VOICES
from around the world

Towards the Postcolonial Museum

by Ciraj Rassool

As we gather to deliberate about the contested nature of objects in old and even colonial museums, as well as the implications and opportunities of new understandings of the meaning of 'museum', we also need to consider how much the world has changed since the modern museum and its fundamental features first emerged. The creation of a world after colonialism might have occurred for the most part in political terms. However, we are still deeply immersed in the epistemic struggle to change the colonial frameworks through which we understand societies and people, as well as institutions such as museums through and within which the societies and people of the world have been collected, classified and made knowable.

Here I want to argue that the frameworks of the stewardship of collections for future generations may be insufficient to maintain and defend the old museum in the face of powerful new arguments and approaches to the museum-as-process and the interrogative museum (Silverman 2015; Karp and Kratz 2015). These new arguments do not merely seek the geographic reorganisation of collections along national lines (new national museums vs 'universal' museums), but demand that old museums seek a new authority for these collections in their relationship with source societies. And it is precisely in these consultations, negotiations and contests that the meaning of the new museum is to be found, and that the dilemmas of the unsettled objects in those museums will be addressed, caught as they are between being returned or staying.

The museum is not only an institution of modernity and ordered citizenship, but also the primary institutional form of empire and coloniality. It was made and is being remade and adapted through both sides of colonialism's history: by a rapacious and violent empire of plunder and pacification, as well as by empire as 'benevolent colonisation', humanitarianism and trusteeship over people and things. This was a simultaneous expression of collecting, documenting and adminstering ('safeguarding' and 'preserving') things and people through appropriation and stewardship. The administrative and classificatory systems of the museum through which the world was made knowable drew very emphatic distinctions between people of culture and those of nature. The natural history museum became the site of collecting and displaying the material culture of subject people as well as the site for collecting and documenting the physical anthropology of race.

Humanitarianism was not simply a masked 'packaging' of empire and colonialism (Stoler 2006). Rather compassion and sympathy were a means of solidifying social hierarchies. Moreover, empire's humanitarianism had another dimension to it, namely a gesture of rescue and recuperation, especially of species and life forms deemed to be in danger of extinction or disappearance. In the case of the bushmen, this humanitarianism gave birth to the first significant representations of material culture in southern Africa, in the form of the 19th-century records of /Xam language and folklore that was later constituted as an archive, known later as the Bleek-Lloyd collection. Yet all this work was conducted in the name of humanitarianism and was completely bound up with the plundered, racialised body of the bushman, perhaps the central element in constituting the discourse of museum recuperation and heritage preservation.

Modern collecting museums in societies as diverse as Amsterdam, Toronto, Cologne and Berlin have embarked upon projects to rethink the relationship between collections and people in their nations and overseas, with perceptive awareness of wider contests of coloniality, race and history. We also take note of the emergence of important new national museums of history in the US, South Africa and elsewhere, where the museum has become a means of asserting a belonging to a new nation in the face of previous denialism or active exclusion, or indeed as part of the cultural proclamation and narration of a new nation. New history museums have also been created as site museums or memory museums or more properly as 'politics of history' museums, where the category of museum has often been constituted in the defence of rights to land or as part of the process of transitional justice.

In this work of the defence of community and place, museums have also been marshalled as part of the democratic organs of the people, as a social movement in their fight against injustice, impunity and forgetting, and even just to build the resources of community itself. Often these new site museums or community museums have embraced the domain of museums without substantial tangible material culture, but with a world of the experiential and immaterial, as performed voice and body that speak to deep histories of oppression and the desire of a new self-authorship and an internal expertise. These are exactly the new projects of the self-activity or museum-making that we need to embrace and advocate as part of the process of deepening democracy in the world in the 21st century.

Museums and Coloniality

South African society has experienced very difficult histories of multiple colonialisms as well as the social engineering of a rapacious, violent apartheid regime that divided its people into races and ethnic groups. In many ways South African history can be understood as a deep, historical contest between the project of race and ethnicity of successive colonial states and apartheid on the one hand, and the project of imagining a society without race and ethnicity on the other. Sections of the South African liberation movement that emerged during the 20th century developed a substantial body of thinking about non-racialism and anti-racism, especially during the period between the 1930s and the 1980s. These ideas have enabled us to understand race, ethnicity and the administration of people in historical ways. We have also come to understand how each category of race was created as part of this administration and governmentality, and how ethnicity itself was invented through native administration as part of the processes of rule.

