SPECIAL SECTION

Anthropology, Postcolonialism, and the Museum

Edited by Ian Fairweather

INTRODUCTION

Ian Fairweather

The advent of the postcolonial era was heralded by the emergence of new nation states from the territories of the colonial powers. These new states inherited a model of nationhood that emerged in Europe in the seventeenth century, in which the nation is presented as a symbolic community creating powerful allegiances to a cultural ideal. For the culturally diverse nations that emerged with the end of colonialism, this ideal of identification between the political nation state and a 'national culture' has always been problematic. Increasingly, the same is true in the metropolises themselves, as the postcolonial breaking down of barriers leads them to become ever more multicultural.

An appeal to tradition is a feature of modern nations that seek to justify present social arrangements by referring back to their apparently remote origins. Although the rhetoric of 'a national heritage' tends to reproduce the idea that the nation is composed of a single culture, and silences histories of conflict by romanticizing or sanitizing them, it also opens up a discursive space for the expression and representation of local and distinctive ways of life. This may explain the current interest in representing the past through the preservation and presentation of material artifacts, and the proliferation of more accessible diversified representations that have arisen in response to grass-roots demand (Evans 1999: 6).

Scholars of the former colonies have long recognized the crucial importance of asserting indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving repressed histories to the construction of postcolonial subjects, despite being aware of the dangers of grounding identities in romanticized images of the past. The anthropology of

the postcolony, along with much postcolonial literature, has tended to focus on the multiplicity of identities available to postcolonial subjects, and the way that postcolonial subjectivity is founded on narratives of migration and diaspora, displacement, and exile. The postcolonial critic Bhabha, for example, has argued that the postcolonial condition is characterized by the multiple subject positions that inhabit postcolonial claims to identity. Most importantly, postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities that are constituted “otherwise than in modernity” (Bhabha 1994: 4).

Under postcolonial conditions, the relative autonomy of social actors and the category of the subject itself are problematic, and marginalization, dispossession, and exploitation on the grounds of cultural difference have become global issues. In these circumstances, ethnic identities that were once determined more by people’s behavior than by their biological parentage come to be conceived of as primordial. As Werbner points out, local subjectivities are remarkably resilient, but people often recognize the need to move with the times and be open to a wider world. The desire for a place in a better future with opportunities for personal success, community development, and ambitious advancement can also open up perplexing uncertainties about subjugation to power and the abuse of power on the grand scale (Werbner 2002: 19). Postcolonial subjugation can be a playful process in which people seek to transcend their marginality and open out subjective worlds of their own, some more deliberately hybrid than others, and some exclusive of outsiders (Werbner 2002: 20).

This thematic issue will highlight the role of the museum and the wider heritage industry in actualizing postcolonial identities, both by making them concrete in fixed displays and by providing opportunities for performances that can express a number of, often conflicting, identity strategies. They show that from the perspective of the formerly colonized, the exhibition of ‘cultures’ is not just about the proliferation of alternative histories and narratives of exclusion. In many cases, the end of the colonial era, and with it the hegemony of a particular way of seeing the world, has brought a challenge to the rights of established institutions, such as national museums, to present ‘cultures’ in both the former colonies and in the colonial metropolises themselves.

In the late twentieth century, the museum space came to be conceived of as a ‘forum’ for debating the past, rather than a place in which objective models of reality are displayed for the edification of the public (Cameron 1972). However, recent attempts to include the voices of those who have long been silenced by the authoritative voice of the colonial power in the debates have inevitably raised questions about who should participate in this forum. Any exhibition that attempts to represent an entire group or region is bound to be controversial (Karp and Lavine 1991: 15), but in some cases, it can give populations an opportunity to control the way they are represented. Furthermore, the performative dimension of many museum displays allows them to offer multiple perspectives.

