RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inherited “Ancestors’ Collections” of a Devoted Curator: The Museum of African Heritage in Georgetown, Guyana

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This essay traces the development of the Museum of African Heritage (MAH) in Guyana, which opened in 1994. The vision for the Museum, however, emerged over a decade earlier within contexts of decolonial cultural nationalist movements in the circum-Caribbean and African diasporic world at large. Exploring particular histories and contemporary functioning of this museum reveals insights into cultural politics of Guyana’s postcolonial nationalist formations, as well as into ways in which museums navigate their often-incongruous political and cultural roles in societies.

Museum Director, Jenny Daly, has since the MAH’s inception been the main force behind this institution. Understanding this Museum’s past and current relationships to cultural-nationalist struggles is instructive for historians of Caribbean politics, Africanist scholars, and museologists more generally. Noting how Daly describes her own professional and personal growth realized through relationships forged with artists, their works, and their various communities of engagement can be illuminating. Daly recalls how art served as an effective medium through which she began to engage meaningfully with aspects of her own ancestral heritages, recognizing a profound correspondence between her involvement with the arts and with local Guyanese iterations of African-derived religiosity. Performing and visual arts provide conceptual and practical bridges between African-inflected expressions of devotion, which are generally marginalized in Guyanese society, and positive self-conceptions among African Guyanese individuals and communities. Through didactic means, art holds potentials to demystify stigmatized culture. The MAH is especially well-situated to harness such educational capacities of art, making African Guyanese histories and cultural expressions more accessible to all.

Keywords: Museum of African Heritage; Guyana; Museums; Komfa (Comfa); Obeah

In 1985 Ms. Jenny Daly was first brought to the no-longer inhabited home at 13 Barima Avenue that was later to become the Museum of African Heritage. She was taken to this quiet street in the residential Bel Air Park neighborhood of Georgetown, Guyana’s capital city, to view a collection of African artworks acquired by the national government some years prior.¹ The works were stored in conditions Ms. Daly described to me as “just built up in a room, with dust and these sort of things.”² Working at the time as a Secretary at Guyana’s E. R. Burrowes School of Art, she found herself immersed in a generative cultural and political world of local artists and their emerging student disciples. Yet, on that initial visit to Barima Avenue, she had not foreseen the transformations both she and the space were to encounter through her later appointment in 1985 as head Administrator of this special home-turned-museum (Figures 1 and 2).

The MAH has grown considerably in its reach since its beginnings. Through employing innovative community programming and engagement strategies, the MAH is today a thriving cultural institution serving many valuable functions throughout Georgetown and Guyana more widely. To better understand these various roles the MAH currently serves for Guayanese people, and expatriate visitors, let us explore historical currents guiding the Museum’s creation. Attention

¹ The MAH was originally called the Museum of African Art and Ethnology until 2001 when it was given its current name. A more exact account of the timing of the transaction between Nicholson and the Guyanese government was unavailable. Ms. Daly stated that when she first saw the collection it was sometime in 1985, and that the house and works were "purchased from [Nicholson] years before...in 1979 or ’80." Newspaper coverage of the MAH’s opening, and subsequent sources, state that a majority of the original collections were "purchased from Guyanese archaeologist H. H. Nicholson by the government in 1985" ("African Icons" 1994).
² Interviews with Ms. Daly and other MAH staff took place from January–April 2017.
will be drawn to meaningful relationships between curators and collections, artists and their patron-communities, and museums and their visitors as important to a museum dedicated to representing the heritages of African and African-descended people in Guyana, as a country wrought of colonialism, slavery, and plantation capitalism in some of the most inhumane of forms. Ms. Daly’s conviction that it is Guyanese peoples’ ancestors—including her own—whose objects continue to be nurtured, added to, and visited at the MAH is a powerful sentiment directing her work at the Museum.

Although Ms. Daly has recently retired, she continues to lead day-to-day operations at the MAH while training her rising protégés. She seemed glad to sit and reminisce with me about the Museum’s and her own personal histories, especially as they relate to political and cultural movements during Guyana’s post-independence nation-building era. Recognizing Ms. Daly’s contributions in nearly singlehandedly spearheading the establishment and ongoing functioning of this cultural institution is vital. It is also instructive, however, for museologists, Africanist scholars, and historians
of Guyanese politics to pay attention to this museum’s development, including the ways Ms. Daly describes her own personal growth realized through relationships forged with artists, their works, and their communities of engagement—both past and present—that she speaks of with such passion.

Running the MAH for more than three decades has enriched Ms. Daly’s life in important ways. She is compelled by the impact art and artists have in engaging museum patrons and Guyanese society directly. Ms. Daly relates the devotion she feels for her work, and that upliftment she and others receive from her devoted efforts, to “a life’s calling” which “mysteriously” unfolded before her, to borrow her own terms. It was her appreciation of art’s powers to evoke suppressed cultural knowledge and facilitate senses of community belonging that initially struck her as so impactful. Similarly, she began to recognize a profound correspondence between her own growing involvement with the arts, especially those from Africa (with her new appointment at the MAH), and local Guyanese iterations of African-derived religiosity. Ms. Daly explained to me that for herself and others with whom she has discussed such matters, art has served as an effective medium through which she has come to engage aspects of her ancestral heritages.

Ms. Daly sees both performing and visual arts as conceptual and practical bridges between African-inflected expressions of devotion, however marginalized in Guyanese society, and positive self-conceptions among African Guyanese individuals and communities. Art has the potential to demystify stigmatized cultural knowledge and practices. Ms. Daly and others working at the MAH recognize a need to harness this educational capacity of art towards not only teaching non-Guyanese visitors about Guyanese pasts and contemporary practices, but also to make Guyanese—and African Guyanese cultural histories in particular—accessible to Guyanese people themselves.