The museum is one of the sites where race was made. A group of colleagues and I have recently completed a project on the South African 'empire', with the publication of a special issue of the Journal of Southern African Studies (Volume 41, 3, 2015). This project showed how it is possible to understand Southern African history through the idea of the constitution of a regional empire of power and authority, instead of through the conventional framework of the making of nations (Henrichsen et al. 2015: Lalu 2015). Research conducted in this project also emphasised that the museum needs to be understood as an epistemology, a system of representation, and not merely as a collection or exhibition. Indeed, the museum was the very institution of empire and coloniality, marked by categories of ethnicity, and systems of classification and knowledge hierarchy (Rassool 2015; see also Bennett 1995, 2004). And as is well known, the fundamental classification was that between cultural history and ethnography; between the material culture of those deemed to be civilised and the material culture of those deemed to be 'primitive'.

The major challenge is to shift from an understanding of colonialism as time and place and as formal system of rule to an appreciation of coloniality as an epistemology, as a politics of knowledge. This would enable a much wider understanding of coloniality as embedded in deep structures of knowledge, in the character and shape of disciplines in the museum and the university. Colonialism would then be appreciated as more than merely a topic of history, as was the approach in the exhibition on German colonialism held in 2016 at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, notwithstanding how powerful this exhibition was. The claim made by art historian Horst Bredenkamp that Germany remained relatively untouched by colonialism because of its brief colonial experience can therefore be dismissed as absurd. This claim lacked an appreciation of just how significantly German museums and universities continue to be marked by coloniality in peculiar ways through the persistence of 19th-century disciplinary systems and classificatory divisions.

As we consider these questions, it is worthwhile noting the extent to which German public cultural institutions and spaces have had a deliberate engagement with postcolonial thought in the last few years. For the most part, nevertheless, many scholars have tended to see postcolonial thought as a set body of ideas, a library that is available to be translated into German and to be quoted. Many scholars in Germany have not even begun to consider the challenges that the society faces in its quest to decolonise itself. The project of creating a Global South Studies Center at the University of Cologne occurred on top of a German disciplinary history that rendered colonised areas of the world into discreet diciplines, such as Orientalischekunde and Afrikanistik. African Studies in Cologne and in Germany more generally was created out of the connection between Etnologie and African languages. For the most part, African History did not develop in Germany as it did in Britain and France (and the United States) as part of anti-colonial struggles in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, German historians interested in African societies have mostly been scholars of German overseas history. These questions of discipline will continue to limit the extent to which the humanities and social sciences in Germany are able to embark upon postcolonial critical studies.

At the same time, ethnographic museums in Cologne, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hamburg and elsewhere have been undergoing processes of renovation that have sometimes seen an openness to rethinking the museum process itself. Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt proved to be the setting of some of the most innovative thinking of the museum as laboratory, of artists in residence engaging with collections and of the idea of the postethnographic in the museum (Deliss 2014). Berlin has perhaps been the setting of the most significant contests over colonial human remains collections, over the ethics of colonial collections, and of the persistence of colonial urban traces. With pressure brought to bear by cultural activist groups, much of the debate has focussed on the cultural politics of the Humboldt Forum, which will bring the collections of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin at Dahlem together with those of Asian Art. In perpetuating the idea of the material culture and art of those described as ‘non-European’ the Humboldt Forum has shown itself to be fundamentally a project of producing ‘Westernness’, and shoring up boundaries, part of the continuing cultural project of reimagining Berlin as a major European city, and of reasserting Germany’s position as ‘Western’.

In South Africa, the museum system was shot through with a colonial classificatory system, characterised by a division between the people deemed to have culture and history, and those deemed only to have tribe as well as the physical features of race. The South African museum system was divided between museums of cultural history and of ethnography, with the latter sometimes incorporated into natural history museums (Davison 1990). This museum inheritance posed challenges for healing a society from the ravages of colonialism and apartheid and for building a democratic, non-racial society. How could these old, divided national museum collections, marked by a colonial classificatory division, become museums of the new non-racial nation? What did non-racialism mean for the classification system, what did it mean for the museum infrastructure and what did it mean for the administration of collections and artefacts that had been segregated?

