GHANA: ARISE TO SAVE YOUR NATIONAL MUSEUM FROM DECAY FOR POSTERITY

ADDRESS FROM ART TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION OF GHANA (ATAG) DELIVERED BY DR OSUANYI QUAICOO ESSEL, NATIONAL PRESIDENT OF ATAG, ON MAY 18, 2020 IN COMMEMORATION OF INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM DAY

Fellow Ghanaian citizens, The Art Teachers' Association of Ghana (ATAG) greets you all for your endearing love for the nation. On this special day set aside for awareness creation about the great importance of museums in historical, educational and socio-cultural development of nations, we, The Art Teachers' Association of Ghana, join hands with the International Council of Museums (ICOM) to celebrate this special day on the theme Museums for Equality: Diversity and Inclusion. We celebrate all Ghanaian museum staff whether working in public or private institution, dead or alive. Congratulations for your efforts!

In celebrating this day, it important to take stock of the progress of Ghana's National Museum since its official opening on March 5, 1957 in order to know its current state of affairs as well as the current state of the regional museums. This will inform us to know whether or not the core mandate for the establisment of the museums have been fulfiled.

This address basically focuses on the idea of African Museums before the Birth Christ; why the need for establishing Ghana National Museum; brief history of the national museum; major challenges of the Ghana's National Musuem; and the way forward.

Idea of African Museums Before the Birth Christ

The concept of storing artworks in special buildings to protect them for historical, socio-emotional and cultural purposes have roots in Africa, but the narrative has not been represented as such. It is evident that centuries before the birth of Christ, Africans had built about One-Hundred and Six (106) spectacular architecture called pyramids in Khemet. Khemet is the original name of Egypt. It was later named Egypt by the Greeks. These pyramids were built in about 2800 before Christ. About Two-Hundred (200) pyramids were also built in Sudan and Nubia. The building of the pyramids, amongst other things, was to 'keep the dead alive' through the Arts by keeping physical evidence of past and present of the 'Dead' for posterity. The belongings, artefacts, the artistic life and heroic deeds of the dead were preserved in the pyramids. In this sense, the pyramids served as museums. The idea of 'museum' was therefore, influenced by the construction and purpose of pyramids. Again, the narrative has been associated with Greek mythology. Egyptian concept of 'museum' was fueled by belief in Life-after-death, a belief common to Africans.

Why the need for establishing Ghana National Museum

Museums serve as the **powerhouse** of a nation's material and non-material cultural history. Museums are duty bounded to identify, collect, document and preserve the artistic heritage and culture of their respective countries in which they are established. The task of museums is to consolidate and display its exhibits for public education, entertainment and other relevant purposes. Engagement with the museum exhibits help to shape identities. Based on the historical, socio-emotional, political and cultural benefits of museums, the Ghana National Museum was established and opened to the public on 5th March 1957.

Just a year of its existence (that was in 1958), the hardworking Ghana Museum and Monument Board and the then Ministry of Education planned of widening the scope of the museum with particular reference to its Research programme and 'usefulness to a country which … [was] fast developing.' They, therefore, **proposed the extension of the Museum building**. They proposed a storey building which included a library, conservation laboratories, ethnography section, archeology section, a 500-seater conference hall and office spaces for administration purposes as well as LECTURE THEATRE.

Fifty-Four (54) years after the overthrow of President Kwame Nkrumah who initiated this project, the construction of the main museum buildings near the temporal structure is still at the foundation stage. The place has become an abode for squatters. It has been left into ruins. The extension plan has still not been constructed.Interestingly, Ghana National Museum is one of the oldest museums in West Africa.

