CHAPTER 5

Exhibiting the Nation

In their quest to gain complete independence from Europe and to consolidate the new nations, nationalist leaders and adherents of the négritude movement, such as Aimé Césaire (Martiniquan poet, intellectual and politician), Léopold Sédar Senghor (the first president of Senegal), as well as Kwame Nkrumah (who advanced the ideology of the African Personality), sought to highlight the common cultural and political history of Africa. The positive aspects of black history and culture were articulated through their individual writings, speeches, and political activities. Being an avid reader and the author of over 20 books, Nkrumah had a special penchant for the role of history, particularly that of Africa, in the nation-building process. He also understood that nations construct museums to preserve and display their glorious historical past, expressive culture, and traditions for the citizenry and the world to memorialize and celebrate. The best examples of this for Nkrumah were the British Museum and the Smithsonian Museum, which developed displays relating not only to the respective past of their own countries, but also the continent to which they belong, as well as the peoples whom they had ruled or from whom they had descended. In 1956, Prime Minister Nkrumah paid a visit to Egyptologist Pahor Labib at the Coptic Museum in Cairo and was given a tour of the museum.

African nationalists used the continent’s past as a source of legitimacy, cultural integrity, and socioeconomic benefit for their governments, which they insisted was rooted in a long and glorious history. Hence, several countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Chad, Botswana, South Africa, Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana constructed or modified national museums, which exhibited important archaeological finds, antiquities, monuments, and cultural relics. Many of these relics also found their way onto national stamps. As Posnansky argues, “Stamp images of monuments, rock art, antiquities, and fossils emphasized the historical depth of culture in newly
minted nations.” For example, Gabon, Guinea, and Mozambique issued stamps with images of traditional masks. Stamps from Togo and Dahomey (Benin) featured images of traditional architecture such as the Tamberma and Somba houses typical of both countries, and the Musée d’Abomey or royal palace of Dahomey (Benin) issued stamps in 1970 celebrating “Dahomean Kings.” Guinea-Conakry issued stamps in 1962 with the theme “Martyrs and Heroes of Africa.” A 1978 stamp from Niger featured the image of a traditional Griot—Africa’s oral historians, praise singers, and royal publicists who retold and translated the exploits of African kings from generation to generation to the people.

Colonial Legacy and the Ghana National Museum

The African museum as a public institution, according to Adedze, is a legacy of colonialism, which, like the colonial state itself, existed for a relatively short period of time. The colonial museum preserved and exhibited African material culture for a European audience. Similar to European trade and colonial exhibitions that were held in the early 1900s, the objects in the colonial museum exhibited and emphasized European ideas about African racial, sociocultural, economic, and political inferiority, and justified the need for a European civilizing mission to redress these ills.

The National Museum of Ghana started out with a “triple heritage,” to borrow a term often used by the Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui: archaeological objects inherited from the British colonial state; objects donated by (mainly Akan) chiefs and other traditional leaders; and objects of modernity, including the very building in which these objects were housed. The first set of objects was an assemblage of material cultural items deposited by British military commander and explorer Sir James Willocks in the administration building at Achimota College. Willocks donated several items from his private collection that he had acquired from the Gold Coast, Africa, Burma, and India. In 1929, he donated weaponry such as spears, swords, cutlasses, and guns to the Gold Coast colonial administration. Other cultural, material, and archaeological finds from the Gold Coast and Dependencies—such as minerals, rocks, Asante goldweights, pottery, calabashes, spears, polished stone axes, and photographs—were later added to the Achimota collection. Many of these other exhibits came from the the Gold Coast Geological Survey Department as well as the Museum of Archaeology, which was established in 1951 and placed