig. 5. — The Nuer: Cattle Herders of the Upper Nile. Cultures of Africa permanent exhibit. Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian, circa 1969.

Fig. 6. — Political Authority. Cultures of Africa permanent exhibit. Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian, circa 1969.
There were three dioramas: the "Lunda Initiation Dance", "The Herero and Himba", and "The Bushman". There were also two miniature models: "Zimbabwe 400 years ago" and "Northern Cameroon Ironsmelting".

Unlike the original life groups which were installed in cases and could be viewed from all sides; the newer style of diorama, by this time popular in museums throughout the United States and elsewhere, presented the scene against an elaborately painted backdrop. The Lunda backdrops were based on field photographs and a great deal of attention was paid to accurately depicting environmental details, built structures and background figures. The Lunda Initiation Dance departed from the theme of Holmes "family groups" and featured the public dance ceremony during young men's initiation rites (Fig. 7). The diorama was peopled by seven life sized figures—five of masked dancers and two representing initiates. Since the museum collections did not include the appropriate objects, the costumes and fiber masks were field collected for this display. A series of brief explanatory labels were installed outside of the case which discussed aspects of initiation and masking. Like all of the labels in the Museum's halls they were written in the third person; a presentational style that underscored the Museum voice and the authority of science. Neither the objects nor the scene were dated, and the diorama was framed in a timeless ethnographic present.

The choice of scenes for the "Herero and Himba" and "The Bushman" dioramas were more reminiscent of Holmes earlier "family groups". While conceived of in the newer style, they both showed domestic scenes with mixed age and genders engaged in a variety of activities. Relationships among the mannequins and painted figures were presented as self-evident. The focus in the "The Bushman" diorama was on the ecological niche that they occupied (Fig. 8). A women is shown in front of a dwelling engaged in making ostrich shell beads. Men are shown making and testing bows and arrows for hunting. In the background painting adults and children are shown engaged in domestic and leisure activities.

The Herero and Himba diorama employed a slightly different dramatic technique. The mannequins were installed within a house. The visitor had to actually step slightly forward to peer into the dimly lit house dramatically exaggerating the voyeurism of the visitor's gaze. The figures represented people of different ages who were dressed in quite different costumes. Some of the women and girls were dressed in leather headdresses and aprons, while another woman was dressed in a tailored cotton dress in a Victorian style. This latter style of dress was introduced into the Herero and Himba areas by Christian missionaries at the turn of the century and this style of dress was an important marker of one's Christian faith. No attempt was made in the labels to discuss the differences in the costumes and their role as markers of complex and different identities in these societies.

The two miniature models were constructed with the same attention

to detail as were the life size dioramas. The Iron Working model featured smelters in the Mandara mountains in Cameroon. Based on photographs, the model accurately portrayed the smelting furnace and the iron extraction process. The explanatory labels were written in the present tense, never mentioning that in many parts of Africa the smelting industry had already begun to decline in the late nineteenth century as imported iron became more widely available. In fact most research on African smelting over this past half century has required reconstructing furnaces and processes already abandoned a generation or more before the research was undertaken.

The Zimbabwe diorama was particularly interesting in that it showed Africans as the builders of the 13th-15th century stone buildings and enclosures at Great Zimbabwe. The model successfully challenged early popular theories that these sophisticated stone complexes could not have been built by Africans, but were built by Phoenician or Arab outsiders.

By the 1980s Africanists had begun to regularly voice their criticism of the Africa Hall in letters to the museum administration and to the curators. Smithsonian Africanist staff and colleagues from outside the institution criticized the hall on several counts. One of the most frequently voiced critiques of the exhibit by scholars and various other publics was that it presented African societies as having experienced little history and no change. For many anthropologists the organization of the hall was also chaotic and did not reflect clear overarching themes. The displays also relied far too much on presenting materials as examples of types of African cultures and institutions, and did not represent the diversity of social and personal experience in Africa where age, gender, education, and personal history all figure into how people experience and make sense of their worlds. Outdated and pejorative nomenclature for societies appeared in label texts and culturally loaded terms reinforced stereotypes of Africans as primitive, exotic, and savage and contributed to the misinterpretation of cultural practices.

