

“AFRICAN VOICES”

Smithsonian Project Brings Africa Alive

by Michael Atwood Mason



Through the centuries, Africans have developed cities and empires, philosophies and religions, technology and trade. Africa's influence today reaches virtually every country and every culture. Humanity began in Africa, and today African voices speak from every corner of the earth. We are fortunate that some of those voices speak through the Smithsonian's *African Voices* Project.

The year 1999 inaugurated the National Museum of Natural History's much anticipated *African Voices* exhibition. After six years of work, the Museum kept its promise to open a hall developed with community input and state of the art museum practices. Key to this effort was a unique collaboration between curators and museum professionals, on the one hand, and an international group of specialists from a wide spectrum of institutions, on the other hand. The new permanent exhibition with its outreach components touching students and teachers throughout the United States expresses a broad consensus on how to represent Africa and the African Diaspora. Through the *African Voices* Project, African voices, original research, and community collaboration united to create a unique and powerful portrait of Africa.

The *African Voices* title reflects a fundamental shift: rather than simply telling the public about Africa, the exhibition and its outreach components literally resound with the words, songs, poems, and proverbs of African people—contemporary and historical. We meet African people and hear their interpretations of their varied histories and cultures. At the same time, the museum exhibition features more than 400 objects, most of which now belong to the Museum's collections, but many of which were collected or commissioned for the exhibition. Objects join with African voices to tell the story of Africa's long and dynamic history as well as its contemporary relevance and vitality. Case studies also present Africa's diversity and global impact. A wide variety of techniques delivers these themes to our audience, primarily families and especially African and African-American families.

A PROCESS OF INCLUSION

In 1993, the Museum organized a series of planning meetings for the new hall of African history and cultures and invited Africanists, African Diasporan scholars, educators, and museum professionals from local, national, and international institutions to

bring their ideas to the table. An intense and lively discussion ensued. Panelists argued that African history had to be central to the exhibition, a history reflecting the fact that African societies were never self-contained enclaves frozen in time or cut off from wider regional or global systems of knowledge and economy. Participants underscored the critical need for the Museum to create an exhibition that would begin to counterbalance the widespread public perceptions of contemporary Africa as a continent of “passive victims,” helplessly plagued by famine, war, poverty, and epidemics.

The panel recommended that the Museum create not only a new permanent exhibition of African history and cultures, but a more comprehensive *African Voices* Project that would include changing exhibitions, a resource and study center, a web site, and broad outreach through public programming including a traveling exhibit. Both the Museum and the panelists agreed that the new permanent exhibition and the larger *African Voices* Project must be developed with the active participation of a broad range of Africans and people of African descent in order that it continue to meet the local, national, and international audiences' cultural and educational needs.

IDEALS INTO REALITY

The first priority of the *African Voices* Project was to realize a new exhibition at the National Museum of Natural History that would communicate the following messages to visitors:

- Africa has a long, rich history.
- Africa today is a dynamic and vital place.
- Africa has always been connected to the rest of the world.

As the project team developed the exhibition, we sought to surprise visitors about Africa and to show Africans as the primary actors in their own lives.

The process ensured the development of a consensus on our representation of Africa and the Diaspora. With exhibition designers, we planned a physical layout that would address our goals. The design of the hall revolves around a conceptually and physically central history pathway of ten key moments in African history, beginning with the emergence of human life in Africa and ending with a moment about contemporary challenges in Africa. Off the history pathway, thematic galleries explore topical issues in African culture that have been and promise to remain important in African life.

We had a clear sense of what we wanted to communicate to the public, but the challenge remained: How to tell the story of an entire continent in a 6,500 square-foot hall? We repeatedly ran up against the physical limitations of the space

and the endurance of the family visitors we had targeted as our primary audience. In the end, we chose to illustrate key concerns with case studies, but the brevity of exhibition texts created real constraints. As happens in many exhibitions, only key ideas could remain in the script, while another set of interpretive ideas remained present but not fully articulated in the exhibition. There were far more stories than we could tell in great depth, and many of the details in the end dropped out of the labels. However, the main messages of the exhibition and the more specific set of interpretive ideas formed an essential part of the conversations during the exhibition development process and informed many of the team's choices for the final script.