A new ‘flagship’ national museum structure was created in Cape Town out of an amalgamation of the old previously segregated national museum collections, and was named the Iziko Museums of South Africa, with ‘iziko’ being a Nguni word for the hearth of the home. As part of the amalgamation and the integration of the collections, a new collections division was created, which was simply called the ‘social history’ collections, and a new storage facility for these collections was created (Davison 2005; Rassool 2009). This new collections building was not merely a new store, but rather became the site for an internationally significant epistemological project, taking previously segregated cultural history and ethnography collections, for example of ceramics, and performing the collections management work of placing them within a single collections division. This epistemic work also involves paying attention to labelling and object biography in ways that remove administrative racism, while showing the history of race and ethnicity in labelling.

While the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam made the bold step in 2015 of removing and changing its labels that bore the stamp of colonial racism (Jones 2015), many museums across the world hold significant collections from Southern African societies that continue to carry the offensive labels acquired during their acquisition and early entry in to the collection. These labels, such as ‘Kaffir’, the colonial label for Nguni-speaking people in the Eastern Cape at the time of their 19th-century conquest by the British, present a challenge to museums as they find ways of according respect to societies from which their collections originate. An opportunity is presented to these museums in South Africa and in other countries not only to alter their offensive labels, but also to embark upon a project of thinking about the history of ethnic and ethnographic labelling as part of the cultural work of colonialism.

Labels are not merely about a sense of authenticity; they are couched in the discourses of society and the object (Price 2013). The decolonisation of museums may involve an enquiry into the ethics of acquisition, and into the relationship between collections and living, historical cultures. And it also involves a deep, critical, historical enquiry into the knowledge systems surrounding objects and collections, in an approach that questions colonial categories. The work of Hamilton and Leibhammer has shown how important this is for ‘untribing the archive’ in the case of South African collections and documentalities (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2017). More recently the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, for the first time, included items of Native American art (previously thought of as ‘artefact’) in its exhibitions of ‘American’ art, representing an important epistemic shift.

In South Africa, the work of building a society out of the ravages and deep effects of racism is also potentially a project of trying to imagine a new nation without race, and even potentially without ethnicity. Yet contradictorily, the new postapartheid society continues to be marked by race in almost every way. You cannot attend to policies of affirmative action without some reliance on older notions of race. Non-racialism is not simply a denial of the effects of race or an opportunistic claim of racelessness. The politics of racelessness serves to assist those whom apartheid empowered, the beneficiaries of apartheid’s own affirmative action. Instead non-racialism needs to be understood as a politics of knowledge and identity in which one thinks about the racial and ethnic administration of persons historically.

Just as one problematises race and ethnicity in the history of the administration of persons, so one has to think historically about the categories of the administration of museum objects and collections. As much as we can identify how artificial and constructed ethnicity is, we need to be able to understand how ethnicity and ethnic categories themselves have history (Vail, ed 1991). And so we need to appreciate the history behind how the ethnic and ethnographic category of Zulu was made, and how Zulu social formation can be understood historically outside of the simplistic framework of the Mfecane and state formation (Hamilton 1998). This will enable museums to rethink the category ‘Zulu’ in their collections management, not just regarding its historical accuracy, but also regarding its cultural politics over time.

The museum has also been one of the sites in the making of the category of bushman, and it is important for us to understand its work and that of the museum disciplines of physical and cultural anthropology in the history of bushmanisation. What the concept of bushman has meant has changed over time, from its earliest colonial creation as a reference to people without livestock, partly as a consequence of dispossession, and to people who in turn raided Boer homesteads for stolen livestock (Gordon 1992). This process culminated in the physical anthropological studies of the early 20th century, and the racial project of cast-making from the bodies of northern Cape farmworkers and shepherds, conducted in the name of anthropological and museum preservation (Davison 2001; Skotnes 2002).