Issues of museum representation, the politics of museum displays, and the relationship of museums to the communities were being debated among anthropologists, cultural historians and museologists (see Karp & Lavine 1991; Karp, Kreamer & Lavine 1992). At the Museum of Natural History, curators and other staff in the Department of Anthropology urged the Museum to move expeditiously toward redoing all of the anthropology exhibits which were deemed at best out of date, and at worst offensive to the peoples and cultures represented. While in principle, the Museum administration recognized the need for change, in practice it was slow to initiate any change. In the final analysis, interest groups outside the Smithsonian were the most instrumental in pushing for change in the Africa Hall which closed in 1992 (Kreamer 1997: 52-53).

While the Museum did sequester funds to upgrade the Cultures of Africa exhibit, it became clear that merely changing texts, installing new groups of objects, or repainting and relighting the displays would not adequately address the professional and public critiques leveled against the old Africa hall. In 1993, the Museum agreed with the curatorial staff that a new exhibition needed to be created, although additional funding for the project has remained a critical issue. At various junctures, the lack of funds to support the project has contributed to delays in the development process.

In 1993 an exhibit team was constituted. The first task was to critically access the old exhibit and to develop a broad statement for the new Hall which would articulate the primary objectives and goals and suggest the major themes and exhibition strategies. After much debate a working consensus was reached that the target audience would be family groups, defined as inter-generational groups of visitors. This category is the Museum’s largest visitor population. Because a high proportion of our museum visitors have little or no knowledge of either historical or contemporary Africa, the team agreed that baseline information about Africa would need to be provided throughout the exhibit. The team was also concerned that the exhibit engage more knowledgeable and motivated visitors especially African-Americans and Africans living in or visiting the United States, and groups such as elementary and secondary school students. These categories of visitor were identified as a secondary audience for the exhibit.

From the beginning of the development process the exhibit team has worked closely with a large number of Africanists and scholars of the African Diaspora locally, nationally and internationally and with local African and African American communities. While earlier exhibits also sought collaboration with anthropologists outside of the Smithsonian, Kreamer noted that, “The controversies of the early 1990s convinced NMNH staff that they should expand the process of exhibition development to include substantive and ongoing participation by members of diverse communities and stakeholder audiences” *(ibid.: 54).* Over the last five years there have been a core group of about 60 advisors to the project. These include members of the larger Smithsonian staff, many of whom are members of the Smithsonian African American Association; an engaged group of Africanist and Diasporan scholars from outside the Smithsonian Institution, who represent different disciplines and a variety of perspectives, and a committed group of African immigrants from the local region. Advisors have met with the exhibition staff at critical junctures on the development process over the past five years. Input from the advisory groups has been instrumental in reworking and revising the emerging exhibit script at every stage from the statement of goals and
objectives through the final script. A final script and design was completed in September 1998 and the exhibit will open to the public in late 1999.

The collaborative process began in earnest in 1994. A community research specialist was hired to identify members of the advisory groups and to work with communities in the local region. The working statement, which included objectives, goals and a thematic outline was presented to the advisory groups at a series of meetings held at the Smithsonian. The framing statement was critiqued on several levels. Based on the discussions at these meetings, the exhibit goals, objectives and themes were modified and sharpened. The exhibit team and the external advisors agreed broadly along the following lines: the exhibit should demonstrate both Africa’s long and dynamic history and Africa’s contemporary face; it should include peoples of African descent living outside of Africa both historically and in the contemporary period; it should give a balanced view of Africa and challenge existing stereotypes and assumptions about African and Africans in the popular imagination. Moving from these generally agreed upon abstract objectives and goals to fashioning an exhibition script and design was difficult to achieve.

It was decided that we organize the new exhibit thematically, rather than by geo-ethnic groupings. A thematic organization, it was hoped, would subvert the static and ahistorical representations of the older exhibits where individual African societies were imagined as unconnected from one another through time and in space. It would also allow for the exploration of shared themes relevant to African societies across the continent and beyond both in historical terms and in the contemporary period.

