

# THE SHARING OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS: COOPERATION WITH THIRD WORLD MUSEUMS<sup>1</sup>

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by

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## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Museums, like other institutions, are part of a larger social whole and as such reflect the organization and fabric of the societies within which they are embedded. The very fact that we have come together to consider and discuss advocacy roles of museums seems to me to be indicative of some fundamental changes in the constitution and governance of American - and Western - society over the past several decades. At the time when most of our museums were founded, and for some considerable length of time into this century, quibbles over aims, functions, and administration of museums were debated in a small circle of professional museum men and were usually settled by an even smaller elite of founding fathers and their biological and social descendants who supported and maintained most of these institutions. Over the past five decades or so, museums have slowly had to confront some major changes.

For one, an ever growing proportion of the total material support needed by museums is being supplied by the public hand. This is true even for private institutions. For the other, the broader audience to which most of our work is addressed has started to take an increasingly active interest in many aspects of our work. Ethics and methods of acquisition are questioned; philosophy and practice of curation and conservation are scrutinized; relevance, intention and appropriateness of research are criticized; and public demands are being made on the form and content of exhibitions.

Reflecting more general social conditions, this public interest is fractured along numerous lines, dividing the audience into a variety of constituencies who face the museum as consumers and critics with sometimes complimentary and often contradictory expectations and demands. To some extent, this situation may well be the result of our own efforts to become more "relevant," to "reach out" and to communicate with a larger number and broader spectrum of people whom we find through a variety of special interest groups. On the other hand, however, this effort itself is often stimulated by our need to demonstrate to the public sponsor through our attendance records both worthiness and need to receive from the generosity of the state. In any event, changes in funding structure and the museums' relationships to the public in general are related to each other, and both reflect more pervasive changes in social constitution, patterns of information exchange, and political practice in American society.

In general, we tend to think of our multifarious constituency as being made up of various segments of our own society. However, all museums that deal with ethnographic specimens, and anthropological museums therefore in

particular, are linked to a much larger constituency which is spread throughout the world - from wherever our collections originate, that is, of course, primarily countries and societies in the Third World. That this group may have a legitimate interest in our collections and what we do with them seems, on the face of it, only reasonable. By and large, we hear relatively little from this interest group, except perhaps for an occasional call for the return of some specific artifacts the previous expatriation of which is felt to be particularly onerous for reasons of cultural symbolism, historical significance, or national prestige. Because of the nature of our collections, we are inextricably linked with this larger constituency and, for reasons of more general social and economic developments on a global scale, it must be expected that this group will become increasingly vocal over the coming years. Basic philosophical grounds then, as well as practical considerations suggest that we consider our relationship to Third World societies.

It is the purpose of this paper to contribute to such a discussion and more specifically, to propose some concrete and practical measures in our interactions with these social institutions that for us are often the most immediate points of articulation with Third World societies: museums in the Third World.

#### Anthropology, Anthropological Museums, and the Third World

In order to set the stage, it is necessary first to devote a few brief thoughts to the social history of which museums and the discipline of anthropology are a part. My purpose is not to be polemical but simply to explore some issues which play a fundamental role in our relationship as museum anthropologists to Third World societies. It would be impossible to address specifics of this relationship in any meaningful way, if these issues are not understood first. If the relationship is to be sound, and profitable for both sides, it must be based not on mushy sentiment or rigid ideologies but on a rational analysis of its social background and implications.

It is no secret that both anthropology as a discipline and anthropological museums as institutions owe much to colonial history. As Western societies opened up and took possession of strange and wonderful worlds, the exotic lands and their people quite naturally became objects of curiosity and study. However, while the scientific endeavor of anthropology is thinkable in the context of pure exploration only (although we know, of course, that its development was in reality both intellectually and practically intimately linked with the colonial process), the accumulation of ethnographic collections is not. We should remember that some of the deepest historic roots of the collecting of valuables and exotica go back to religious votive offerings in temples and political tribute gifts of subjugated and dependent populations and their rulers to dominant potentates (Wittlin 1970). Up until today, collecting has naturally remained the privilege of ruling elites who have the means to induce original owners in one way or another to give up some of their possessions.<sup>3</sup>

It has been said that any artistic representation of reality engenders some form of aggression and intrusion on that reality inasmuch as it represents an act of taking possession of certain aspects of it, even if in a rather abstract sense. Not unreasonably, some non-Western societies resist having

their photographs taken because they feel that this involves the taking away of part of their essence by somebody whose motives and intentions they are unable to control. All the more, then, the act of collecting ethnographic specimens must be seen as an act of taking possession, both physically and symbolically, of some of the essence of individuals as well as whole societies and cultures. For the Third World, this aspect of private and museological collecting is just another element of the larger colonial context.

