



**2024 ICOM SOLIDARITY PROJECT:
COMMUNITY-LED TRAINING**

VOLUME 1:
CONSERVATION





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Community-Led Training

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Published by ICOM-CC
Authored by Maggi Loubser and Nancy Mae Collett

Johannesburg, South Africa
2025



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ISBN 978-2-487970-21-2

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INTRODUCTION

Conservation plays an essential role in museums. Collections of all types and materials require technical and cultural understanding in order to preserve artifacts, safeguard cultural heritage, and ensure the longevity of collections.



It can be easy to think of conservation as a series of restrictions about what you should and should not do to care for your collections.

My approach is to think of conservation as a type of lifetime support for the objects and monuments that sustain our shared stories, values and experiences and, at the same time, as an important part of the infrastructure for cultural heritage as a public institution.

Ayesha Fuentes





CONSERVATION IN AFRICA

Image credit: Ebrima Jammeh - National Museum Of The Gambia, Gambia



Preventive vs interventive

Preventive conservation focuses on minimising deterioration and damage before it occurs. This involves controlling environmental conditions, handling procedures, and storage/display practices. Interventive conservation involves direct action on the object or site to repair damage or restore its condition. This might include cleaning, structural repairs, or material stabilisation.



Responsibility & frequency of care

Conservation is a shared responsibility among governments, heritage professionals, communities, and international partners or funders. The frequency of conservation activities often depends on available resources. Regular monitoring and maintenance are essential for preventive care. Interventive treatments are performed as needed, but they can often be left unexecuted due to a lack of funding or skills. This is why it is so important that preventive conservation practices are well established.



Display

The way heritage items are displayed plays a critical role in their conservation. Proper display requires access to funding and expertise. However, display is not just a technical issue—it is also deeply cultural and requires knowledge of local traditions and beliefs. In many African contexts, heritage objects and sites are not simply historical artefacts; they carry living cultural, spiritual, and communal significance.



Conservation really starts with that motivation of wanting to care for something, to maintain it, to keep it accessible.



Stephanie de Roemer

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSERVATION



Image credit: William Tsaka - Jumba Site Museum, Kenya



The whole idea of conserving by removing objects or things from the communities they belong, is an ideology that we need to rethink as museums.

We need to question ourselves: Is that what we really want to do? Because it also begs the question, then, who are we preserving for? Who are we conserving for?



Muthoni Thang'wa



Preserves cultural identity

Safeguards the physical symbols of African history, traditions, and beliefs, reinforcing cultural identity and community pride.



Maintains a connection to the intangible

Protects valuable records of past generations and events, allowing future generations to connect with their heritage.



Supports education

Provides tangible resources for learning about history, art, architecture, and traditional knowledge.



Promotes tourism and employment opportunities

Attracts visitors, generates income, and creates employment opportunities through cultural tourism.



Encourages pride in a unified national heritage

Shared heritage strengthens social cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging across diverse communities.



Fosters unity in conflict

Preserves common cultural symbols and historical narratives that can aid in healing and unity after conflict.



Prevention of physical loss

Ensures there are custodians of important objects.



By encouraging a sense of pride and ownership in their own cultural history, we empower communities as we work with them to actively participate in the preservation and promotion of their own cultural heritage.



David Kojo Derban



COMMON CHALLENGES

Image credit:Hannes Elsenbroek - University of Pretoria Museums, South Africa



It has become essential to step out of our comfort zones as heritage professionals and to step into the role of advocates, to persuade our governments, policymakers, and decision-makers to become more interested in the preservation of cultural property and its actual advantages.

We still need to discover strategies to persuade governments and policies to support the efforts of cultural heritage promotion and preservation in the face of economic challenges.



David Kojo Derban



Lack of funding

Many African countries allocate limited budgets to cultural preservation, making it difficult to maintain and restore heritage sites or train skilled personnel.



Insufficient technical expertise

There is often a shortage of professionals trained in conservation science, heritage management, and traditional restoration techniques.



