

Indigenous peoples and ethnographic museums: A changing relationship

The Nordic Centre of Heritage Learning and Creativity

Lilla Vonk



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Within Western museology, the exhibiting of ethnographic collections has been a long-lasting practice. In the 19th century, the exhibition of such collections for mass-audiences became a common practice, with phenomena such as the popular World Fairs acting as important catalysts (Corbey 1993, 339-340). The ethnographic material put on display at such events originated from what is nowadays called source communities; people deriving from colonized countries and later former-colonies, which were, or had been, submitted to European rule (Peers, Brown 2005, 1). The term source communities most often refers to indigenous peoples, which are culturally distinct groups affected by colonization (Anaya 2004, 3). Over time, the accumulation of such objects led to the formation of large collections which eventually led to the emergence of the ethnographic museum. The relationship such museums maintained with the source communities associated with their collections can be described as a one-way exchange, deriving from a principle of colonial inequality. The museum collected objects within an imperial context and served as a cultural institution whose task was to safeguard cultural expressions for the future. In the case of ethnographic collections related to indigenous communities, this functioned as a particularly strong discourse, based on the premise that without the museum safekeeping objects, primitive cultures would die out for in this discourse, indigenous people are portrayed as vanquishing cultures (Peers, Brown 2005, 1). This discourse is inscribed within the grand narrative wherein Western civilization functioned as the dominant culture, opposed to 'Others', deriving from 'primitive' cultures. Indigenous communities were not consulted regarding collections comprising cultural artefacts associated to them and with which they self-identified (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 2).

Over the last years, shifts towards a more two-way type of relationship can be perceived. Indigenous interests and values are increasingly taken into account by museum staff, who progressively have come to consider indigenous communities as authorities of their own cultural heritage and have started to cooperate with them in the context of the management of their ethnographic collections. This shift showcases a changing power relation, wherein cultural institutions and source communities are building on the establishment of relationships of trust, where none has existed in the past (Peers, Brown 2005, 2).

The museum is nowadays considered as the cultural institution *par excellence* to mend the unequal colonial relationship with indigenous communities because they hold artefacts that are seen as so-called “contact-zones” which function as sources of knowledge and catalysts for the establishment of new relationships (Peers, Brown 2005, 5). In this context, the unequal colonial relationship is plural; it refers to the relationship between museums and indigenous communities, but also to the relationships that exist within these communities which have, over time, led to gaps in knowledge.

Since developments and changes in these relationships have started to take place only recently, initiatives of cooperation between museums and indigenous are still an emerging field. Therefore it is both interesting and instructive to look into the different ways in which individual ethnographic museums approach their collections and the extent to which they are involved with indigenous communities in order to assess which initiatives are deemed successful and why, and where progress remains to be made. This report will provide current examples that illustrate decolonizing museum practices from several case studies, two from a European and one from a North-American context. A comparison of their methodology and the impact thereof will be drawn in pursuance of making a contribution to the mapping of current museum initiatives in this particular museological field.

Case-Study: Musée des Abénakis, Canada

In the fall of 2014, the Tourism Industry association of Canada (TIAC) and the Aboriginal Tourism Association of Canada (ATAC) initiated a new partnership which aims to advance Aboriginal tourism in Canada. As a part of this cooperation, TIAC and ATAC have designed The National Aboriginal Cultural Tourism Award, which will be awarded annually to a business or institution that demonstrates a “commitment to the development, promotion and delivery of an authentic, innovative and enriched Aboriginal cultural tourism visitor experience¹.” The first recipient of the award was the Musée des Abénakis in Quebec, who received the award on the 26th of November 2014. This is the latest coronation in a long list of awards: since 2011, the museum has won several awards. The museum is referred to as a pioneer of Aboriginal museums in Quebec², and a recurring recommendation is the museum’s engagement in the

¹ See

http://tiac.travel/cgi/page.cgi/_zine.html/TopStories/New_Canadian_Tourism_Award_Announced_to_Celebrate_Excellence_in_Aboriginal_Cultural_Tourism.

² See <http://www.newswire.ca/fr/story/1454133/musee-des-abenakis-first-national-aboriginal-cultural-tourism-award-recipient>

development of their local community and economy. So what makes this museum so successful?