Colonialism has also often had the effect of removing people from any sense of indigenous continuity with precolonial societies. It is important to understand how new expressions of a politics of indigeneity have been emerging in which people have sought to narrate their lives in new indigenous terms, and where this indigeneity is the basis of a new and aspiring modernity, sometimes even expressed as the 'recovery' of indigenous knowledge systems. For this, an older language of ethnography has often been employed, which draws upon the research and publications of the old colonial anthropologists for assistance. So while Khoisan indigenous identities were studied in the museum through the prism of racial type and the trope of disappearance, Bantu-speaking people were turned into ethnic groups through the work of anthropology and native administration. And notwithstanding their desires, it has not been possible for indigeneity to be claimed and expressed outside the frames of ethnography (Rassool 2009)

These have been some of the contradictions unfolding in South African museums, expressed most powerfully in the 1996 exhibition, Miscast: Negotiating Khoisan History and Material Culture, curated by artist and scholar Pippa Skotnes in the South African National Gallery in 1996. This exhibition sought to engage with the history of racialised cast-making and with the power of the Bushman diorama that had been installed in the South African Museum in 1959-60, utilising the body casts of racial science made 50 years before. In this significant exhibition, Skotnes sought to counterpose the violence of the gun and the museum with recovered expressions of indigenous voices, as assembled by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd from 19th century / Xam informants who had been imprisoned in the Breakwater prison in Cape Town on charges of stock theft (Skotnes 1996; Skotnes 2002).

Skotnes's project failed to problematise these notions of 'recovery' and 'rescue' ascribed to the work of Bleek and Lloyd, and her concept of the museum remained couched in the discourse of atonement, preservation and stewardship, and its desires for trusteeship over people and objects (Rassool 2009). The Miscast project was also criticised for reproducing and repeating the very colonial representations of Khoisan people that it had sought to problematise. In addition, the exhibition met new assertions of indigeneity as ethnicity, as neo-Khoisan groups sought to question the authority of the curator and the museum (Schrire et al. 1996>). These assertions were part of broader neo-Khoisan demands for belated inclusion in the system of traditional authorities (formerly native administration) that also represented a shift from race to ethnicity.

Rehumanising the Dead of Racial Science

When you make a new national museum of a non-racial democracy, what do you do with the legacies of racial collecting and research? An important aspect of South African museum anthropology and collecting history involved supposed 'preservation' of the physical records of people deemed to be disappearing, such as people labelled as 'Bushmen', whom anthropologists saw as 'living fossils'. As a result of these impulses to preserve and collect, the buried bodies of the 'freshly dead' were purchased by museums from grave robbers. This trade in stolen human remains of early 20th-century people lay at the heart of the making of the modern museum in South Africa, coinciding with birth of the Union of South Africa as a new white nation in 1910. It also saw South African museums compete with their European counterparts for priority access to the remains of the stolen dead, as an expression of the South Africanisation of science. In addition to the trade in human remains of the recently dead, there is also evidence of the purchase of bodies of people before they died (Legassick and Rassool 2000).

As part of the transformation of the old museum collections, in the Iziko Museums of South Africa, the collections of the dead who had been stolen in these ways, or acquired for the purposes of racial research, were removed from the collection under the terms of a new Human Remains Policy, and set aside in special 'no access' stores until such time as a national policy on return and repatriation comes into operation. After the Bushman Diorama had been closed, a decision was made that racialised body casts should also be considered as unethically acquired human remains. The experience of creating national cohesion and social healing through the return and reburial of the remains of Sara Baartman in 2002, and Klaas and Trooi Pienaar in 2012 was widely expected to influence a process of returning the dead from museums in South Africa (Rassool 2015). These returns would not merely be a roll-out of events of deracialisation, but would constitute the new content of the museum itself, with processes of return constituting processes of remaking the museums themselves.

As the legacies of race and physical-anthropology-as-science are attended to as part of the decolonisation of museums in South Africa, Iziko Museums have also shown that it is possible to rethink the value of the category of ethnography. It is not possible to make new postcolonial nations on the basis of the ethnographic museum. The experiences of Ghana and Uganda and other countries demonstrate the dilemmas of national museums which remain dormant, with their frozen, dusty exhibitions trapped in old languages and categories. The creation of social history collections in the Iziko Museums has shown one way in which old museums with inherited collections can set out on a post-ethnographic path, so that people can recognise themselves in museums outside of colonialism's categories of race and ethnicity.