The remainder of this article explores the main ideas of each gallery in *African Voices* but also presents this interpretive frame that is only sometimes described in the exhibition text. This article thus brings the content of the exhibition to readers who might not be able to travel to the National Museum of Natural History, and it also elucidates certain interrelationships between stories within the exhibition. In addition, web sites and public programming also bring the exhibition experience to those living far from Washington, D.C.

TWO ORIENTATION ENTRANCES

Visitors enter the hall from two places, with each entrance creating an Orientation section. These orientation areas introduce visitors to the main messages of the exhibition and the physical layout of the hall. Large maps and wall panels stress Africa's diversity. In both Orientations, a large video wall presents a program that has three sections, each stressing the key messages of Africa's diversity, creativity, and global influence. The videos' quick pace communicates the continent's vitality. "Traditional" music fades into contemporary Afro-Pop. Factory workers smile and women with painted faces move to the rhythm. Africans narrate the videos with short statements in the first person.

HISTORY PATHWAY

The two orientations are connected by a long history pathway, titled "A Walk Through Time." This pathway runs down the "spine" of the hall. The ten moments along the pathway trace Africans developing cities and empires, philosophies and religions, and technology and trade through time. Although this open design makes it

difficult to make explicit comparisons between the moments, there are important juxtapositions. For example, the second moment focuses on the development of economic, social, and cultural exchange along the Nile from 3100 B.C. to A.D. 350 including ancient Nubia and Egypt. The third moment explores the emergence of a similar area along the Niger River in West Africa from 200 B.C. to A.D. 1400. Both these moments were characterized by river-based exchange, dynamic economics, the development of specialized labor and new knowledge, and the production of stunning works of art.

Several moments overlap between 1800 and 1900. The "Money Drives the Slave Trade" moment examines the causes and effects of the Atlantic slave trade between 1500 and the 1860s. "Trade Transforms Africa" presents the dramatic changes in trade in central Africa from the early 1800s through the early 1900s. Both these stories demonstrate Africa's connections to the rest of the world, and both show how events on the world stage shifted local economies in Africa toward exports. This tendency was intensified under colonialism, and "Colonialism Yields to Independence" shows European powers setting the rules for the scramble for Africa at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) and Africans responding to colonialism in a variety of ways from the late 1800s through 1990. As a counterpoint to the colonialism moment, "Ethiopia Prevails over Italy" tells the inspiring story of the Ethiopian army's stunning victory over Italian invaders at Adwa in 1896. Because the last two hundred years have seen so much change in Africa, several moments on the history pathway present different aspects of this complex history.

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WORKING IN AFRICA GALLERY

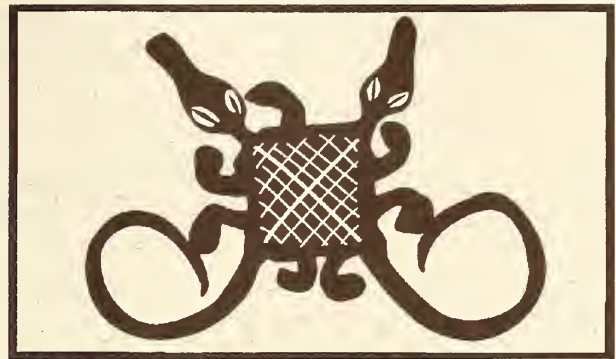
Images of contemporary work in Africa illustrate three important, long-standing technologies—metallurgy, pottery, and agriculture—that have changed the face of the continent. These play and continue to play important roles in Africa. The presentation of agriculture explores the cultural value of agricultural work through headdresses that honor *Ciwara*, the mythical antelope who taught farming to Bamana people in Mali. The headdresses are used in annual festivals to commemorate the importance of agriculture and the ideal qualities of a farmer—strength, tenacity, and grace. Similarly, the exhibition explores African rice cultivation, showing West African farmers who have cultivated a unique variety of rice (*Oryza sativa*) for over 3,000 years, experimenting to create strains that thrive on hillsides, swamps, flood plains, and coastal estuaries. In the 1700s, African rice farmers were enslaved and their expertise exploited to work rice plantations in the Americas. In addition to the presentation on metallurgy, pottery, and agriculture, a video and photo murals show the diversity of modern work in Africa.