The Musée des Abénakis is a museum dedicated to documenting, preserving and transmitting the cultural heritage of the Abenaki First Nation’s people, situated in the Odanak reserve. An interesting thing to note about this museum is that it was founded in 1965 by Abenaki Elders, in cooperation with a missionary, as the first indigenous museum in Quebec at the time³. It was thus not founded during the colonialist epoch, nor was it solely conceptualized by non-indigenous founders, which, in the context of most ethnographical museums, is unusual. The current museum director does not originate from the Abenaki community, but she works closely with members of this community. The museum functions as a platform wherein members of the Abenaki community, local non-Abenaki communities and tourists are invited to engage in and develop a constructive dialogue regarding cultural development. The museum creates content in consultation and cooperation with member of the Abenaki community, therewith creating a high level of indigenous agency.

The museum’s most recent temporal exhibition is a good illustration of the type of relationship the museum maintains with the First Nation communities across Canada. This exhibition is centered on the topic of collaboration and is titled “Everyone pull up a chair” (“Prenons tous place”). It is an account of the three-year collaborative project

between eighteen First Nation peoples which resulted in the museum’s permanent exhibitions “This is our story”. This permanent exhibition recounts the lived experiences of indigenous communities in the 21st century, exploring their sometimes complex identities, balancing between tradition and modernity. Such a vigorous multiannual project, wherein more than 800 First Nation



One of the exhibition spaces of “Everyone pull up a chair”

³ See http://museedesabenakis.ca/data/?page_id=43

community members have been consulted, is a first in Canadian museology⁴.

“This is our story” touches on themes such as roots, colonization and decolonization and the future. “Everyone pull up a chair” showcases the proceedings that led up to this exhibition, and it recounts the steps that were taken in bringing the several First Nation peoples together to work collectively on this project. The strength of this project resides in the “object” taking control over the narration and thereby being the “subject” at the same time. The communities were at par collaborators, which is a far cry from the unequal colonial relationships sketched above, which is very typical for 20th century European ethnographic museums.

“Everyone pull up a chair” consists of objects, photographs, audio, and audio-visual material. These all form sources of information that recount lived experiences. In the audio material for instance, several members of First Nation communities elaborate on what their specific culture means to them, and how their indigenous heritage manifests itself throughout their life and in their identities.

Aside from creating and hosting exhibitions, the museum is also engaged in an archaeological excavation project in Odonak, the First Nation Abenaki reserve in Quebec, which started on the museum’s initiative in 2010 and is still ongoing. This initiative, titled “Fort Odonak: the past revisited” (“Fort Odonak: le passé revisité”), has received the *Prix Excellence*, awarded by the Société des musées du Québec in 2014. The jury report listed this project as an innovative initiative transcending the customary standards of the museum. The project comprehends an important scientific component, but it also acts as cultural mediation wherein young members of the Abenaki community are active participants. They are invited to excavate with archaeologists on the dig. The archaeological research performed in Odonak looks into the ways of life of past Abenaki and aims to reconstruct lost knowledge on handwork techniques, dietary and medicinal knowledge and bio-environmental resources, in order to set up a program to promote the reintegration of vanished flora and fauna. This project thus generates knowledge, but also has social and economic impacts, created by taking on members of the community to work as collaborators on the project and by actively involving media, which attracts tourism, and members of the public are also involved through blog updates and visits of the excavation.

⁴ See <http://www.lapresse.ca/le-nouvelliste/arts-spectacles/201409/26/01-4803732-le-musee-des-abenakis-presente-sa-nouvelle-exposition-prenons-tous-place.php>musee%20de

The Abenaki museum can thus be characterized as a museum with a strong positioning in local communities which engages with its audiences, actively involves them and consults with them in the process of creating museum-content. These are recurring elements in the jury reports which explain and list the reasons for awarding the respective awards to the Abenaki museum.

Musée du Quai Branly, France

The Musée du Quai Branly is a contemporary ethnographic museum, founded in 2006 in Paris. It is one of the most frequented ethnographical museums worldwide, attracting over 1 300 000 visitors per year and in 2013, the museum welcomed its 10 millionth visitor. Its collection derive from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania. Some of these collections, especially the ones containing artefacts that have been collected in Oceania and the Americas, are strongly related to current indigenous communities.

The particularity of this ethnographic museum is that since it was founded during a time when the issues raised above concerning indigenous collections were already being discussed, it was able to take a stance on these right from the conceptualization of the museum. Australian Aboriginal art in particular has received great attention from the museum. In 1999, the museum launched an international architecture competition for the design of the museum and the laureate, French architect Jean Nouvel, inspired by indigenous Aboriginal art, incorporated Aboriginal aesthetics in his winning design. According to the museum, this sparked a great enthusiasm for Aboriginal art and the museum subsequently decided to create a permanent collection of contemporary Aboriginal artworks⁵. This permanent collection is the biggest installation of contemporary Aboriginal art outside Australia. The works were commissioned by the

museum and created by eight Australian artists from indigenous communities. The artists contributing to this permanent exhibition have expressed a wish to draw the world's attention to contemporary Aboriginal culture