**Ghosts of Colonialism**

Ms. Daly is of African descent, as are roughly 35–45 percent of Guyanese people. Through the course of our conversations it quickly became apparent that she possesses a keen awareness of the ways in which African-derived cultural features are understood in Guyanese society, or what gets perceived as “African culture,” in Guyana. As anthropologist Brackette Williams (1991: 193) writes of Guyana’s racialized social order inherited as a “hegemonic ghost” of colonialism, “all non-Europeans and some Europeans (that is, Portuguese) who managed to acquire the economic prerequisites for entry into the middle- and upper-class ranks and who hoped to have their accomplishments recognized had to adopt Anglo-European cultural practices as the standard against which their class-position claims would be judged.” Williams (1991: 194) observes further that, “consequently, individuals who aimed to become respectable members of the middle and upper classes took on, as they moved up the ladder, the practices and symbolic representations of English culture as the homogenous standard of civilized conduct.” These colonial and “neo-post colonial” moralized valuations of ethnic and racial hierarchies worked to malign not only Africans and African-descended peoples, but also delegitimized their cultural practices and those thought to derive from Africa. Such “ghosts” of colonial thinking are what allow many Guyanese today to overlook significant historical circumstances of their country's pasts, and, as Williams (1991: 183) writes, to 'consider African culture (or Africans' lack of culture) to be responsible for what they see as the Africans’ slow economic progress and their alleged insignificant contribution to the overall economic development of Guyana.’ That enslaved Africans contributed immensely to the creation of colonial Guyana, reportedly excavating “100 million tons of soil” by hand and bucket to establish the still-functioning sea defenses and irrigation canals of Guyana’s below-sea-level coastal plantations (Rodney 1981: 3), is a reality shrouded by generations of European-imported racial ideologies.

3 According to the most recently published national census, which was conducted in 2012, of roughly 750,000 people, 29.25% self-identify as “African/Black” and 19.88% as “Mixed.” The majority of Guyana’s population, at 39.83%, descend from people who emigrated from South Asia, who are popularly and officially in census data termed “East Indian.” Indigenous “Amerindians” comprise 10.51% of the population, “Portuguese” .26%, “Chinese” .18%, “White” .06%, and .03% “Other” (Bureau of Statistics 2016: 4).

4 Like their “East Indian” and Chinese counterparts, Portuguese, primarily from Madeira, came to colonial Guyana (or then British Guiana) as indentured laborers in the period immediately following the abolition of slavery in Britain’s colonies in 1838. Indentureship provided a means for British plantation elites to replace their previous labor source of enslaved Africans and undermine the newly-freed Africans’ mandated wages and thus livelihoods. In this period, African people were also indentured and brought to Guyana (then British Guiana, see note 9 below) and neighboring European colonies. See Hossein (2016: 51–52); and Schuler (2002).

5 Analogous arguments regarding South Asians’ devaluation within Guyana’s colonial social order, and accommodations to it, are relevant here, if space allowed. See, for example, Carter and Torabully’s (2002) compelling anthropology interrogating social status among South Asian diaspora plantation laborers, or “Coolies,” and their descendants. For a relevant discussion of “nationalisms” and their relationships to concepts of culture and to “neo-post colonialisms,” see Williams (1993), although Williams uses this last formulation in a slightly more tailored version than I employ the concept here.

6 To prevent confusion, I have used the spelling “Guyana” throughout this essay to refer to the area that officially became Guyana in 1966 after independence from Britain. Prior to 1966, and beginning in 1831 when Britain united three former Dutch colonies (Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo), the colony was officially called British Guiana. “Guyana” is commonly said to be an indigenous Amerindian word meaning “land of many waters,” although linguistic interpretations vary (see Marco 2013).
Debates over which ethnic or racial group “contributed” what to Guyana’s “development” and ongoing “progress” are ever-present features of Guyanese social and political life. Yet, such racialized conceptions of Guyanese national identity continue to obscure “African,” “East Indian,” “Amerindian,” and other non-Anglo-European economic and cultural inputs. Countering such processes of racial subjugation and cultural homogenization, Ms. Daly sees in her work at the MAH an opportunity to learn for and about herself, and to learn from and teach others about African and African Guyanese cultures. It is the propensity for art to educate and raise cultural and historical consciousness inside and out of the museum that Ms. Daly and her colleagues perceive as the real virtue of their jobs as curators and arts educators. As she explains, her work at the MAH is much less an occupation than a “spiritual” practice, and one deeply rooted in her understanding of herself as an African Guyanese proud to identify with her heritage. “Being a part of the African culture you get to know thyself, you get to know yourself, self, right,” she told me. “You get to know the inner, more deeper spirituality of you and our people, very few will accept it and would come and embrace it, not everybody.” For Ms. Daly and other Guyanese then, “being a part of the African culture” is not only about having African ancestry but about appropriating for oneself what that ancestry comes to mean in one’s own life today. In the process, “Africa” is continually invented to meet new needs (Mudimbe 1994), over and above what the designation may mean regarding particular histories of enslavement and with reference to African lands of origin.

The MAH’s head Curator, Latifah Elliott, an historian with a degree from the University of Guyana who has been with the Museum since 2014, shared similar sentiments. “All the teachings of slavery and colonialism are still here,” Ms. Elliott told me, “and it’s divide and rule, and everything that is Black is bad. People are ashamed to wear their African clothes and prints, and Indians wear their shalwars anytime.” Through the arts, however, Ms. Daly and Ms. Elliot have both seen increasing interest and participation in MAH activities by Guyanese of African heritage and not, seeking to better understand African cultures as part of their own acceptable and embraceable ancestral or national backgrounds. According to Ms. Elliott, in recent years Guyana’s national education curriculum at primary, secondary, and tertiary school levels has not prioritized history as a valued subject to be taught or learned. A once robust history program at the University of Guyana is currently languishing (Hinds 2015b). Cultural institutions such as the MAH have worked to fill an unfortunate pedagogical gap while countering Eurocentric historical narratives dominant in Guyanese society, following from the Anglo-European “ghost of hegemony” of which Brackette Williams (1991) writes. As Ms. Elliot told me, her main objective is “teaching youth their own culture, because they want to know their history including but beyond slavery and indenture, the ancient cultures they come from.”8 Inspiring young people and old to engage with and embrace their own marginalized cultural inheritances is part of what Ms. Daly describes as learning to “know thyself,” a process the MAH helps cultivate in visitors and staff alike.

Philip Moore’s Cuffy Monument
There is one person Ms. Daly sees as having the most memorable influence on her development as an arts educator and museologist of African arts: distinguished Guyanese artist Philip Alphonso Moore (Figure 3). Ms. Daly confided in me that it was also Moore who first inspired her to live her life as a “spiritual person,” a phrase many Guyanese use to identify themselves with Spiritualist, Faithist, or Komfa (or Comfa) practices. These are composed of people from a broad array of ethnic cultural heritages, but are primarily engaged by and considered to derive from those of African heritages. The most well-known form of such African Guyanese devotional idioms is commonly referred to as the Jordanite—or White Robe—movement, and, in his day, Philip Moore was among the most prominent members. Moore is an artist of national and international renown whose works are popularly associated with complex invocations of local Guyanese religious and philosophical understandings, and he served as a mentor encouraging Ms. Daly through her spiritual and professional life. “Philip used to be at the Museum practically every day,” she recalled. And although Moore passed in 2012, Ms. Daly continues to describe him as a guiding source of inspiration and fortitude—an ancestor, as she says.