MARKET CROSSROADS GALLERY

Rather than create a generic and timeless market as seen in many museums, this installation recreates the “31 December Makola Market” in Accra, Ghana, as it existed in 1996. Visitors meet four vendors who worked in the market at that time and hear them talk about the importance and value of their work. For example, Ernestina Quacoopome and her daughter Marjorie Borchway sell Ghana’s classic blue-and-white cloth. Marjorie uses skills she learned in secretarial school to help her mother manage the business. They make a monthly contribution to a revolving credit organization and every two years receive about \$5,000 to buy cloth in bulk. Women selling yams, housewares, and kola nuts each discuss their work, as a large video screen fills the gallery with the sounds and movement of the market.

WEALTH IN AFRICA GALLERY

In Africa, wealth takes many forms: money, knowledge, and connections among people. These different notions of wealth as well as the movement of goods and ideas are important concepts for understanding African cultures. A brightly colored, jumbo jet coffin used by Ga people celebrates various kinds of wealth and is a major feature of this section of the exhibit. A luxury item costing approximately \$400, the coffin represents a significant expense to honor important people who have “joined the ancestors.” While these coffins take many forms,



This image from an Akan gold weight from Ghana represents two crocodiles with one stomach. It alludes to a proverb: “They share the same stomach yet they fight over food.”

each one reminds the family, friends, and colleagues of the accomplishments of the deceased. A successful international business person might be buried in a jumbo jet. The mother of many children might be buried in a chicken coffin, complete with many chicks. At the funeral, the coffin is carried by friends, family, and supporters through town to the cemetery for a Christian burial. The greater the number of people in the funeral procession, the greater the evidence for the deceased’s “wealth in people.” The procession makes real the Akan proverb: “Everyone helps carry the burden of a funeral.”

LIVING IN AFRICA GALLERY

The diverse living spaces people create and inhabit in Africa tell us a great deal about their values and their daily lives. Portable nomadic houses from Somalia are contrasted with longstanding stone architecture in Zanzibar. Today in easternmost Africa about 60 percent of Somali people are nomadic herders. Central to the culture that has evolved around herding are the portable houses called *aqal*. The houses belong to women, and a Somali proverb says “A man without a wife is a man without a house.” Next to the *aqal* on display stands a life-size video featuring two Somali-Americans discussing their memories of living in *aqals* and the meanings of these houses in their lives. The next installation features massive wooden doors from Zanzibar, Tanzania. In this coastal city, which dates from the 18th century, merchant families commissioned massive, intricate, hand-carved doors to display and enjoy their wealth. Many of the historic buildings in this ancient city are built from coral bricks. Rural and urban, nomadic and sedentary, these contrasts underscore the diversity of living spaces and ways of life in Africa today.

KONGO CROSSROADS

Connecting the “Living in Africa” and “Global Africa” galleries, this crossroads space focuses on important values that sustained Kongo people in Africa and the Americas. Kongo-speaking people have long lived in a region north and south of the mouth of the Congo River. Their religion, like many in Africa, revolves around venerating the ancestors. The gallery floor has a brass circle cut by a cross: This *dikenga* symbol embodies a crossroads where the living can meet the ancestors. It also represents the sun’s daily movements—sunrise, noon, sunset, and night—and the soul’s journey through life—birth, adulthood, death, and ancestorhood. This symbol can be seen in the cylindrical medicine pack on the belly of a female *minkisi*, a power figure used to direct the ancestors’ power into solving everyday problems.

This gallery also shows Africa’s connection to the rest of the world. A Kongo crucifix from the early 19th century shows Christianity’s long-standing influence in Central Africa; in fact, Kongo King Afonso I converted to Christianity in 1509. Similarly, because Central Africa was the source for approximately 40% of all people enslaved in the Atlantic Slave Trade, traces of many Central African cultures, including Kongo, appear around the Americas. A Brazilian metal sculpture collected for the exhibition in 1996 clearly shows the *dikenga* symbol. Identified as a Kongo symbol by Brazilian followers of the African-based religion *Candomblé*, the symbol is incorporated into altar sculptures used to honor the indigenous spirits of Brazil. While the meaning of the symbol has changed somewhat, the form remains unchanged and is still used to call upon the ancestors.