Lack of emphasis placed on cultural heritage

Inadequate or poorly enforced laws can leave heritage sites vulnerable to destruction, neglect, or unauthorised development.



Urbanisation and infrastructure development

Rapid growth and infrastructure projects can lead to the encroachment on or destruction of historical sites.



Conflict and political instability

Armed conflicts and political unrest have led to the looting, vandalism, or complete loss of significant heritage assets.



Climate change and environmental degradation

Erosion, flooding, desertification, and other environmental impacts threaten the physical integrity of many sites.



Lack of public awareness and community engagement

Without education and community involvement, local populations may not understand the value of heritage sites or participate in their protection. Engaging communities in display decisions helps avoid cultural misrepresentation and builds a sense of ownership and pride. It also strengthens conservation outcomes by fostering greater public interest and responsibility in heritage protection. In this way, display becomes not only a tool for preservation but also a platform for inclusive storytelling, cultural continuity, and education rooted in local perspectives.



It will help us to talk. It will help us to collaborate and interact with each other. You know, the problems we have are problems we share. We have common problems.



Ogechukwu Okpalanozie

THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATION IN AFRICA



Image credit: Muthoni Thang'wa - National Museums of Kenya, Kenya



It's through use that objects are saved. It's through their use that people find value. If objects can be used in exhibitions, in education programs, in research, then that is what gives them the value that leads to their conservation.



Terry Little



Fulfil the need for both specialist and generalist conservators

African museums need both specialist and general conservators because collections are often extremely diverse, ranging from archaeological artefacts and ethnographic objects to paintings, textiles, natural history specimens, and contemporary art. General conservators provide broad preventive care, ensuring that storage, handling, and environmental conditions protect all types of objects. At the same time, specialist conservators bring in-depth expertise and background knowledge about the fabrication of specific objects. Together, conservators ensure that collections are safeguarded holistically and with the required technical precision.



Increase funding and resource allocation

Advocate for prioritisation of cultural heritage in national budgets. Encourage public-private partnerships and international donor support. Develop sustainable tourism models to generate revenue for conservation.



Educate locally

Invest in education and training programs for conservators, archaeologists, and heritage professionals. Create local institutions or strengthen existing ones for conservation research and practice.



Update legal and institutional frameworks

Advocacy for heritage conservation authorities with the legal tools to prevent illegal development, looting, or misuse.



Promote community involvement

Engage local communities in conservation planning and activities by using traditional knowledge and practices where appropriate, ensuring culturally sensitive approaches. Public awareness can be communicated through outreach, education, and participation in heritage management.



Improve documentation and monitoring

Prioritise digitalising document sites and artefacts to prevent information loss. Establishment of regular inspection and monitoring systems to detect early signs of deterioration. Ideas and methods can be shared by the community throughout the continent.



Encourage collaboration

It is imperative to foster partnerships across African countries to share expertise, resources, and best practices. Leverage international networks for advocacy, technical support, and funding when needed. Perhaps most importantly, use local knowledge and skills within practices where possible.



Recognise the value of conservation beyond preservation

Conservation also carries inspirational, statistical, and emotional value, as preserved objects allow future generations to connect with their heritage and history.



There is lots of indigenous knowledge, lots of practices that can still be applied. It just requires a little bit of research into how these practices were used, for what purpose they were used, and how we can still make use of them.



Satish Pandey

CONCLUSION

Heritage conservation is crucial for preserving Africa's cultural identity and history. By protecting monuments, artefacts, and historic sites, we safeguard the stories and traditions that shape communities across the continent. Collaboration is often the answer when dealing with questions around conservation under the sometimes challenging circumstances we face in Africa. With the combined efforts of local communities, governments, and international partners, Africa's rich heritage can be preserved for future generations to appreciate, learn from, and celebrate.



The importance of conservation is essential for preserving the diverse and rich heritage of humanity, ensuring that the knowledge, values, and artistic expressions of past civilisations are protected and passed down to future generations.



Abdullahi Abdulkadir

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