Philip Moore was a Senior Tutor and artist-in-residence at Guyana’s E. R. Burrowes School of Art while Jenny Daly was working there in the 1980s as a secretary under the national Ministry of Culture. While Moore was a highly recognized artist in Guyana, he also taught at numerous international institutions, including at Princeton University in the 1970s (Rajer 1998). Within Guyana, however, Moore is best known for creating one of Georgetown’s most visible landmarks: a large bronze statue in the center of the city commemorating an historically crucial rebellion whereby in 1763 enslaved

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7 Williams’s (1991; 1993) work is instructive in charting ways in which such colonially conceived thinking lives on well into the 1970s, when she conducted fieldwork, in Guyanese people’s everyday interactions. However, see Jackson (2005; 2012) for reformulated and expanded applications of frameworks Williams developed.

8 On Guyanese immigration and labor histories, see note 5 above.

9 The word Komfa/Comfa (and related spellings) is thought to derive from the Twi word Okomfo, which among Akan people of present-day Ghana means “priest” (Allsopp 1996: 165; and Moore 1995: 138). The term is also related to the Akan and specifically Asante lineage of ritual specialists who trace their legitimacy to late-seventeenth-century culture hero Osei Tutu’s partner and “priest,” Okomfo Anoyye (McCaskie 1986). For variations on interpreting the roots of the term, see de Barros (2004: 40); and Schuler (2002: 346n57). For relevant discussions of Guyanese Spiritualist, Faithist, Komfa/Comfa, Jordanite, and related devotional practices, see Asantewa (2009, 2016); Gibson (1992, 2001, 2013); Peretz (2015); and Roback (1973, 1974).
Africans successfully gained control of the then Berbice colony from Dutch colonizers for over eleven months. The events of 1763 constituted what some historians consider a revolution, and may have been the most significant rebellion of enslaved Africans in the Americas prior to the Haitian Revolution of 1792–1804 (King 1966). Unveiled on 23 May 1976, to mark Guyana’s tenth anniversary of national independence from Britain, Moore’s statue is popularly called “Cuffy” or “Kofi” after the leader of the Berbice “uprising,” an Akan man born on what was then the Gold Coast and today known as Ghana (Konadu 2010: 144) (Figure 4). After independence, “Cuffy” was made Guyana’s first national hero by then Prime Minister Forbes Burnham. Yet, the statue in Georgetown said to depict the revolutionary leader is understood more ambiguously by today’s city residents. Curator Latifah Elliot told me that a wooden replica of “Cuffy” on display at the MAH draws considerable attention from visitors, especially children, who she said enjoy the opportunity for a close-up view of the statue’s layered intricacies (Figure 5).

As Shona Jackson (2005: 86) writes of Guyana’s political past, “shortly before independence,” and again directly prior to Burnham’s death in 1985 (see Majeed 2005), “the two leading political black and East Indian figures for much of the twentieth century, Forbes Burnham and Cheddi Jagan, respectively, once shared the hope of a unified politicocultural vision for the nation.” By the mid-1970s, however, the “erection of the statue in Cuffy’s honor became not just a symbol of the country’s long history of anti-colonial struggles. It also symbolized the consolidation of Afro-Creole nationalism in the country” (Jackson 2005: 86). Leading up to the 1997–1998 national elections, as a time of increased racial animosities and violence, the Cuffy statue “was routinely defamed by the dumping of trash at its base” (ibid). Moore’s Cuffy monument, which “would have been [the] most significant, single symbol” of a “shared national vision,” grew to reflect through its defamation “the problem for unified national representation in the country” (ibid). Guyanese people’s varying understandings of “Cuffy” have also been associated with the artist’s, the national hero’s, and national leaders’ connections to Guyana’s Jordanite and Spiritualist faiths, including Obeah, a catchall term historically used to describe and often delegitimize local variants of Caribbean religiosity, especially those thought to derive from Africa (Paton 2015).

**Obeah, Art, and Politics**

In their study of ways in which “occult forces” have been drawn upon within national and local political processes in Guyana and Venezuela’s Amazon region, Silvia Vidal and Neil Whitehead (2004) bring attention to such connections among artists, politicians, and local Guyanese religious understandings. Discussing how Forbes Burnham “augmented” his political power through “his association with obeah practice,” Vidal and Whitehead (2004: 72) comment on Burnham’s relationship to Philip Moore and his artistic works, particularly the “Cuffy” monument. Burnham led the country through its independence from Britain in 1966 until his death in August 1985. Guyanese people often describe the

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**Figure 3:** Philip Moore, prominent Guyanese artist, educator, and Jordanite Faithist. (Photo: Salvador and Andrea L. de Caires. Reproduced with permission of the photographers.)
rear-facing countenance on the “back” of “Cuffy’s” janus head as a depiction of Burnham, allowing national leadership or others to utilize the statue as, what Vidal and Whitehead call, “a sacred object with powers” (2004: 73). The “powers” of this “sacred object” emanate, by some accounts, from the artist and his reputation, but Kofi’s reputation also includes his use of Obeah in marshalling plantation revolution. Vidal and Whitehead (ibid) write that the monument’s “detra-
c tors—from all ethnic groups—accuse Moore, an ardent spiritualist, of invoking African witchcraft in his work.” One informant that Vidal and Whitehead (2004: 78–9) quote describes Moore’s “rather ‘regal African aura,’” but questions whether the “palpable sense of awe and respect surrounding” Moore can be attributed to “his popularity and fame…or to his mastery of obeah.”

While Vidal and Whitehead (2004: 73, emphasis added) write that “Moore admits to addressing elements of African animism” within his 1763 Monument work, they state that he “obviously resists the suggestion that his work glori-
fies Afro-Guyanese obeah.” Globalized and normative conceptions of White supremacy, or that Anglo-European ghost of hegemony, have over generations made glorifying Obeah seem like an obvious stance to resist (Stewart 2005: 77, 190; Paton 2015). Yet, Moore’s creations and teaching did and continue to help demystify and honor African-derived or -inflected practices like contemporary “Afro-Guyanese” Spiritualist faiths, or what non-practitioners often term “Obeah.” Rather than emphasize only the ways in which Moore as an artist, teacher, and prominent public figure dis-
tanced himself from his own Jordanite Spiritualist practices in public spheres, it is also instructive to understand how Moore and his contemporaries such as Forbes Burnham and others helped present alternative discourses surrounding Obeah, Guyanese Spiritualist faiths, and what is thought of as “African culture” more generally.