The challenge for the postcolonial museum is to devise strategies of representation that do not reproduce colonial ways of organizing experience, but

rather, reflect the representational strategies of those whose 'culture' is on display, in ways that remain meaningful to visitors not acquainted with the areas involved. The articles presented here seek to place museums in their postcolonial contexts, as important vehicles for the production of postcolonial subjects. In doing so, they demonstrate the inadequacy of ascribing to the state, some sort of master narrative of citizenship through museums, and highlight the complex issues of cultural production and commodification that are at stake in the postcolonial museum.

Corsane's article draws attention to the legacies of the modern colonial museums, which were often a key aspect of the colonial project, in terms of representation. He shows how the traditional museum in post-apartheid South Africa is undergoing a total transformation, as a result of policy formulations and new legislation, to become more inclusive for the majority of people in these countries. He argues that these changes have fundamentally affected the ways in which South African heritage and museums are being re-configured under postcolonial and post-apartheid conditions, particularly by extending what is considered to be 'heritage' to include more intangible aspects of culture, tradition, and memory. In doing so, he sets the scene for the next two articles, which offer case studies of individual museums, perhaps best conceived of as 'heritage sites' in postcolonial Africa.

My analysis concerns the Nakambale Museum, a small community museum in north central Namibia, and the way that local people are able to make use of the museum to reclaim the colonial past for their own constructions of identity. In doing so, they appropriate the notion of 'heritage' itself, and by representing 'tradition' as vanishing, they successfully resist the stereotype of the traditional rural villager that the hegemonic narratives of nation-building and cultural tourism threaten to impose upon them. The idiom of heritage itself allows them to represent the past without being constructed as simply locals, parochial 'natives' bound by their association with a particular culture. On the contrary, the museum has provided a stage upon which the ambiguities and complexities of the colonial encounter are woven into a narrative that seeks to demonstrate their modernity and cosmopolitanism.

The implications for local politics of a developing 'heritage industry' linked to the growth in cultural tourism are taken up by Probst, who examines the interaction of local politics with global forces of commercialization and secularization in the Osun Grove, in the Nigerian town of Osogbo. He argues that the explanations given in the guidebooks to the various places in the grove have provoked and given rise to a critique of the information given in the texts, highlighting the way in which the local nobility used the brochures to exclude rivaling claims and competing historical traditions in favor of the ruling royal lineage. What is interesting here is that the written media through which this process of political centralization operates is based upon visual media. That is, the history of Osogbo that is given in the brochures is narrated along the shrines and sculptures standing in the grove. Thus, what has taken place is the creation of a double representation, with the written representations using the

visual as their legitimation and point of reference. Probst's conclusion that the revitalization of the grove works within a politically highly difficult milieu, in which different actors pursue different projects to come up with an answer to what 'local' is supposed to mean, throws light on the relationship between performance, genre, and reflexivity.

The final case study by Henare introduces the policies of biculturalism in New Zealand museums, particularly Te Papa Tongarewa the Museum of New Zealand, and the ways that these policies are translated into practice. She asks whether biculturalism is an effective strategy for the museum in terms of its stated aim of supporting Maori self-determination and a (cultural and political) 'partnership' with the descendants of Pakeha, the collective term typically applied to non-Maori New Zealanders. She argues that if we restrict our analysis of museums and their collections to the study of culturally constructed 'meanings,' we may overlook the point that museums can be repositories for precisely the kinds of knowledge that can transcend (or at least operate on a different epistemological level from) discursive formulations.

All of these articles serve to highlight both the colonial legacy with which postcolonial museums must engage, and the ambiguities and tensions of the postcolonial situation itself. They do more than indicate the importance of museums in reproducing the narratives of national cultural identities. They focus on the ways in which museums can subvert or even challenge dominant narratives, and in doing so, bridge the gaps between communities and negotiate tensions in the ways in which diverse groups represent themselves and are represented to others. They also bring to light the challenges faced by the post-colonial museum in an increasingly multicultural and globalized world.

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