

Ethnographic Museums as "Contact Zones"

ICOM - ICME 2016 ANNUAL CONFERENCE,
Milano, 3rd. - 9th. July

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It is not surprising that ethnographic museums in the post-modern world have been undergoing an identity crisis. Some scholars were hurry to declare that these museums are no more than dead storehouses. Their claims were based on the idea that there is no reason, need, priority and authority for "us" to present and represent the "other". In those cultural shrines of colonialism the objects were stood metonymically for the distant "others", places and cultures.

As a result of the post-colonial era, ideas of multiculturalism, politics of identity and reflexivity have emerged in the academic world and spread in the intellectual discourses that have penetrated, to the museum world, as well.

The aim of this paper is to focus and reflect mainly on the ethical *raison d'être* of these museums spaces nowadays in our globalized, virtual and uncertain world and to concentrate on the obstacles, responsibilities and challenges that we have to deal with in the present, especially for the future.

In my opinion, the way of looking at the past material cultures and especially dealing with contemporary subjects and objects is not universal. Different missions of conserving, exhibiting, presenting, representing, educating and especially empowering are needed in varied societies. The western culture and the European world are facing different questions and dilemmas than other countries and cultures in other places.

In this paper I would like to borrow the term "contact zones".

Mary Louise Pratt introduced the concept of the contact zone (1991, 1992). She said: *"I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today"*

Based on this theoretical idea, I'm claiming that ethnographic museums are contemporary contact zones of objects, people, ideologies, unity, diversity, past, present, poetics and politics. I would like to suggest and present 3 available forms of contact zones, which deal and take into consideration the 'maladies' in these museums.

3 Forms of Contact Zones

- **Old collections - New interpretations.**
(A Land and its Dolls)

- **Cultural (ethnic) groups create their museums.**
(Libyan Jews and others)

- **Contemporary issues & dilemmas**

Two possibilities:

- 1. Social problems presented and represented with past existing objects.**

Dealing with Aids problem in Zambia, by using traditional icons in Ethnographic Museum

- 2. Social issues & dilemmas presented and represented with current materials.**

Subjects like migration, refugees, racism, social & economic gaps, anorexia vs. hunger, etc...

Old collections - New interpretations.



Souvenir dolls made and designed in Israel were the central part of this exhibition, as a manifestation of one of the cultural practices that developed, created and consolidated Israel's national identity.

The first costume dolls emerged on the scene in Palestine of the 1920s and disappeared at 1990's. They were of wide-ranging quality and were manufactured by employing different design techniques

This socio-cultural phenomenon is part of popular culture that began before the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), and came to its end in the late 1980s; its halcyon days were between the 1950s and the 1970s.

These dolls were made by artists, artisans and craftspeople that used an array of techniques and styles. Most of the doll makers and designers were not born in the country; some of them had had art or artisan education and others had a modicum of knowledge of the field.

The production and design of these dolls played a significant role in the "*invention*" of *tradition*, which serves as one of the primary systems for building national identity and guaranteeing common coherence, which claim to be of long-standing primarily in times of dramatic change.

This invented and instrumental practice sought to add its contribution to the establishment of Israeli society as a nation - "*an imagined community*" in Anderson's sense of the word, based on common images, values and a sense of belonging.

National costume dolls are a cultural implement that constitutes part of the national ideology created in the country and at the same time are also their manifestations. Based on this argument I wish to claim that souvenir dolls are not only cultural objects but also can be seen as a cultural-political "text" (Shenhav-Keller, 1993). This approach makes it possible to examine not only the material aspects and special messages inherent in one doll or another, but also to examine the social and political statements beyond. This perspective makes it possible to learn about processes, power relations and perceptions in

Israeli society, and the way in which the elite group presents and is representative of cultural groups, expressing or ignoring and denying them, in full or in part.

The research and the exhibition that followed expanded the scope beyond the nostalgic context and regard these dolls as a symbolic unit that conveys messages and meaning about the period, and the changes that took place over seven decades. The dolls manifest symbols, values and myths that relate to the creation of Israeli identity: nationalism, ethnicity, the melting pot, pluralism and multiculturalism. Interpreting and Presenting the doll collection enabled me to draw the boundaries of representation and to reveal the figures that are included, as well as those which are not, while attempting to answer the question: did these dolls - created over the years -reflect, represent, shape or invent the sought-after imagined and hegemonic Israeliness?

Over seven decades an inner discourse was conducted in the world of these dolls and their production, which related to localism, belonging, and identity. *Sabra, Yemenite, religious Jews and Arab dolls* were designed and produced over the years, however their existence and the extent of their presence was dissimilar.

The different types of dolls draw the boundaries of Israeliness that shifted between representation of "us" and of "others." These concepts are essentially imagined, but also have the capacity to delineate a symbolic border. The key question is: who are "us" and who are "the others," and what are the prominent representations that were shaped and perceptible over the years.

The Dolls and the Boundaries of Israeliness



"Sabra" dolls



"Orthodox Jew" dolls



"Arab" dolls



Cultural groups (ethnic) creating their museums

Ethnographic museums in Israel reveal significant trends in the role they play in the creation of a national ethos and in the formulation of multicultural Israeli identity. This role is expressed through the ideology, cultural discourse and forms of presentation and representation.

Identity and museums are terms that have much to do with one another, notably in Israel; a closer look deciphers a strong connection between the two. A summary glimpse at museum content reveals deep involvement in questions regarding the Israeli identity. During the last three decades, ethnic heritage has been added to the list. Ethnic and heritage museums especially of non-European ethnic groups ["*Mizrahi*"] have been established.

It's a 'text' in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them.

The Libyan Jewry Heritage Museum



The Libyan Jewry Heritage center was opened gradually at the last two decades; it was placed in a building given to the world organization of Libyan Jews and the local community by the municipality of Or-Yehuda. The permanent exhibition was in a constant process of creation and shaping itself, it was crystallized in phases, section after section till the last year. The Libyan Jewry Heritage centre is a small institution, based mainly on volunteers, enjoys small budgets and represents quite a small community, around 60,000 in Israel and few thousands more abroad, most of them in Italy.

At the last two decades, with the new waves in historiography and the awakening of multicultural ideology in Israel, the Libyan community became more aware of their unique tradition, memory and history, and especially the life in Libya under the Italian occupation in 2nd world war.

In this museum and others as Pratt notes, “safehouses” are created. *These “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as homogenous, sovereign with shared understandings, trust and temporary protection from legacies of oppression”.*

Epilogue

In this paper I have tried to challenge Ethnographic Museums, by proposing three available forms of "contact zones".

I would like to finish my talk by raising an important question for further thoughts and discussions - what do we expect / want that will happen to the visitors, with each single person, once they are out of these museums?. (Jorge Melguizo, Icom Conference, 2013 Rio de Janeiro).

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