One of the artworks commission by the Musée du Quai Branly

⁵ See http://www.quaibrantly.fr/uploads/media/Commande_publicque_d__art_aborigene.pdf

through these works, which function as expressions of the vivacity of their cultural identity⁶. The museum itself has named this initiative as a historical indication of positive changes in terms of political and cultural engagement of indigenous communities with museums. The works were integrated in the architectural plans in cooperation with Nouvel, thereby creating a synergy between the artworks and space within the museum. Through this initiative, the museum has taken a stance wherein it distances itself from the discourse of indigenous culture as extinct and wherein it emphasizes Aboriginal culture as a living tradition, which is a very important step towards decolonizing practices since it denounces one of the most determinative colonialist discourses concerning indigenous culture.

The Quai Branly museum does not stage participatory projects with indigenous communities on a regular basis, but it does organize international colloquiums and symposiums which are freely accessible to the public on topics and issues relating to indigenous communities. These events are often accompaniments to exhibitions that are hosted at the museum. During these colloquiums and symposiums all focus on emphasizing the living cultures of indigenous communities, and they often place their cultural practices in political contexts, addressing the issues indigenous communities are often confronted with. Many indigenous communities today are still affected by the lingering effects of colonialism, in many different ways, ranging from socio-economic to psychological impacts (Peers, Brown 2005, 6). The Quai Branly museum addresses the current situation of these peoples, while also showcasing the richness of their cultural practices.

The museum also critically assesses anthropological and ethnographic research that looks into indigenous communities and their culture. In 2013 for instance, the museum hosted an international colloquium that offered critical perspectives on anthropological research on Aboriginal culture. The museum staged this colloquium from the point of view that many European research are based on outdated intellectual traditions, which do not take recent developments within and concerning indigenous Aboriginal communities into account but instead repeat ethnographical findings gathered in the 19th and first half of the 20th century⁷. These types of debates and critical challenges are very needed, as many attitudes towards, and conceptions of, indigenous

⁶ See http://www.quaibrantly.fr/uploads/media/Commande_publique_d__art_aborigene.pdf

⁷ The interventions and debate are consultable as audio-files online, and contributions and presentations are available as pdfs. Visit: <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/programmation/manifestations-scientifiques/manifestations-passees/colloques-et-symposium/saison-2013/australian-aboriginal-anthropology-today-critical-perspectives-from-europe.html>

communities and culture remain locked-up is strong discourses that stem from the colonial era and perspective⁸.

Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, The Netherlands

The Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde was founded in Leiden during the colonial heyday, in 1837. The museum features collections similar to the ones from the Quai Branly museum that stem from all continents of the world aside from Europe. Over the course of the last years, the Volkenkunde museum has been engaging in collaborations between the museum and western academics associated with it, and indigenous populations. These projects are all articulated around the cultural heritage of the indigenous communities who are represented throughout the collections of the museum. One recent project focused on the Americas and was titled “Sharing knowledge and cultural heritage: First Nations of the Americas”. In 2010, the museum published the results of the project and it has received critical acclaim since (Hugo Benavides 2013, 84). This initiative is part of, as the museum puts it, the growing commitment of museum professionals to share their collections with the descendants of people and communities from whom the collections originated, who until as recently as the 1970s had so say whatsoever in the exhibition and ownership of these collections (Van Broekhoven *et al* 2010, 1). The main topic that is explored within this project is how to transform consultation into so-called “true collaboration”, which moves beyond the situation of one group providing ideas and suggestions to another group, and becomes “the joint shaping of representations” (Van Broekhoven *et al* 2010, 1). The museum hosted “expert meetings” in Leiden with indigenous and non-Native experts where numerous aspects involved in working with cultural heritage and material culture were discussed in a round-the-table setting. The wishes, critiques and requests that were voiced during this three-day meeting were then used to develop the “Sharing knowledge and cultural heritage” projects that would lead to new strategies for cooperation with Native stakeholders (Van Broekhoven *et al* 2010, 7-8).

A recent project, falling within this larger “Sharing knowledge and cultural heritage” project, for instance, has constituted of a collaboration with members of the Ka’apor community. Contact was established with this community when collection research performed by the museum pointed out they held a large collection of Ka’apor artefacts (240 in total). After the first contact was established, some members of the

⁸ See <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/programmation/manifestations-scientifiques/manifestations-passees/colloques-et-symposium/saison-2013/australian-aboriginal-anthropology-today-critical-perspectives-from-europe.html>

Ka'apor community, including a craftsman and artist, visited the Volkenkunde museum as consultants to examine their Ka'apor collection, to elaborate on the use and production of the artefacts and correct errors that had been made in the exhibition of certain artefacts. The Ka'apor delegates also visited the Brazilian Museu Paraense Emilio Goeldi, a partnering museum of this project.