Burnham himself had no reservations about glorifying Obeah, and regularly attended Spiritualist services and con-
sulted with a number of practitioners privately. In a political maneuver seen as celebrating African religiosity and culture still well-remembered by certain Guyanese and others throughout the Caribbean, in 1973 President Burnham

Figure 4: Georgetown’s “Cuffy,” or 1763 Monument, created by Philip Moore. (Photo: David Stanley. Reproduced with permission of the photographer).
announced to his nation and an attentive regional populace his administration’s intention to repeal colonial-era laws criminalizing the practice of Obeah. Diana Paton (2015: 283) writes that in Guyana in the 1960s and 1970s, “Obeah became...an instrument of populist politics,” whereby the practice was “for some a complex signifier of state support of African culture, [and] for others a symbol of corrupt power...[Obeah] also became enmeshed in multiple discourses about ethnic and national authenticity and purity. Within Guyana’s complex and tense ethnic politics,” Paton (2015: 283–284) goes on to write, “Burnham’s promotion of obeah at a symbolic level signified his government’s favouring of African rather than Indian concerns.” Exploring the “enmeshed” trajectories of cultural nationalisms as they emerged in post-independence Guyana, in particular local and transnational manifestations of Black Power and Pan-African movements, and understandings of Obeah and Guyanese Spiritualist practices, is important when considering the establishment of the MAH.

Forbes Burnham and CARIFESTA
While Jenny Daly’s tireless work and ambition was foundational to the initial realization of the MAH, as well as its continued operations through to today, other people prominent in Guyana’s political and cultural circles played important formative roles. This is especially true regarding the original idea to establish a museum in Georgetown dedicated specifically to arts of Africa and its diasporas. Sitting in her office, Ms. Daly recounted how the concept for the MAH came about through “Burnham’s vision,” who is likewise remembered for having first envisioned CARIFESTA, the Caribbean Festival of Arts, which was launched in Georgetown in 1972 (Cambridge 2015: 194; Creighton 2003; Dolphin 1971). As an important transnational cultural institution connecting artists and communities throughout the region, since the Festival’s inception it has toured the circum-Caribbean, and in August 2017 was hosted by Barbados for its thirteenth iteration. Works donated by visiting artists during past CARIFESTAs are displayed at the MAH, including a collection of wooden stools and paddles, calabashes, and other intricately carved objects made by “Djuka” or Okanisi Maroon artists from neighboring Suriname.10

In a 1974 article titled “Carifesta: Doing it our way,” Edward Kamau Brathwaite (343) captures the immense scope of the 1972 festival, as well as its cultural and political impacts: “Three weeks: twenty-two provinces of the circumambient Caribbean: 4,000 artists: audiences of 10,000 every night: children everywhere...Carifesta was Emancipation Day come true; a collective Declaration of Independence; the first ever meeting of the Caribbean people.” A mass convergence of Caribbean artists, thinkers, and revelers arranged on their own terms presented opportunities for people to refashion

10 This terminology, “Djuka,” is used by most Guyanese to refer to members of any of the six main Maroon cultural groups of Suriname and French Guiana. The MAH also identifies the works mentioned above as made by “Djuka” artists. However, Okanisi (or Aukaner) is often preferred as a designation, rather than “Djuka” or “Ndjuka,” by those who self-identify with this Maroon cultural group and speak their Okanisi language. Thanks to Drs. Sa-Fidelia Graand-Galon, former Surinamese ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago, for sharing insights on Maroon ethnonyms.
and appropriate in ways of their choosing the types of narratives and discourses used to interpret and represent their own cultures and heritages. Describing the atmosphere of that first CARIFESTA, Brathwaite (1974: 343) writes:

The slave masters were absent. There were no whips, no foreign magistrates of taste or art, no missionaries or sergeant-majors. No one had to shoe-shine-boy, shimmy or show his teeth at the sun over his shoulder. There were no Euro-American camera crews, no anthropologists taking notes.

Elsewhere, Brathwaite (1972) notes an ‘ancestral consciousness’ not only pervading the festival, but “in the African-oriented arts of the Caribbean: in the African-oriented life of the Caribbean.” Understood in this way, CARIFESTA ‘72 functioned as an exhibitionary complex of knowledge and power whereby the festival presented alternative forms of authoritative communication through spectacles of performance, political speeches, and a multitude of other art forms (Bennett 1988). This exhibitionary complex, however, in many ways served to counter authoritative knowledge and social orders insculpted through centuries of past formal displays of power relations, such as those presented in the British Guiana Court of the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London, and the many World’s Fairs and similar expositions of Europeans’ global hegemony (see Albuquerque 2016; Cox 2007). CARIFESTA ‘72 encouraged what Brathwaite (1974: 344) calls a “sense of cultural wholeness” and self-directed appropriation, which allowed for a deep-seated “fear of Africa” (347) persistent among Caribbean people to be probed and reassessed within a context of wider acceptance of emergent Black consciousness and related cultural and trans/nationalist movements. Comparable to how Andrew Apter (2005: 3) describes FESTAC ’77 in Lagos, CARIFESTA ’72 “revealed how the national recuperation of cultural traditions was by no means limited to local festivals and village dances, but involved” artists from the whole of the circum-Caribbean and beyond. Countries that would go on to form CARICOM the following year were especially involved, but so too were non-Caribbean countries like Brazil, Nigeria, and Ghana, “thus remaking the local within a modern framework of regional, national, and global ‘communities’” (ibid). To draw again on Apter’s (ibid) characterization of FESTAC ’77, that first CARIFESTA was similarly “a black world’s fair.”

Forbes Burnham was a leader with a keen sense for managing post-independence constructions of cultural nationalism, in a time when Caribbean, Latin American, continental African, and other once- or still-colonized states were steadily renegotiating their positions within global and regional relationships of power (Lewis 2001; Danns 2014). By the mid- to late- 1970s, Burnham’s ruling political party, the People’s National Congress (PNC), was moving increasingly away from policies of economic and political unification with the West, primarily the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and adopting measures to promote national and regional self-directed tactics of sustainability. Such measures included strengthening trade and political relations with other socialist states and members of the Non-Aligned Movement such as Cuba, the Soviet Union, Libya, East Germany, and North Korea (Brotherson 1989; Jackson 2006; Taylor 2015). Domestically, such shifts in policy were reflected in Burnham’s language while addressing the PNC’s August 1977 Biennial Party Congress, where he spoke of the challenges and necessities of promoting “cultural emancipation” for Guyana’s “six peoples,” including those living in the more populous coastal regions, as well as, importantly, those in the country’s “hinterland” interior (Burnham 1977).

