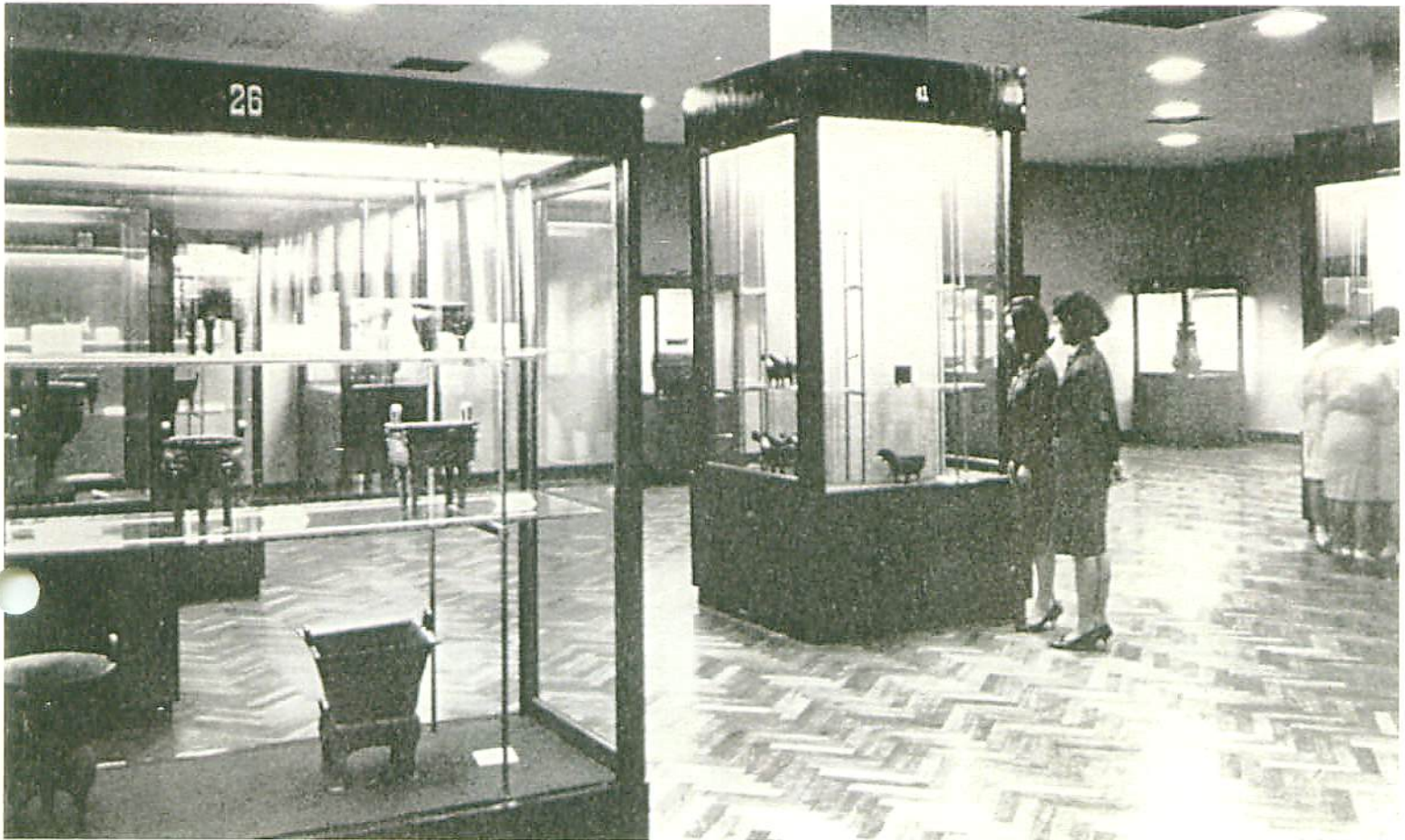


Museums and the Politics of Nationalism



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I would like to begin my discussion of these essays on the relationship between museums and nationalism by invoking a poem entitled *The Large Women in the National Museum* written by Canadian poet Robert Barsky (1991) on a visit to Hungary in 1988¹:

We are followed, incessantly, by those who watch
over the history of Middle Europe. They have no
story to tell
or if they have, refuse to recount it to us;
their story seems to be repressed behind the ropes,
where we are asked to stand and survey—but not
to touch.
To observe the petrified objects, the faded maps
or gilded crowns, demands imagination;
to stand around and over the relic that sits in the
chair
before us demands a sense of humour.
That hardened woman, sitting on the hard-wood
chair
protects with dignity and attentiveness
but also ruthlessness and pride
a past represented by golden, jewel-studded
crowns,
robes of leather, masks of stone
and diamond-encrusted religious icons.
We stare into the past, searching for an object-
world,
and find instead the forbidden ancestors of this
grouchy old woman.