GLOBAL AFRICA GALLERY

For millennia, Africans have dispersed around the world, creating a community called the African Diaspora. While the dispersion of Africans had its tragic peak in the Atlantic Slave Trade (1502-1860s), a map in this gallery shows major historical African journeys. The map begins with Hannibal leading his North African army against Rome and ends with the recent migration of Africans to Europe, Australia, and the United States.

Another installation tells of the horrors of being enslaved: visitors can hear the voices of people



The crosses and circles in this contemporary image from the Democratic Republic of Congo evoke physical and spiritual crossroads for many kiKongo-speaking people.

enslaved in the United States. Their stories were collected by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s, and former slaves speak of the violence, indifference, and cruelty of slavery.

For generations, scholars believed that the horrors of the Middle Passage destroyed all African culture in the enslaved. However, recent research has shown conclusively that enslaved people brought whole cultural systems with them to the Americas. One example is the Afro-Brazilian religion *Candomblé*, and the hall includes a large display about this complex tradition thriving in Brazil today. The installation introduces visitors to the African deities through objects and narratives. Quotes from a leading priestess and a young artist in the tradition convey its meaning and vitality.

The Freedom Theater includes two dramatic videos that convey stories that we could not tell through any other means. *The Atlantic Slave Trade* tells the story of the “Other Mayflower,” a slave ship that brought enslaved people to Virginia in the 1720s, and a Muslim rebellion in Bahia, Brazil. Both stories focus on the ways in which enslaved people created community and resisted their oppression. *The Struggle For Freedom* 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 Liberation Movement in South Africa. The videos emphasize

the human dimension of these powerful stories—the struggle for freedom and self-determination.

FOR TEACHER AND STUDENTS

To guarantee that *African Voices* remains fresh for years to come, the exhibition design includes three changing exhibitions within the hall. From the beginning, the *African Voices* Project staff recognized that the exhibition alone could not tell the whole story of Africa. Therefore, public programming and outreach efforts complement the exhibition. Through films, lectures, hands-on workshops, teacher training opportunities, performances, web sites, and a smaller poster version of the exhibit, the museum is bringing the rich resources of the project to a broad audience. Through these multiple opportunities, Americans throughout the country will be able to meet Africans and people of African descent to learn about their lives, their cultures, and their histories.

- African Voices Web Site: This web site, already the subject of much praise, combines a great deal of content with a very interactive design. The site reproduces most of the content of the exhibition: A “History” tab leads to the stories on the history pathway, and the “Themes” tab opens onto the galleries presented here. Visit the site at <http://mnh.si.edu/africanvoices>
- Curriculum Materials: Public school teachers are working with exhibit developers to design educational materials for grades 6-12.

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NEW TEACHING PUBLICATION

History Beneath the Sea: Nautical Archaeology in the Classroom. Edited by KC Smith and Amy Douglass. Society for American Archaeology. 28 pp. 2001. \$4.95 for SAA members, \$5.95 for non-members.

History Beneath the Sea is a new teaching module that explores the role watercraft played in the global spread of people, products, ideas, and animal and plant life through the research of nautical archaeologists. Nautical archaeology is the study of “material remains, technologies, and traditions relating to ships and the seas—from wrecks and vessel construction to lighthouses, trade routes, and coastal communities.”

The volume provides an overview of nautical archaeology, followed by short articles about four notable shipwrecks, including the Civil War submarine the *H.L. Hunley*, located off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina in 1995. One-page readings, “Dive into Details,” on such topics as artifact conservation and the *Titanic*, are designed to help students improve literacy skills through the use of historical content.

History Beneath the Sea is a valuable educational resource for secondary-level educators who teach history, social studies, and science. Classroom activities, including a strategy for conducting a simulated excavation; recommended books and teaching manuals; a glossary; and a list of related organizations and web sites round out this introduction to nautical archaeology for educators and students.

The Society for American Archaeology (SAA), Public Education Committee prepared this *Teaching with Archaeology* education module. To order *History Beneath the Sea*, contact:

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