The Ghana National Museum in Accra still inhabits the 1957 temporal building structure which was meant to be one the galleries of the original structure. Sadly, this temporal structure leaks, making the collections unsafe. On December 24, 2015, this National Gallery of the Ghana Museums was closed to refurbish the leakages when it rains. Sadly, due to **lack of political will, the renovation which began in 2015 has not been completed till date.** In addition to the Ghana National Museum, is the Museum of Science and Technology (MST) near Accra Technical University (formerly called Accra poly). **This museum also leaks.**

Fellow citizens, you may be wondering, if this is the condition faced by National Museums cited in the capital of the nation, what then is the situation of those outside the capital? There are also regional museums which are unfortnately inhabiting castles and forts which were not meant as museum buildings. They are Volta Regional Museum, Ho (1973); Cape Coast Castle Museum, (1974); St. George's Castle (Elmina Castle) Museum (1997); Ussher Fort Museum (2007); and Fort Apollonia Museum of Nzema Culture and History (2010). Museums building are well planned and constructed such that the amount of air that enters is restricted in order not to destroy the exhibits. The forts and castles in themselves are monuments and need to be protected.The reasons for the establishment of regional museum was to:

- speed up greatly the work of collecting specimen of indigenous craftworks and artworks.
- to encourage people to cultivate the habit of, and to take pride in, donating specimens for the National collection instead of selling them to tourists; and
- for the people of Ghana to learn about their cultural heritage.

Fellow citizens, it would surprise you to know that the Ghana National Museum is older than some Asiatic museums including National Art Museum of China (NAMOC). The construction of National Art Museum of China began in 1958, and was completed and opened to the public in 1963 under the Chairmanship of Mao Zedong, The museum is a national cultural landmark after foundation of the People's Republic of China. The building, with 21 exhibition halls in its 6 stories, covers an area of more than 18,000 square meters. The museum boasts of an exhibition area of 6,660 square meters. The robust development of National Art Museum of China benefits greatly from the support of the central government and the direct leadership of the Chinese Ministry of Culture. The government has established a special collection fund, which laid a solid foundation for the museum's collection of art treasure. Yet, Ghana National Museum was opened in 1957. What lesson can the nation learn from this? When will our leaders develop the political will to complete buiding our national museum and start to build a National Art Gallery?

Major challenges of the Ghana National Museum

The museum is facing leadership deficiency; has magnificent physical infrastructural deficit; serious funding problems; lacks proper branding strategy; and obsolete laws. Sometimes the degree of neglect of historical documentation seemingly causes the colonialists to say unkind and false things about us as a people. Desipte the glaring historical feats and richness of Africans, the Colonialists painted a sad picture about Africa which needs to be demystified. The Arabs came to Africa 700 AD yet the Encyclopedia Britannica (1910, p. 326) wrote that:

"… with the exception of the lower Nile valley and what is known as Roman Africa …, is, so far as its native inhabitants are concerned, a continent practically without a history, and possessing no records from which such a history might be reconstructed." Frobenius (1913, p. 2) also wrote that "… Africa is poorer in recorded history than can be imagined. 'Black Africa' 'is a Continent which has nor mystery, nor history!" He added that:

> "If the soil of Africa is turned up today by the colonist's ploughshare, no ancient weapon will lie in the furrow ; if the virgin soil be cut by a canal, its excavation will reveal no ancient tomb, and if the axe effects a clearance in the primeval forests, it will nowhere ring upon the foundations of an old-world palace."

But the reality is that among the exhibits of the Ghana National Museum, are works dating as far back as 4000 BC. Our museum must reorient us because we have been disoriented. There is so much good things about Africa and Ghana for that matter, to say that has not been said.

Besides, there is so much that has been said about Africa that need to be REFUTED. Our museum must let us know our past, current realities to shape our future.

What is the way forward?

One of the solution to the problems of the Ghana National Museum is proactive and action-oriented leadership. Such leadership is need to address the challenges of physical infrastructure, obsolete laws, funding concerns, and introduce a good branding strategy.

We, the Art Teachers' Association of Ghana craves the indulgence of the media to proritise and show interest in bringing out issues of the museum as well as Art related issues since it boils down on national identity, public art education and enculturation of the current and future generations. The media have demonstated this level of proactiveness in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and would definitely contribute in this regard. May God protect us all as we follow the guidelines and protocols for our safety and welbeing as we traverse through these difficult times of COVID-19 pandemic.

Our national Museum must reflect our varied artistic cultures, and be a powerhouse of our art history and identity.

Long Live Ghana,

Long Live the Art Teachers' Association of Ghana

Thank you for your audience.