This poem, it seems to me, captures one of the central contradictions in national museums: namely, the tremendous distance which can be felt between

the symbols of national representation and the nationals who are supposedly being represented. “The hardened woman sitting on the hard-wood chair” (that is to say, the guard monitoring the halls of the national museum) protects with ambivalence and trepidation a heritage that is largely alien to her personal experience—the jewel-studded crowns and diamond-encrusted icons were salvaged from somebody’s past but almost surely not from her own.

In an insightful review essay on “Nationalism and Anthropology,” Brackette Williams (1989) has suggested that ethnicity, race, gender, and class are all implicated in the projects and policies of nation-building along different axes in the homogenizing process basic to the modern nation-state’s form of rule. In the case of the Hungarian National Museum, it is class (and perhaps also gender) which serves as an idiom of disjuncture between the people and the state. In many of the essays presented in this special theme issue of *Museum Anthropology*, it is ethnicity (and perhaps also race) which plays a divisive and contested role in the symbolic constitution of the national museum.

In Africa, as both Agbenyega Adedze and Enid Schildkrout demonstrate, ethnic groups lumped together by the unanticipated consequences of Europe’s scramble for the continent in the late nineteenth century, are either over-represented or under-represented in museum display (but almost always misrepresented) depending on the particular circumstances and ambitions of the current ruling party in the nation-state.

This last point on the classification of ethnicity in the national museums brings me to a more general argument on museums, nationalism, and the ordering

or structuring of culture. Museums of anthropology were born out of a need or desire to create order out of the material debris of culture contact swept into Europe from the far-corners of the earth in the Age of Discovery. In the late nineteenth century, Pitt-Rivers dealt his hand in the classification of artifacts at the ethnographic museum at Oxford—insisting that objects could be classified according to genera and species like so many specimens from the natural world. In the early twentieth century, Franz Boas shuffled the cards anew and dealt his hand in the arrangement of objects at the American Museum of Natural History—according to criteria of culture history and ethnic provenance. Changing views in social theory demanded radical changes in the sequencing and juxtaposition of material culture in museum exhibits. Like anthropology, nation-states are also in the business of classification. And, as in social theory, the conditions of social hierarchy and power structures of hegemony also change through time. The ordering and reordering of objects and representations in national museums can serve to legitimate or “naturalize” any given configuration of political authority.

The divisiveness of ethnicity and class within the nation-state and museum representations can also be felt through the disjunctures and contestations within a single cultural or ethnic grouping. Nancy Marie Mithlo demonstrates very clearly in her essay that contests of identity are fought not only between self-representations and outside representations but more interestingly there is disagreement within the group itself about the nature and content of self-images and national identity.

Benedict Anderson (1983) notes that all communities and polities have an imagined dimension which manifests itself in self-representation. Nation-states, as Clifford Geertz would have it for ritual, need on occasion to represent themselves to themselves. Of course, who is counted in the category “themselves” is always a problematic and keenly contested issue. But nation-states, on occasion, also need to represent themselves to others. As Susan Bean suggests, mounting an exhibition of Bhutanese textiles in Salem, Massachusetts legitimizes the national identity and iconography of Bhutan not only in the eyes of its own people, within its own territorial boundaries, but also in the eyes of the world—within the political, economic, and social networks of the modern world system. Richard Grinker's study of the Demilitarized Zone which separates North and South Korea raises another fascinating permutation in the puzzle of

representations. In this case it is the United States military which guides South Korea's imaging of the North Korean enemy. The DMZ is a site of representation intended for outsiders, but in the collective unconscious of South Korea the DMZ plays a critical role in defining the nation by contrasting itself to a carefully constructed Other.

Tradition and modernity

A major theme running through all of these essays is the relationship between tradition and modernity in the constitution of national symbolism and consciousness. Some of the most recent books on nationalism, such as Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) emphasize the modernity of nationalism as both an idea and institution. Yet, most of these essays point to inherent tensions between tradition and modernity in the representation of the nation-state in museums. Rubie Watson and Tamara Hamlish, in particular, throw into doubt the received wisdom that nationalism is a functional requirement of secularizing societies. Museum representations in China blur the conventional distinction between the sacred and the profane, between the enchanted and the disenchanting, between the temple and the museum. In the case of China, the objects contained in the national museum from which the modern nation-state drew authority and power were the same objects—with magical and cosmological properties—from which the traditional ruling power drew its legitimacy and political force. In a related paradox, Susan Bean also notes that the Bhutanese who visit the national museum in Bhutan worship the images of saints and deities which are displayed in the gallery of the national museum. The point is, therefore, that the transition from artifact into art—from object of religious veneration to object of aesthetic contemplation—is not always acknowledged universally at the same moment in time: it is a process that is at once reversible and incomplete.

A second point on the relationship between modernity and tradition in the museum and the nation-state has to do with a museum's or an exhibition's orientation in time—with its structuring of what Johannes Fabian (1983) calls allochronism. Does the nation-state draw authority and power from the recreation or, as Agbenyega Adedze put it, the invention of a glorious past? Or does the state project its image into the future? Tamara Hamlish points to the Chinese celebration of a “generic” past; Mithlo points to the

representation of a “fictionalized” past; while Watson points to the fact that “for many Chinese, identity was to be sought not in China’s past—in its grand cultural traditions—but in its future.”