Not relying exclusively upon anti-colonial and socialist ideologies, Burnham and his administration appealed to local constructions of Guyanese demographies and geographies in viewing the “creation of a truly Guyanese cultural aesthetic as something that must come into being against a colonial economic and cultural system” (Jackson 2006: 42). The creation of the MAH may have played a part in plans encouraging the realization of just such a “truly Guyanese cultural aesthetic.” Or, perhaps analogous to how Jackson (2005: 86) describes Moore’s Cuffy monument, the MAH for some is seen as “a black symbol for a nation that is not.” After all, while Georgetown is home to a National Museum of natural history and a Museum of Anthropology, there is no government supported museum dedicated exclusively to representing cultures of the majority of Guyana’s population, those of South Asian descent. Ms. Daly described this lack of a national “East Indian” museum institution as a matter of political trajectories. Burnham’s PNC government espoused “cultural emancipation” as a political agenda, while subsequent administrations after Burnham’s death, including what became the predominantly East Indian-supported People’s Progressive Party (PPP), she told me, did not share similar aspirations.12

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11 As an example, Burnham (and Cheddi Jagan) developed a close working relationship with Kwame Nkrumah, sharing ideological and material ties in the lead-up to and after independence in Ghana and then in Guyana (Nagamootoo 2017; West 2008). Relations between Ghana and Guyana date back to early in the colonial period, with many Guyanese of African ancestry descending from people who lived in what is now Ghana. This close relationship is still honored today in an annual celebration called Ghana Day, which recognizes Ghana’s 6 March 1957 independence from Britain, roughly one decade before Guyana’s. Guyana’s annual Ghana Day celebrations are organized by a group of activists closely aligned to the Pan-African Organization of Guyana, and the African Cultural and Development Organization (ACDA), which often use the MAH facilities for their programming and meetings.

12 Ms. Daly was quick to acknowledge however that the PPP government, which held national leadership from 1992–2015, fully supported the MAH just as the PNC had under Burnham and his successor, Desmond Hoyte.
Hubert Nicholson

While constructing the MAH and accessioning the collections would not begin until Ms. Daly was appointed in 1985, and the Museum did not open in earnest until 1994, Burnham had years prior seen an opportunity for the Museum’s initial development. Ms. Daly explained to me that around 1979 or 1980 a prominent Guyanese intellectual named Hubert Nicholson had moved to London following the passing of his wife. An anthropologist and political organizer, described as a “committed Black Nationalist” by one informed Guyanese scholar (Hinds 2011: 197n10), Nicholson was active in the nation’s independence and post-independence political and cultural movements from the 1950s through to the 1980s. As early as 1951 Nicholson was considered a leader of Guyana’s League of Colored People (Westmaas 2009). He was also influential in cofounding Guyana’s African Society for Racial Equality in 1958, an organization that promoted consciousness-raising efforts primarily among African Guyanese at a time of increasing political instability accompanying interracial and interethnic tensions heightened to a national scale with Burnham leaving Jagan’s PPP to establish the PNC in 1957 (Hinds 2015a; Tamboli 2015: 133n8; Westmaas 2014: 165).

As it happens, Nicholson was also a world traveler and collector of African arts, which he is said to have proudly displayed in his home. Aside from serving as the MAH’s initial collection, today these over two hundred and fifty works once owned by Nicholson still comprise many of the main attractions of the Museum’s holdings. This includes a set of approximately one hundred and forty Akan gold weights, Akan drums, a series of Yoruba wooden sculptures, and a central African nkisi figure, among many other objects displayed today in the airy upstairs main exhibition space of the Museum. Prior to his departure for London, Ms. Daly told me, Nicholson inquired with President Burnham about having the government officially acquire his collection to make it accessible to the public. Along with his eclectic assemblage of works, Nicholson also left his home on Barima Avenue to one day become the future museum housing his collection, and over time, accommodating much more. Certain people I spoke with around Georgetown still nostalgically referred to the building as “Nicholson House.”

Desirée Malik and Michael “X” Abdul Malik

While the majority of the MAH’s holdings to date came directly from Nicholson, there are a few works on display that museum records indicate were acquired at roughly the same time from a different source, one who happened to also be a prominent figure in regional and transnational movements for racial justice and Black Power. A wooden headrest attributed to Shona people, resting in a glass case in the Museum’s main exhibition space, is the only object identified for the public as coming from the collection of Desirée Malik. Malik, born as Desirée de Souza in Guyana, was the wife of late Black Power “martyr,” Michael Abdul Malik, who had been known popularly as Michael X. Abdul Malik was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, in 1933 as Michael de Freitas to a Black Barbadian mother, who is remembered for “embracing the forbidden slave religion of Obeah,” and an “absent” “Portuguese Jewish” father from St. Kitts (Williams 2008: 13, 21, 119). Affiliated loosely with local Black Power organizations functioning in the circum-Caribbean, including Trinidad and Guyana, as well as in New York and London, and converting to Islam and changing his name, Abdul Malik was connected to a scene in the late 1960s and 1970s whose agendas intersected domains of transnational political activism and the arts.

A highly controversial figure through to his state-sponsored hanging in Port of Spain in 1975, Abdul Malik is ambiguously remembered as both “the first prominent black British figure to write at length about Malcolm X” (Abernethy 2010: 287), and as “nothing more than a pale British imitation of Malcolm X” (Giuliano 2001: 36). During his life however, Abdul Malik worked as a playwright and writer of other genres, while also organizing and mobilizing efforts for racial justice primarily through an influential cultural center and museum/gallery he established in North London known as the Black House. The Black House was later “branded on the public mind as the lair of the infamous common and murderer Michael de Freitas,” after his capture by authorities in Guyana for the alleged murder of two acquaintances on his Trinidad commune (Independent 2006).

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13 The MAH’s official opening ceremony on 29 July 1994, a Friday starting the annual Emancipation Day national holiday weekend, was presided over by Janet Jagan, the wife of then President Cheddi Jagan. Janet Jagan was herself a highly influential member of the PPP leadership and later became president of Guyana in 1997. The Museum has on display a set of two ivory sculptures labeled as donated by former President Janet Jagan.