One of the primary objectives of the exhibit was to fashion exhibit stories that would focus on the constructive aspects of material culture, i.e., how people shape objects and how particular uses of objects shape people. Objects, like words, are means by which humans shape their world. An approach to material culture which underscores human agency allows for an examination of objects and the material experience in terms of production, identity, and representation (Arnoldi & Hardin 1996: 11).

Certain physical constraints shaped the design of the exhibit. The exhibit hall is a rectangular space with two separate entrances, one at each end of the hall. Because the visitor could enter from either end of the hall, a linear exhibit narrative was not feasible. Moreover, it was determined that each entrance would need its own orientation section. Rather than repeating the same orientation texts and displays at each entrance we decided that one entrance would introduce the exhibit themes from the perspective of the long and dynamic history of Africa, while the other would introduce the exhibit themes from the perspective of a contemporary global Africa.

A History pathway which features ten historical moments serves as the central spine of the exhibit. It begins with the emergence of man in
Africa and ends with a story dedicated to contemporary issues and challenges in Africa. While the history pathway is linear, each moment is a discrete story and the visitor can explore the path from either direction working backwards or forwards in time. In each of the history moments, maps and a timeline provide baseline information for the visitor.

Four thematic galleries branch off the history pathway; two on either side of the pathway. These include Wealth in Africa; Enterprising Africa; Living Spaces and Global Africa. These thematic galleries are linked to one another by two discrete transitional spaces. Living Spaces and Global Africa are connected by a historical story of Kongo religion in Africa and in the Americas. Wealth and Enterprise are connected by a contemporary market story which features vendors from the Makola market in Accra, Ghana.

Each of the history moments incorporates themes explored in the adjoining galleries with the intention of setting up a resonance between historical and contemporary stories. For example, along the history pathway the theme of early urbanism in Africa is introduced through the story of Jene-Jeno in Mali (200 B.C.E to 1,400). This history moment is in physical proximity to the Living Spaces Gallery which features contemporary urban stories. Those history moments dedicated to colonialism and independence are adjacent to the Global Africa gallery. A theater is part of the Global Africa gallery and for the opening in 1999 several short films are being developed, one of which will focus on the Pan Africanist movement and the oratory of freedom struggles within Africa and in the Americas.

Organizing the galleries thematically posed a series of exhibiting challenges. Most visitors are familiar and comfortable with the geo-ethnic organization, since that continues to be the standard in most anthropology museums up to the present. Many visitors also prefer a single narrative that moves them through the exhibit space. In order to make the thematic organization of the exhibit comprehensible to the visitor, a set of hierarchical text labels and design elements were developed. Each thematic gallery is introduced with a large gallery text label prominently placed at the entrance to the gallery space. This text introduces the theme and makes connections between the various stories the visitor will encounter in the gallery. The size of these gallery labels and the design elements chosen for them are consistent in all four thematic galleries.

Every individual display or story within the gallery includes a series of hierarchical texts. A large main text relates the regional or local story to the broader gallery theme. Each display includes a map or series of maps to locate story in Africa or within the wider world. Subtext panels, focus labels and object labels, in descending size, provide more detailed information about the story and the objects on display.

At various stages in the development process the team tested stories, constellations of objects, and photographs and the label texts with museum
visitors. This testing provided important insights about the intended and unintended messages being communicated by both objects, images and words. In some cases it meant abandoning a story or text altogether, or radically refashioning it to make it comprehensible and engaging.

Both the team and the outside advisors agreed that the exhibit should include a variety of perspectives especially those of Africans and people of African descent who are represented in this exhibit. African voices in the exhibit include cultural voices drawn from African poetry, proverbs, songs, and adages; excerpts from historical and contemporary texts by Africans and peoples of African descent worldwide; and excerpts from interviews with individuals whose stories are featured here. These African voices play a central role in the exhibit. They are prominent at every level in the text hierarchy and throughout the installation. Others are actually heard within in the exhibit in videos, sound tapes, and computer interactives that are seen as an integral part of the exhibit.

