



Book Review

Emanuela Trevisan Semi, Dario Miccoli, and Tudor Parfitt (eds)

Memory and Ethnicity: Ethnic Museums in Israel and the Diaspora

Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 265 pp.

£44.99 hbk

What is a museum and whom is it for? What entitles an assortment of items to be called a ‘museum’? Who are museum visitors and what experiences do they expect to have there? These and other key questions of museum practice come to mind – although not always addressed – when reading *Memory and Ethnicity*, a collection of studies on ethnic museums, all but one of which are dedicated to Jewish communities in Israel and in other parts of the world. Starting from the book cover picture to photographs in the third chapter, taken by Emanuela Trevisan Semi at the Museum of the Jewish Cemetery of Fes, Morocco, one cannot avoid wondering: can *any* accumulation of objects – a sewing machine, hats, walking sticks, a pile of footballs, various photographs, art reproductions, Jewish ritual objects – be considered a museum? Trevisan Semi acknowledges the difficulty of definitions but puts the question differently: ‘what kind of museum is this?’ and soon moves to the main topic of her study: four museums of Moroccan Jews in Israel. The theoretical base of the chapter, and to an extent of the entire book, is the function rather than the form of these museums: following James Clifford (1997), ethnic museums are discussed as sites of memory, where minorities present and represent their past; often as a tool in their cultural and political struggle to voice their own version of history within the majority culture.

The contributors to the book’s nine chapters, scholars from Europe, the United States, and Israel, come from various disciplines: history, Jewish studies, languages, anthropology, and communication. Only a few have a practical museum experience. The institutions discussed are also diverse: large and small museums, private and public, located in major cities and in remote villages, well-established and officially accredited museums and amateurish initiatives, some still in the making. And some can hardly be called museums – heritage centres and internet websites. In this diversity most of the authors share the tendency to ‘read’ a museum merely as text with its didactic purpose and ideologically motivated story, rather than as a three dimensional and multi-faceted entity. The story told in most of the museums discussed here is the story of specific Jewish communities vis-a-vis major events in modern Jewish history – displacement, immigration and settlement, persecution and discrimination, Zionism, and the establishment of the State of Israel.

The first chapter presents Tamar Katriel's study of local settlement museums around Israel, mainly in the Kibbutzim, which make up about a third of over two hundred museums in the country. These museums, she argues, aim at enhancing the fundamental Zionist narrative, primarily the dichotomy between 'here' (Israel, the new homeland) and 'there' (the Diaspora), doing so not only through the exhibits from the pioneering periods of the early twentieth century but also by erasing any signs of the previous lives of the pioneers when in the Diaspora. In contrast to these 'museums devoted to the local Israeli terrain' are the ethnographic museums, a label 'used to refer to museums concerned with the ethnically-marked cultures of diasporic communities'. Moreover, Katriel claims, the very distinction between these museum genres 'carries far-reaching ideological overtones' (p. 7).

While focusing on critique of the ideology behind the settlement museums another, no less important motivation is hidden in an offhand remark: 'Rather tellingly, and somewhat ironically this museological rhetoric of pioneering emerged at a time when the Socialist Zionist ideology epitomised by the vision of the *kibbutz* was losing its grip on Israeli cultural imagination, and when the *kibbutz* movement itself was already in a state of dissolution' (p. 7). True, but why 'ironically'? The crux of the matter is that museums, especially ethnographic and historic museums, are usually established when the culture they represent is no longer a living culture; when the elders of the community gather and preserve objects and symbols of their past before they disappear from the world, and transmit this chapter in history – usually painted in rosy colours – to the following generations. By their very nature, museums are sites of memory; an idea not always respected as Italian poet F.T. Marinetti demonstrated in his famous 1909 'Manifesto of Futurism' when scornfully equating museums to cemeteries.

For Jewish ethnic museums the question of passing on the memory is complicated by the multi-layered identity of Jewish communities: they are part of the general population and culture of the country, but are distinct in their cultural and religious traditions, which thus connect them to the wider Jewish world. The Jewish museum in Casablanca, Morocco, analysed by Sophie Wagenhofer in chapter seven offers an illuminating example. The main aim of the museum is to 'represent Jewish culture as an integral part of Moroccan culture, a message that is directed . . . first of all . . . at the Muslim majority in Morocco, who often consider Jews to be somehow different, associated with Europe, the US or Israel' (p. 173). Special efforts are thus made to attract local Muslim visitors, and to promote to the outside world an image of tolerance and pluralism. Consequently, the Holocaust and racial persecutions of Jews in Morocco during the Second World War are not emphasised. Equally, the mass emigration of 250,000 Moroccan Jews, almost the entire community, is marginalised in the story told by the museum, focusing instead on the good relationship that existed beforehand between Jews and Muslims.

Likewise, the Jewish Museum of Florida (chapter nine), which was established in a dwindling community of Miami Beach, has its *raison d'être* in the legitimisation of Miami Jews. The collection is used to 'demonstrate to gentile schoolchildren and others that Jews are normal human beings just like them' (p. 225). In order to present a positive view of Florida's Jews, anti-Semitism and oppression of the past is not emphasised. Moreover, the museum's mission

is to present the Jewish community as a model, to 'act as an inspirational paradigm for the successful acculturation and integration of any American immigrant communities' (p. 232).

Challenging Jewish historiography and Zionism is proven more problematic for ethnic museums in Israel. In presenting the glorious past of rich culture and peaceful relationships between Jews and non-Jews they also have to deal with the fate of these communities after their arrival in Israel, when they lost their traditions and self-respect and suffered discrimination. Unlike museums in the Diaspora, ethnic museums in Israel are mainly directed at the immigrants' offspring, providing them with memories and offering them a sense of pride and belonging that they may not feel within Israeli society. The book's inclination towards non-western Jews – from Morocco, Libya, India, and Egypt – raises a question about other Jewish communities who immigrated to Israel: Polish, Romanian, Bulgarian, German, Greek, etc. Did they not establish ethnic museums or heritage centres (some certainly did), or were they not considered worthy of a research? Obviously no single book can cover the diversity of Jewish communities. The choice made in this book is legitimate but should have been openly argued and justified.

The book's second chapter on '*Beith Ha-Tefutzot*, The Museum of the Jewish Diaspora' supposedly covers other Jewish communities, mainly in Europe, and shows how 'the narrative in the Museum . . . is the museological duplicate of the core of the cardinal Zionist myth' (p. 26). But the focus of Shelly Shenhav-Keller's study is what was new and much disputed when the museum opened in 1978: exhibits that were reconstructed or even invented in order to tell a story rather than being true historical finding. Nowadays, when thematic and virtual museums are widespread, using sophisticated technologies and offering emotional experience rather than factual knowledge, the question of authenticity of the exhibits is perhaps less relevant. Regrettably, this study was not updated since it was originally researched, to include even the most obvious changes of the recent decade, such as the museum's new name 'The Museum of the Jewish People'.

The studies presented in *Memory and Ethnicity* generally concentrate on the intentions and vision of the museums' founders – the story tellers – and tend to take for granted the audience (some exception is the chapter on Umm El-Fahem Art Gallery, which describes exhibitions' opening ceremonies). This volume effectively upholds the paradigm of ethnic museums as instruments in the cultural and political struggle of minorities to voice their version of history. But as the communities of which these museums are part remain mostly beyond the scope of the studies, we cannot know whether this struggle is successful without further research.

Reference

- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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