The Museum as Process

That museums nowadays are much more about people and creating civic forums for discussion and debate is powerfully shown in the cultural and memory work of community history museums in South Africa that emerged from the mid-1990s. The foremost example of this new museum of process is the District Six Museum in Cape Town, which came into existence as a site museum and a politics of history museum. It was created to defend the land of District Six, from which people had been forcibly removed under apartheid, and to defend the narrative of that experience, through site interpretive work. This museum that has developed alongside a complex project of healing the community through land restitution has also deliberately set itself the task of rethinking the city of Cape Town outside of the categories of race, with the challenge being 'to build a city not of people, not of races' (Soudien 2001).

The District Six Museum has worked with the concept of museum not as collection but as site inscription, as memory work, and as transactions of knowledge. In recent years its main methods of interpretation have involved site visits and commemorative walks, utilising the resources of memory, trying to ensure that a land restitution process under way pays attention to questions of memory. Here the museum is understood as the process of knowledge formation, as part of the resources of reconstituting society, where this is the museum not as the object and not as the exhibition. Yet the District Six museum has been through quite a substantial process of museumisation and formalisation, as it acquired the responsibilities of stewardship and care of collections, of objects and images of ordinary lives as well as recordings of social memory and cultural expression (Rassool 2006).

This work of regarding histories of displacement and return, of dehumanisation and the resources of recovery, is part of the new museum work of remaking society and of rethinking the museum beyond its modern impetus to discover, document and classify. This is the new museum of conversation and interrogation between local, national and international expertise, between the oral and literate, and between academic and public scholarship. A focus on the 'politics of history' enables a new approach to museums that consider varying pasts and more than anything else offer an approach to expanding the horizons of museums beyond the canon.

The postethnographic museum and the museum of process both point to the possibility that the modern museum as the world has known it, which emerged as part of the making of the modern person, and which coincided with the colonisation of the world, may have outlived its value. Yet the postmuseum can only be the outcome of a sustained engagement with the basic museum work of collecting, conservation, exhibition and education in ways that enter into battle with the colonial concepts of race and ethnic group, which seem almost naturalized and frozen into who we are. In general, it is critical to think about the connections between the administration of people and the administration of artefacts in the museum, and to rethink both society and the museum at the same time.

What we are talking about in this questioning of race, ethnicity and ethnography is a new critical citizenship and what it means to be human in a postcolonial world.

In considering how the museum is changing we need to understand how old collecting museums have been challenging themselves and how new, interrogative museums of process have begun to expand museum horizons to embrace the downtrodden, the oppressed and exploited of the world, whose experiences might previously have been confined and contained through colonial ethnography and even a denial of coevalness. This focus on local and deep histories of oppression, displacement and survival, while guarding against the triumphalism of nationalism, needs to consider the ways it offers new understandings of what museums are, as well as the possibilities for new museologies for the 21st century.

Questioning the museum is not merely about expunging its rapacious histories, and shoring up the vestiges of a remaining benevolence, framed as preservation and stewardship, but requires questions posed about the syndrome of preservation itself. The most progressive edge of that reformed, benevolent museum is the ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997, based on Pratt 1991), as produced through co-curatorship, and through science and indigeneity working together. This model of a reformed museum retained the classificatory order and hierarchy of empire, but relied upon greater participation by ‘source communities’, with the museum placed on a more ‘ethical’ footing.

This age of ethical engagement with human subjects and of a new ethics of collecting has seen the emergence of new programmes to prevent museums from benefiting from the illicit traffic in artefacts, and a significant move in many museums to ‘clean’ museums of culture and nature of their human remains collections and of other ‘sensitive collections’, deemed to have been unethically collected. Sometimes these changes have taken the form of a partial ‘cleaning’ through merely moving the store of human remains or sensitive collections, and creating Keeping Places, jointly managed by both scientific and indigenous parties. Such processes of reform might have created more socially responsive and ethically grounded museums, but they have left the empire of the museum intact.

Transforming the museum requires understanding its history as the locus of empire and coloniality in all of its forms, and to embark on the difficult work of interrogating its collecting histories and epistemologies, and to think about museums outside evolutionary frameworks and the impulses of preservation and atonement. The postcolonial museum may indeed require the inauguration of the postmuseum itself.

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