The primary focus in the thematic galleries is contemporary Africa. Some advisors, many of whom are African American, felt strongly that urban sites should be featured exclusively in the thematic galleries in order to subvert the image of a “primitive” Africa so strongly associated with rural Africa in the American popular imagination. African advisors on the extended team took a different view. While they agreed that it was important to feature urban Africa in the thematic galleries, they disagreed that it should be an exclusive focus. They argued passionately that contemporary rural Africa not be ignored. In their view, the exhibit should include both urban and rural stories and the dynamic historical and contemporary connections between rural and urban areas be highlighted as an essential part of African history and the fabric of contemporary African life. The team struggled with stories and exhibiting strategies which could address these concerns and different points of view.

The thematic galleries as they are constituted do include both contemporary and historical stories from both urban and rural settings, although contemporary urban and rural stories are emphasized. The objects selected draw upon existing collections and also include objects which were specially collected for this exhibit. All objects in the exhibit are dated and where possible we have identified the individuals who have made the objects and included their biographies as part of the exhibit story. In the “Wealth in Africa” gallery for example, a case explores how people use objects to register a change in status. The case includes a Luba chief’s staff from the late 19th century, a Tunisian bride’s costume and a Mende woman’s initiation mask from mid century, and recent graduation gown from Fort Hare University. In this same gallery we are featuring several contemporary Malian artists and fashion designers who create and work with mudcloth textiles. We locate the production of these textiles in both rural and urban settings and discuss the local, national and international markets for mudcloth consumption. As part of this exhibit story we also
explore the international marketing of products based on Malian mudcloth designs from manufactured textiles and clothing, bedsheets and towels to coffee cups, wrapping paper, and shopping bags.

In displays where historical objects are featured, labels clearly indicate if similar objects are still being produced and used today. Where an object is no longer in current use, the historical object is installed next to a more contemporary object that has replaced it. For example, an iron bundle once exchanged as bridewealth in the Cameroon is installed next to a stack of Cameroon CFA notes. The label addresses the changes in the material repertoire and in bridewealth practices in contemporary Cameroon.

A century after "life groups" were first introduced into the anthropology museums, dioramas remain a popular genre. Despite the representational problems inherent in this genre, the new exhibit includes several variations on dioramas. The team struggled with the ways to exploit the dramatic potential of the diorama, but reconfigure and refashion it in ways that would extend its interpretive potential. We freely borrowed a number of successful strategies from other museums who have experimented with the diorama form. In the Makola market display, for example, we are featuring four women vendors currently working in this market. The market includes an installation of the four stalls and the products which these women sell. The visitor is introduced to each woman through a life sized photographic cutout. In contrast to mannequin displays, there is evidence that photographic cutouts are most often read as contemporary by museum visitors. Rather than being generic Africans, the photographs are of the actual women whose stories are featured in the market display. The labels adjacent to the photograph are in their voices and are excerpts taken from interviews that were conducted with them in 1997. In these texts the women speak about the market organization, the economic value of the work they do, the particular goods that they sell, who buys these goods, and their own hopes and aspirations for the future.

In the gallery devoted to Living Spaces we have opted for a different strategy. We plan to install a Somali nomadic house, an aqal. Inside the house will be a selection of domestic objects from the contemporary household repertoire. These include such locally produced objects as baskets, leather cases, and mats along with imported goods such as a short wave radio, plastic buckets and rope and an automatic weapon. As this story took shape, some of the American advisors on the extended team felt that the installation of the portable house would be too easily misread by our visitors as an example of a "primitive" dwelling. The Somalis on the extended team, spoke in defense of using the house emphasizing that the aqal and the related domestic objects and the landscape in which it is inscribed resonates as a central symbol of Somali family life, of marriage, history and cultural identity for Somalis no matter where they are living today. The challenge we faced then in thinking about the
Diorama was how to exploit the popular appeal and dramatic potential of the diorama and at the same time transcend a "primitive" trope.

The plan is to install the house and its contents on a platform slightly raised off the floor. No mannequins people the scene. Behind the house are two large scale color photographs taken in the 1980s: one of aqals in the northern Somali landscape and one of a camp's camel herds. One side of the house will be left open, so that its materials, its engineering, and its internal spatial organization becomes visible to the visitor. A series of text labels interprets the house from several perspectives: A label addresses the technology and engineering of the house, and how this sophisticated technical knowledge has been passed through generations of women through practice. Excerpts from Somali poetry and Somali proverbs relate the house to marriage. Labels highlight the organization of space in the camp [the arrangement of houses and corrals] and these spaces are discussed as gendered spaces which are defined and reproduced through everyday practices.

