

Keeping African artifacts in Africa

It is common for professional archaeologists and paleoanthropologists working in Africa to populate western museums with foreign artifacts by excavating and permanently removing them from history rich communities in Africa. University of Calgary researcher Julio Mercader, along with University of Boston PhD student Arianna Fogelman are doing their part to stop this dated trend.

Mercader and his team have established the first museum of its kind in Mozambique and the second museum in the country's province of Niassa, which will officially open in August. This museum—named Museu Local, meaning “local museum” in Portuguese—will help keep some of Africa's treasures in Africa, and also make Western and African academic research relevant to the local population, two initiatives that should have started long ago, says Mercader, who collaborated with the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane and Universidade Pedagógica, in Mozambique, for this project.

Mercader sees the Museu Local as more than just a repository of ancient artifacts. It is an interactive center that makes learning about ancient and modern cultural heritage a part of everyday life. The museum is housed in a restored historical building; the first schoolhouse in the district of Lago, and is currently displaying the archaeological and historical findings of Mercader's team. The museum also features an oral history digital archive, recorded and compiled by members of his team, which is a precious homage to past generations of African story tellers.

Mercader has been excavating artifacts in the area since 2003. He was inspired to construct the museum after finding a cave located up a steep cliff overlooking Lake Niassa, which contained 1,000-year-old ritual bowls. Mercader has three students helping him with the overall project, Fogelman, with experience in African museums, Mussa Raja, an honours student at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, in Mozambique, and Tim Bennett, a Master's student at University of Calgary.

Through the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, operated out of the U.S. Department of State in Washington, DC and separate funding at the U.S. Embassy in Mozambique, the U.S. government has given \$35,000 to support this project. Other supporters include the Mozambique Ministry of Education and Culture, the Smithsonian Institution and the Canada Research Chairs Program.

Source: University of Calgary

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