14 Ms. Daly could not recall if the exact year was 1979 or 1980. Most published sources such as newspaper articles and historical accounts of the MAH found online refer to 1985 as the year in which Dr. Nicholson left the country and the Guyanese government acquired his home and collections. See, for example, a short article in Guyana’s Sunday Chronicle covering the MAH’s 29 July 1994 opening titled “African Icons” (which also features a photograph of Ms. Daly’s daughter presiding over the inaugural ceremony) (Figure 6). A more recent article in Guyana’s Stabroek News claims that “the museum became a reality in 1985 when historian Dr Herbert [sic] Nicholson not only donated over 200 African art pieces but also handed over his house to the government for museum purposes” (Alleyne 2013). The website for Guyana’s Tourism Authority, a governmental body charged with promoting tourism in the country, states that the Museum “was founded in 1985” (Guyana Tourism Authority).

15 For more involved discussions of Guyanese political histories see Hinds (2011); Jackson (2005); Manian (2006); Majeed (2005); and Smith (1995).
Prior to his return to the Caribbean, and renewed legal troubles, however, the community arts and activism institution Abdul Malik founded was an important feature of London’s Black consciousness movement. His contemporary and fellow British Caribbean social critic, Stuart Hall, acknowledged the work of the organization Abdul Malik ran out of the Black House, called the Racial Adjustment Action Society (RAAS), noting that “Michael X actually had an impact on people on the ground” (quoted in Tinaz 2006, citing “Windrush” 1998). Through Abdul Malik’s and the RAAS’s close involvement with the London Free School, a “community action adult education project” (O’Dair 2014), he is also remembered for his leading role in organizing the first Notting Hill Carnival to take place outside on the streets of London in 1967 (Miles 2010: 187–190). The RAAS, Black House, and later Abdul Malik’s legal defense for the murder trial in which he would ultimately be convicted and hanged, were generously supported by numerous artists, activists, and philanthropists sharing similar aspirations of social and racial justice. Most notably, after both cropping their hair low around 1970, John Lennon and Yoko Ono exchanged their hair with Abdul Malik on the roof of the Black House for a pair of Muhammad Ali’s bloodied boxing shorts, which the fighter had gifted to Abdul Malik prior (Lennon and Ono 1971; Williams 2008: 181). Both the shorts and the hair were to be auctioned at Sotheby’s, with Abdul Malik’s funds going to support the efforts of the Black House and the RAAS, and John and Yoko’s “to promote world peace” (Williams 2008: 181; Giuliano 2001: 36) (Figure 7).

As the collection of artworks and artifacts displayed at the Black House ranged at times from Ali’s shorts and John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s hair, to implements of torture used on enslaved Africans, perhaps the Shona headrest now held by the MAH once also rested in North London. What is known is that sometime after her husband’s “lynching” by the state of Trinidad and Tobago for murder, Desirée Malik either donated or sold the Shona headrest she and Abdul Malik owned, along with a few other works, to the emerging Museum in Georgetown. Ms. Daly said she and her staff intend

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17 Abdul Malik, Desirée Malik, and others are known to have referred to the trial as a “kangaroo court” and, ultimately, his execution, as a state-sanctioned “lynching.” See Souvenir Programme for the Official Lynching of Michael Abdul
to create a more elaborate display with label copy contextualizing some of the histories of works held in the MAH’s collections so that visitors can explore more thoroughly the routes objects took in getting to Georgetown.

**Denis Williams**

Inspired by Nicholson’s and Malik’s generous spirits, President Burnham may have had the “vision” to establish Guyana’s Museum of African Heritage, but he quickly enlisted another prominent Guyanese intellectual to direct the initiative. As a local Georgetown authority on both the arts of continental Africa and Guyana, and being a rising museum specialist, Denis Williams was President Burnham’s only candidate for the position, according to Ms. Daly. Williams was an internationally recognized archaeologist and scholar of African and Guyanese arts, as well as being a painter and novelist (Figure 8). One year after Guyanese independence, in 1967, Williams returned to his home country after living away for over two decades. He had spent ten years “studying, practising, and teaching art in Britain” followed by another ten years “teaching art [and] researching into African archaeology and anthropology, in the Sudan and Nigeria” (Walmsley 1996: 261), where he was a Lecturer at the University of Ife and University of Lagos (Williams and Williams 2010: 230–231). Upon moving back to Guyana, Williams settled in a small village on the Upper Mazaruni River where he undertook a series of studies on indigenous Guyanese arts, particularly *timehri*, or local Amerindian petroglyph murals (Williams and Williams 2010: 231).

Moving to Georgetown in 1974, Williams was appointed as Director of Art for the Department of Culture within the National Ministry of Education under Burnham’s PNC administration (Williams and Williams 2010: 231). Williams’ daughter, Evelyn Williams (2010: 21), writes of her father’s “commitment to social responsibility within the climate of this revolutionary phase in the evolution of Guyana.” She observes that “his position as Director of Art in the newly established Republic...stimulated thoughts on the purpose of public art in a revolutionary society” (Williams 2010: 21). Through his position of institutional authority, Williams sought to harness the “pedagogical value and popular appeal” of arts generated through “cultural nation-building” as he had seen succeed in Nigeria with the creation of government-sponsored large-scale public mosaic murals, as well as in Mexico where he had studied the celebrated works of Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros (Williams 2010: 21). For these reasons and others, Evelyn Williams (2010: 21) writes that her father “saw his role as creative, and not political or wholly administrative,” an attitude that Ms. Daly perhaps adopted and adapted from Williams too.

In 1975, the year following his appointment in the Ministry of Education, Denis Williams founded the E. R. Burrowes School of Art and served as the college’s first Principal (Williams and Williams 2010: 231). Before establishing the Burrowes School, however, Williams first worked to found a new institution in Georgetown in 1974 called the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology and Art History, which initially housed his personal collections of primarily Amerindian works (Figure 9). In certain ways, Williams’ establishment of the Walter Roth Museum served as a model that Ms. Daly...
would later follow in negotiating terms with the government on the creation of her own museum from Nicholson’s home and collections. It was not until Williams brought Ms. Daly from the Burrowes School of Art to work on what would later become the MAH in 1985 that the Museum truly began to take form. For, as Ms. Daly intimated to me, after transferring her to work as the sole employee at the burgeoning Museum, Williams essentially left her to conceive and develop the MAH as she saw fit.

International Support and Museum “Authenticities”

Throughout her years dedicated to getting the MAH first functioning, Ms. Daly required technical expertise in accessioning, identification, preservation, restoration, and display of museum holdings. Denis Williams assisted in securing a specialist in museology and African arts through an UNESCO-supported scholar exchange program. This resulted in William C. Siegmann, the late Curator Emeritus for the Arts of Africa and the Pacific Islands at the Brooklyn Museum, joining Ms. Daly in Georgetown for an intensive few weeks of collaborative work and training that she recalls “really got the Museum running.” Through similar initiatives also supported by UNESCO, Ms. Daly was sent to attend regional museum studies conferences and workshops in both Barbados and St. Kitts, which effectively enabled her to acquire skills necessary to

Figure 8: Denis Williams, painter, novelist, and scholar of African, Amerindian, and Guyanese arts and cultures. (Reproduced with permission of Wikimedia Commons).