After this consult, the Ka'apor were asked to collaborate with the museums and realize an exhibition in Belém, Brazil, using the collection of Ka'apor artefacts present in the museums. They were invited to choose the theme, storyline and artefacts themselves. Within this exposition, political issues currently faced by the Ka'apor were also addressed. The Ka'apor, native of Brazil, are living in the rainforests, which are threatened by deforestation, leading to violent confrontations between the Ka'apor and those invading their lands, cutting down the trees. According to dr. Mariana Françaço, a museologist who worked on the Ka'apor project as an associate of the Volkenkunde museum, this project touched upon the core task of the museum, which is to serve as a platform to talk about urgent political issues and address these problems⁹.



The Ka'apor exhibition poster of the exhibition in Belém, on display from the fall of 2014 until spring 2015.

⁹ See interview with Mariana Françaço, associated to Leiden University and the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, involved in the Ka'apor project. http://www.revistaproa.com.br/05/wp-content/uploads/2014/PDF/PROA_entrevista.pdf

Conclusive remarks

All three case-studies have presented initiatives from ethnographic museums with different backgrounds but sharing a common objective: establishing cooperative strategies with indigenous communities and inviting them to be involved in the museum. All museums approach this aspiration in a different way but the shared characteristics can all be grouped under the concept of giving agency to indigenous communities over their cultural heritage and by addressing the political situations indigenous communities are involved.

The Musée des Abénakis in Canada was already involved with indigenous communities and consulting with them at the establishment of the museum and has included members from the Abenaki community ever since. The level of indigenous community is high, and so is the political involvement of the museum with regard to issues and struggles of this indigenous community, as it lets its exhibitions function as platforms to discuss and voice problematic topics.

In France, The Musée du Quai Branly, one of its most high-profile ethnographic museums, is also actively involved with the political issues faced by indigenous communities. The museum stands up for these communities by organizing freely accessible colloquiums that serve as platforms for the critical evaluation and discussion of research, of questions relating to human rights and museological practices concerning indigenous communities. Furthermore, the museum is a strong advocate of emphasizing indigenous cultural practices as part of living cultures, therewith taking a clear political stance by breaking with an old and tenacious colonial discourse, portraying indigenous culture as bygone and in need of safeguarding by western museums. To stress this, the museum has worked with members of indigenous communities in the past for the design of exhibitions, but this is not a standard procedure for each new exhibition.

The Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde in The Netherlands has been engaging actively in the past ten years with indigenous communities related to the collections it holds, after having performed collection research to identify the source of particular collections of artefacts. This research has led to the development of cooperative projects between the museum and members of communities its collections derive from. The level of indigenous agency within these initiatives is significant, as was illustrated by the Ka'apor project. Once again, the political engagement of the museum is important to note.

The granting of agency to communities who were previously denied any access and say over their cultural heritage on display in Western museums is crucial, as it is a clear step towards a collaborative relationship wherein the museum is no longer the authority concerning the heritage of these communities. Working closely together with members of indigenous communities, consulting them as experts and actively involving them in the conceptualization and design of exhibitions, allow for a cooperation based on mutual trust. All three discussed museums showcase efforts in this directions, but not all museums take these efforts as far as they could. The Quai Branly and Volkenkunde museum have initiated collaborative projects, but these do not cover all their indigenous collections yet. It is recommendable to reach out more, as these previous initiatives have been met with enthusiasm in the indigenous communities in question.

The level of political engagement is equally important for successful collaborations. Ethnographic collections can no longer be considered and presented solely for their aesthetic appeal, they are embedded in political contexts, since many ethnographic collections have been assembled under colonial rule. Colonialism is still an issue today, as its effects linger on and have significant impact on many indigenous communities. Museums are no longer mere aesthetic temples showcasing the richness of culture, they fulfill an important social and educational rule. Exhibiting indigenous collections should therefore be connected to exhibiting their current socio-political situations.

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http://www.revistaproa.com.br/05/wp-content/uploads/2014/PDF/PROA_entrevista.pdf, consulted January 28th 2015.

Images

Image p. 5: http://museedesabenakis.ca/data/?page_id=83

Image p. 7:
http://www.quaibrantly.fr/uploads/media/Commande_publicque_d__art_aborigene.pdf

Image p. 10: screenshot from the homepage of the Emilio Goeldi Museum:
<http://www.museu-goeldi.br/>