A life size video screen is located just outside the platform, looking into it, but also visible to the museum visitor. In the first three minute video a Somali man and his children will play the role of virtual museum visitors with the house and landscape as the focal point of their conversation. Actual museum visitors will be able to overhear their conversation where the father shares with his children his memories of growing up in Somalia and living in an aqal and what the house means to him. The house in this video is seen from the perspective of a cultural resource that this family can draw upon as it creates a life here in the United States. As this first video fades, a second short video begins. This video will feature the actual reconstruction process of the aqal within the museum by a team consisting of Somali women from the Washington area working with the museum staff. The film will include commentary by the Somali women directing the reconstruction. While this video introduces the museum visitor to the technology of the built structure, it also reveals the exhibit making process. By simultaneously telling different stories about the house—as technologically sophisticated dwelling; as part of a camp which is itself gendered space; as a significant object of memory, and as a museum object—we hope to move the installation of the aqal from a static diorama to a more dynamic dialogic display. The voyeurism inherent in the diorama genre becomes displaced to conversations and practices located in the present and in Washington, D.C.

In planning for this new exhibit, the team needed to address explicitly how this new permanent exhibit could be designed to respond to changing concepts, interests, and themes both within anthropology and cultural history and in terms of its representation of Africa and Africans. The exhibit would need to be conceptualized as a work in progress, rather than a finite product, a philosophy that is foreign to the culture of exhibiting at the Natural History Museum and an anathema to most museum
Fig. 9. — Schematic Drawing of the “African Voices” exhibition, Smithsonian. Opening in late 1999.
administrators. Currently, several areas in the exhibit are scheduled to change on an annual basis. These include a separate gallery space where small temporary exhibits will be installed which will either expand on an aspect of one of the themes or stories in the permanent hall or introduce new themes. The final history moment entitled, Africa Today, is intended to be updated annually in order to present different contemporary issues and perspectives. There is also a changing space in the Global Africa gallery intended to introduce new stories and themes and additional films for the theater are planned for the future. Rather than conceptualizing the exhibit as an end in itself, the team proposed to the museum administration that we create a larger project that would include not only the exhibit, but ongoing public programming, a resource center adjacent to the exhibit hall which could be continually updated, and an electronic outreach which could serve patrons nationally and internationally. These are currently under development. To its credit the current administration has agreed to this larger project, a commitment that will require additional staff and resources. Efforts are now underway to secure an endowment for the Africa project to insure that funds will be available to support the changes within this exhibit and to keep the public programming, resource center and the electronic outreach current. As we move towards an opening in late 1999, I am cautiously optimistic. But, it is also clear to me, given the history of anthropological exhibits at this Museum, that it will take the continued pressure and involvement of stakeholder audiences to keep the museum invested in making critical changes throughout this exhibit in a timely manner.

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NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHIVES
ABSTRACT

The article begins with a brief history of anthropological collections of African material culture at the Smithsonian from the 1860’s to the present. It then analyses the history of permanent African exhibits at the Smithsonian and the relationship of each exhibit to specific anthropological theories. The museum’s first permanent exhibit was on view from the end of the 19th century to the 1960’s. Its second permanent exhibit opened in the late 1960s and was closed in 1992 amid public controversy.

The final section of the article examines the development of the current permanent exhibition, African Voices, which is scheduled to open in late 1999. It explores the issue of representation of Africa and Africans in public museums and examines the development process for the new exhibit. This process has involved the active participation of various stakeholder communities in the conceptualization and realization of the exhibition.

Résumé


Dans la dernière partie est examinée la mise au point de l’exposition permanente, Voix africaines, qui doit ouvrir ses portes à la fin 1999. On y explore la question de la représentation de l’Afrique et des Africains dans les musées publics et on y analyse le processus de préparation de cette nouvelle exposition, lequel a impliqué la participation des différentes parties prenantes à la conception et la réalisation de cette exposition.

Keywords/Mots-clés: African collections, anthropology exhibits, public culture, representations of Africa/Collections africaines, culture, expositions anthropologiques, représentations de l’Afrique, culture.