Figure 9: The Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology. The museum is housed in one of Georgetown’s downtown Kingston neighborhood colonial buildings, constructed circa 1890s. (Photo: David Stanley. Reproduced with permission of the photographer).
establish and head the institution she has called home for over three decades. The training and support she received through UNESCO and others was formative to her understandings of museum practices. However, Ms. Daly still holds that she gained most inspiration, guidance, and drive from ancestors whose works and memory she grew to see herself as caretaker for and inheritor of, embodying the etymologically layered meanings attached to the word "curator."[9]

Certain understandings Ms. Daly has developed concerning objects housed in the MAH provide insights into what other scholars have conceptualized as cultural “authenticity” (Clifford 1988; Kirshenblatt Gimblett 1998; Roberts and Vogel 1994). Ms. Daly acknowledges that certain works on display are what she calls “market items,” or reproductions crafted by artists to resemble often well-known and older “traditional” forms that carry higher prices on the capital-driven international art market. While many museum specialists and administrators would perhaps view these “market items” made for foreign collectors on display in the MAH as “inauthentic,” Ms. Daly sees immense value in these works nonetheless, and acknowledges the pressing needs and ingenuity of contemporary African artists who continue to create works based on those of their forebears. For Ms. Daly as well, that certain works, even from the original Nicholson collection, may have been made specifically to be sold and were never “used in situ” by “ancestors” in no way detracts from the educational and cultural worth of the objects, nor should it detract from their perceived “authenticity.”

Offering visitors experiences and information through which they can learn about African cultures, past and present, including the ways in which objects on display functioned in their “original” cultural contexts, is a major objective of the MAH. However, meanings and efficacies that visitors and staff draw from the Museum itself—the space, the works held therein, and the accompanying programming for the public—make the Museum and its holdings “authentic” through the ways in which those involved appropriate the institution and its interpretive potentials in their own ways. As James Clifford (1988: 222) observes in his influential study of histories of anthropology, ethnography, and museums, “cultural or artistic ‘authenticity’ has as much to do with an inventive present as with a past, its objectification, preservation, or revival.” In this sense, the MAH’s “authenticities,” and that of its works, stem from Ms. Daly’s, her staffs’, and museum patrons’ own capacities to seize upon meanings and meaning-making processes freely as individuals, as Guyanese—and specifically Guyanese of African heritage—and as various communities connected to and through the MAH.

**Museum Programming and Special Community Relationships**

Employing a number of innovative community programming and engagement strategies, the MAH continues to be a thriving cultural institution serving many valuable functions for people throughout the country, including those living outside of the Georgetown area who may not often get an opportunity to visit. The Museum operates a “mobile unit” that consists of a set of artworks and other educational materials of various forms accommodated in a booth with tables and chairs which keeps a busy schedule of events in locations in different parts of the country. Through their mobile unit, as well as at the Barima Avenue location, the MAH works chiefly with school children who either visit the Museum on fieldtrips or who get visited by the mobile unit and Museum staff at their schools and village community centers.

There are a variety of community-based organizations that also utilize the MAH space and other Museum resources in supporting their own programming. As an example, a group of Guyanese activists organizing policy proposals and events surrounding the United Nations’ Year and Decade for People of African Descent meet regularly in the MAH’s downstairs auditorium hall and members often consult the Museum’s library holdings for research purposes. The national Guyana Reparations Committee uses the facilities in a similar manner: the Museum library is itself a highly valued feature of the MAH for many patrons and houses a respected collection well known and used by scholars, artists, activists, and others throughout the country. An innovative “gallery” space in the MAH also offers local artists an opportunity to display and sell their works to the visiting public (Figure 10).

In certain instances, the MAH provides direct support in terms of allocating funding to specific groups with which it has cultivated long-term reciprocal working relationships. Using the authority and resources ensuing from its governmental status and institutional affiliations, the Museum is able to offer assistance to community groups that otherwise might have difficulties securing material and other forms of support from government agencies or other sources. The

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[9] *Oxford English Dictionary* (2017), for example, cites the Latin *cūnāre*, a root for the modern English word “curator,” as meaning “One who has the care or charge of a person or thing”; “A person who has charge; a manager, overseer, steward”; or “One who has the cure of souls,” or who “cares” for souls. Tracing similar etymologies, two education technologists observe that, “...in other words, a curator is a kind of spiritual guide” (Savage and McGoun 2015: 71).

[10] Ms. Daly and Ms. Elliot reported that MAH education programs are geared towards familiarizing students with material covered in their regional Caribbean Examination Council’s (CXC) curricula, particularly pertaining to topics in Caribbean history, as requested by local school administrators within the Ministry of Education.

[11] Ms. Daly serves as current Vice-Chair of the Guyana Reparations Committee. It functions as a local auxiliary of CARICOM’s Reparations Committee, which is leading an international legal and political campaign seeking reparative justice for those whose ancestors were enslaved in the Caribbean.

[12] The MAH library houses a highly sought after collection of DVDs, which consist mostly of documentaries and non-fiction works on Africa and African diaspora-related topics. The films are also featured for public viewings held regularly in the MAH’s auditorium hall. The library also has book and journal holdings, again, with most all relating to continental Africa and its diasporas, including many works by Guyanese authors.
reciprocity comes through ways in which the Museum utilizes certain resources and services offered by these same cultural organizations. The strongest examples of such relationships, and one’s Ms. Daly expressed most enthusiasm about, are those nurtured between the MAH and various Spiritualist church groups meeting in and around Georgetown. As there remains a persistent stigma in Guyanese society surrounding Spiritualist churches, their practices, and their members, it is highly consequential that such groups secure material and institutional backing from government-affiliated bodies.

While the MAH only wields so much authority, as Ms. Daly put it, administratively it is still able to appropriate funding from its budget independently for its own programming, and for years has chosen to support specific Spiritualist “gatherings” and their functioning. It remains Ms. Daly’s sincere hope that Spiritualist practitioners’ participation and presence at the MAH will foster awareness and understanding about this devotional form of African-inflected Guyanese culture. Through engaging Museum visitors with Spiritualist practices, showcasing and contextualizing such practices as rightfully acknowledged aspects of Guyanese people’s own cultural or national heritage, Museum programming seeks a sort of persuasive intervention encouraging acceptance of this form of “religious diversity” in society generally.23

One major event the Museum sponsors a Spiritualist gathering for is the annual national Emancipation Day holiday that many years includes a parade and libation ceremony held at Philip Moore’s Cuffy monument in Georgetown’s Square of the Revolution, all of which is organized and led by a Spiritualist group (Figure 11).24 Events hosted by Spiritualist gatherings also take place at the MAH on occasion. Spiritualists are invited to administer libations and perform other ritual work when new exhibitions open and following renovations to the Museum building. And, importantly, Ms. Daly reported, they are duly compensated for their services provided.