In many cases, it seems to me, the glorification of past and future—or what may be called “forward-looking” versus “backward-looking” regimes of representation—often co-exist, complement, and even contradict one another in the nationalist agenda of state museums. One need look no further than the United States nation’s capital to witness the National Museum of American History positioned diagonally across the Mall from the National Museum of Air and Space. In some rare, but fascinating cases, the state uses representations of history not to glorify its heritage by association with the past but rather through repudiation of its own past. The best examples of these representations seem to come from Germany—either in the national monuments and memorials to the Holocaust, or in the just announced plans for the construction of a theme park in former East Berlin which would re-enact the conditions of life under communism—a kind of Disney fantasyland only projected in reverse.

Nationalism and transnationalism

Another major theme which emerges as an issue that is germane to all of these essays is the relationship between nationalism and transnationalism and its relevance to museums. In a recent issue of *Daedalus* devoted to the topic of nationalism, anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1993) draws attention to the difficulty of defining and maintaining national boundaries in light of international market, migrations, and mass-medias. She writes: “The increased flow of capital—and of populations, in its wake, producing the much commented phenomenon of transnationalism—called into question in an unprecedented way all those arbitrary, taken-for-granted nation-state boundaries” (1993:44).

Enid Schildkrout in this issue describes not only the permeating stench of deep-fried global capitalism in Namibia—from the Golden Arches of McDonald’s to one of the “Colonel’s” more distant fast-food outposts of the KFC—but also shows how the Namibian state has borrowed Bennetton’s “United Colors” advertising campaign to represent itself to itself as well as to outsiders. In the swirl of transglobal communication, a Western representation of the Other becomes appropriated as the Other’s representation of

itself. Parenthetically, this also parallels, of course, Nancy Mithlo’s point about the Chiricahua’s acceptance of a past selected and constructed by others.

Additionally, the impact of transnationalism on national museums relates to the economics of the modern world system and, in particular, the international art market. The question in this regard is: Do national treasures in a national museum become more potent and viable as their economic value increases and their investment appraisal matures? Are the multi-million dollar bronze treasures from the ancient kingdom of Benin worth more today in the political currency of Nigerian nationalism than they were worth at the turn of the century or even at the moment of Nigerian independence in the 1960s when they were worth only a fraction of their current monetary value? Do icons representing religious spirits become further activated and symbolically heightened when they are conjoined with the spirit of capitalism?

Nationalism and the trope of invention

One final theme that deserves to be raised in the context of museums and nationalism concerns the relationship between objects and the invention of meaning(s). Enid Schildkrout ends her paper by remarking that “the objects in museums remain rooted in particular histories and cultures and are not as easily rewritten as are peoples’ memories.” In recent years, a small industry has emerged in publications dealing with invented phenomena. There is, for example, the *Invention of Tradition*, *The Invention of Africa*, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, *The Invention of Modernity*, *The Invention of Reality*, and so on. The topic of nationalism has not been immune to this epistemological bent toward the study of inventions and modes of inventing. Indeed, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) is largely about the invention of national boundaries and its relationship to the invention of national identity. Are there, however, limits on the imagination—i.e., boundaries beyond which invention is not possible or likely to occur? Is there something uniquely unmalleable about material artifacts—as opposed to memory, for example, whose malleability is limited only by the human imagination? To be sure, interpretations of artifacts can range widely through the spectrum of the possible, yet at some point it seems to me, interpretation is bounded by the physical constraints of the object itself.

Although the volume of literature on nationalism

is an overwhelming mass, taxing its readers and swamping the computer-based databases through which citation searches are run, I would contend that the study of nationalism in the context of museums remains a largely untapped area of study,² and offers a special vantage point for understanding the logic and process of nation-building—a unique perspective which is otherwise overlooked by studies of nationalism in other domains. ❖

Notes

1. All but one of the essays published in this issue of *Museum Anthropology* were originally prepared for a session that I organized at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association held in Washington, D.C. in November 1993. Papers that were read for the panel, but do not appear in this issue of the journal are: Raymond D. Fogelson's "Exhibiting Nationalism at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair," Shelly Errington's "Fantasized Communities: The Case of Beautiful Indonesia in Miniature Park," Sally Price's "Executing Museums" (published as Price and Price 1995), and a discussion of the papers by Irene J. Winter. The essay by Roy Richard Grinker was solicited for this issue after the conference.
2. Although the study of museums and nationalism is not yet fully developed, a working bibliography already exist—see, for example, Coombes 1988; Mitchell 1989; Duncan 1990; *Art in America* 1991; Wallis 1991; Anagnost 1993; Kaplan 1994; Papadakis 1994; Ehrentraut 1995.
The few pages that Benedict Anderson devotes to museums in his much-cited book *Imagined Communities* help us little in formulating a discourse on museums and nationalism. Anderson examines the museum with the very precise aim of understanding the "totalizing classificatory grid" of the colonial enterprise (1983:184), and in so doing links the role of the museum to that of the census and the map.

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