23 Guyana’s current president, Brigadier David A. Granger (2017), recently stated that “Guyana is a model of interfaith harmony” while addressing the opening ceremony for the United Nations-sponsored World Interfaith Harmony Week. At the event, Granger went on to reference Guyana’s Constitution (Article 145) which prohibits encroachments upon religious freedoms, as he called for continued “tolerance of religious diversity.” His comments came despite Spiritualists’ ongoing reports of religious-based discrimination, including reports that were voiced during the course of the event (prior to the President’s arrival). While the meeting did have a Mother, or leader of a Spiritualist gathering, speak as an honored guest for roughly five minutes at the start, none of the day’s three panels on various aspects of “religious diversity” in Guyanese life featured a representative of a Spiritualist group.

24 The Guyanese national holiday celebrated annually on the first day of August, called Emancipation Day, commemorates the 1838 abolition of slavery in Britain’s Caribbean colonies. The MAH’s initial opening on 29 July 1994 was scheduled to coincide with Emancipation Day weekend. See Peretz (2015) for an account of Spiritualists’ involvement in a 2014 Emancipation Day event; and Nehusi (2015) for a thought-provoking treatment of libation rituals in African and African-diasporic cultural contexts, including Guyana.
Ancestral and Museum Lineages

Special relationships cultivated between the MAH and Guyanese Spiritualist groups go beyond material or mere bureaucratic ties. For Ms. Daly and others, the Museum is itself a home—or altar—where important ancestors inhere, and they feel it should be recognized as such through means most appropriately performed by those with specialized cultural knowledge attributed to Spiritualist adepts. To enact such forms of ritual recognition, leading “Elders” and “Mothers” of local Spiritualist gatherings are enlisted to perform their “work” at the MAH for visitors and, importantly, for the Museum itself and its revered ancestral inhabitants. Both the objects held by the MAH and the artists who fashioned them, as well as the lineage of historically significant figures who contributed to the establishment of the Museum and its holdings, are considered as ancestors meriting perpetual honor, remembrance, and celebration for the work they continue to do.

Interpretive meanings of a certain object held by the MAH, a Tabwa high-backed stool, or “throne,” help illustrate this point (Figure 12). Often thought to be literal seats for Tabwa dignitaries, Allen Roberts (2018: 253, quoting Van Wyk 2013: 72) writes that these “thrones” “more likely... served as altars to divinity—that is, they were less “furniture” than ancestral witnesses.” For Tabwa people of central Africa, the vertically elongated back of these stools carried symbolic meanings associated with “matrilineal kin” who “are understood as one’s ‘back,’ always behind one to provide loving, protective support” (Roberts 2018: 253) (Figure 13). Whereas the “Nicholson House” is understood by some less as a museum institution and more as a functioning “altar,” so too the works held therein are “less ‘furniture’ than ancestral witnesses,” observing and partaking in ongoing encounters representing African heritages within Guyanese society. Works held by the MAH—the Maliks’ Shona headrest or the replica bust of Moore’s Cuffy monument, for example—can themselves be thought to possess “ancestral wisdom” through the histories they can evoke. Such interplay between forms of material and oral culture provide visitors opportunities to share in “object lessons” emanating from interactions with Museum holdings, displays, and associated community events.

See Thompson’s (1993) masterful study of African and African diasporic altars, which includes insightful considerations into the implications of creating and displaying “activated” African Atlantic altars in museum institution settings. See also Cosentino (2000), in which the head curator of the landmark “Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou” exhibition reflects on experiences working with Vodou practitioners throughout the process of “mounting” the controversial, and highly innovative, 1995 exhibition. (See Cosentino (1995) for the volume of essays published to accompany the exhibition.) For more general but compelling essays on religion in museum settings see Buggein, Paine, and Plate 2017; and Paine 2000.

The idea of ‘object lessons’ comes from Allen Roberts, personal communication 2018. Also see Jenkins 1994; and Bronner 1989.
As matriarch of the MAH, Ms. Daly echoes sentiments embedded in central African and local Guyanese philosophies in sharing that, "...everyone turns into an ancestor...and we need them, now...We need more showcasing African things...I can’t do it...I can only advise...Apparently there’s no one standing up for the Africans." While everyone may become an ancestor, for Ms. Daly the uplifting potentials lie in “the work” of “the ancestors” themselves, whose “loving, protective support” the MAH draws upon in “standing up for the Africans” and mobilizing efforts to honor African cultural histories in Guyana. “Showcasing African things,” as Ms. Daly put it, often comes through the assistance of Spiritualists who continue to recognize and publicly represent the significance of African cultural heritage to Guyana as a whole in a society often unsympathetic to reckoning with such representations. This general stigmatization and cultural marginalization presents the MAH with distinct challenges, ones that for decades the institution has worked to overcome.

A key way through which Ms. Daly and others associated with the MAH have seen greater acceptance and interest in “African things,” and Guyanese cultural heritage generally, is through youth involvement in Museum events. Whether young people are initially drawn to the Museum, its programming, and collections through school visits, family, or neighborhood activities, the Museum serves as a pathway, in Ms. Daly’s view, that connects ancestors and youth along a cyclical journey of historical and cultural remembrance. The overriding goal of the MAH is to teach as widely as possible about African heritage in Guyana. Those at the Museum see no better way to do so than through educating young Guyanese people using experiential techniques that are more likely to be meaningful within the lives of the youth they seek to reach. Such education has long come through stories and performances evoked by “the ancestors,” whether understood as objects, artists, community leaders, or notable figures in the development of the MAH or of Guyana and its cultural and political pasts, recent and long-ago. In this way, the Museum strives to serve as a functional altar, where Guyanese can access and interact with their ancestors who continue to provide insights and succor in their ongoing challenges for cultural and political recognition.
Peretz: Inherited “Ancestors’ Collections” of a Devoted Curator

Figure 13: Detail of top of stool. For Tabwa people of central Africa the vertically elongated back carried symbolic meanings associated with “matrilineal kin.” (Photo: Jeremy Jacob Peretz. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.)

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