In the United States, when discussion turns to colonialism, we often prefer to stand slightly to the side, assuming that the issue pertains primarily to countries like Spain, France, England, or Holland. However, we ought to consider that in our professional activities in Africa, Asia, Oceania, or Latin America, we are as much part of Western colonial history as our colleagues from Europe. To a large extent, our very presence is predicated on the colonial opening up of those world regions; the fact that many traditional societies willingly give up their artifacts is often due to pervasive culture change induced and promoted by the global expansion of the Western social and economic system; and the things we usually exchange in return for the ethnographic specimens we collect are generally indicative of Third World societies' ties with, and dependence on, the Western economic system.

In addition, we should recognise that the collecting of ethnographic artifacts involves a process of very deep alienation. Not only are the artifacts removed from their original setting, but they are transferred to a new and totally alien environment where they are stored, labeled, studied, and exhibited according to principles which are at best remote from their original social and cultural context, and at worst may be diametrically opposed to it. Extreme cases are, fortunately, becoming increasingly rare: when, for instance, an Australian ritual item which would aboriginally have been used only in the context of specific ceremonies, restricted in access to initiates, and associated with intense emotions, might be exhibited on a plexiglass stand next to a carving from central Africa, with a label perhaps reading: "Wood, engraved, 16 inches, Australia. John Doe Private Collection." However, it is important to understand that even the best-intentioned and ostensibly culturally sensitive activity of collecting, and even the activity of detached anthropological study, take part in this process of alienation. From that perspective, the ethics of conservation, and the enterprise of anthropology as a whole become questionable from the native's point of view.

To illustrate my point, let me briefly quote from a statement by a black Australian activist:

"Up to and including the present, the 'artifacts' of Aboriginal culture have, generally speaking, attracted cultural voyeurs of all shades and hues. That is to say, the physical manifestations of Aboriginal culture - the act, song, and dance - have been preserved, conserved, and occasionally protected by Europeans for a multitude of reasons. Chief among these has been preservation for posterity and academic study, the ethics of which are self-explanatory for those concerned. Unwitting conservationists have included the odd curio-seeker and the ever-present entrepreneur making sales to various culture collections, both private and professional.

A unique embodiment of all these concerns (though not necessarily entrepreneurial) was the establishment of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1961. This institution was fundamentally rooted in the premise that the Aboriginal race was dying - culturally - and that a comprehensive, well-sponsored programme was needed to 'salvage knowledge' for posterity. European controlled and directed, the Institute programme of 'ethical concern' for Aboriginal culture concretely expressed and vindicated the academic 'concern' for same. The coloniser's (latent) attitude towards Aborigines could not have been made appropriately expressed in neocolonial times - the oppressor mentality now exercising control over public understanding, or misunderstanding, or Aboriginal culture...."

(Widders 1974:107)

I am presenting this quote not because I agree with all its sentiments, but to illustrate the point that anthropological activities of collecting, preservation, and study inevitably involve a process of alienation, and that this is acutely perceived by many members of non-Western societies, and today often articulated in political terms.

I do not think that an understanding of this reality necessarily calls the totality of our work and existence as anthropologists in question. No matter how much somebody might want to, it will not be possible to turn back the clock by several hundred years. While it is true that the development of the Third World, as we know it today, is to a very large extent the result of colonial history, even the complete return of all ethnographic artifacts from Western museums to their countries of origin, and the cessation of all anthropological study would not alter this fact, nor would it significantly affect the further development of the world. On the other hand, I think that it can be argued that anthropological work has had some minor, but not totally insignificant, effects on social perceptions and attitudes in the West. Similarly, I believe that anthropological work has the potential of making meaningful contributions to the lives and development of Third World societies. I am assuming, of course, that the establishment and consolidation of systems of science and education after the Western model in Third World countries is, at this point in history, both desirable and inevitable. Not everybody would agree on this point.

This brings us back to our point of departure: the fact that non-Western societies do constitute a constituency with legitimate interests in our anthropology museums and their activities. Considering the issues I have touched upon, it should also be evident that we have an ethical obligation to respond to the interests of this group. The question, then, is how best to do this. There are, of course, many areas which can and should be explored with regard to our professional attitudes toward, and interactions with, non-Western societies: for instance, theoretical and practical aspects of the collecting of contemporary ethnographic materials; general acquisition and deaccessioning policies; thematic direction, form, and specific content of exhibitions; thematic focus of museum studies; our relationship to recent immigrant groups from Third World countries; etc. Since it is impossible here to cover all these areas, I will limit myself to the specific topic of our interaction with Third World museums. As stated earlier, these institutions are in many regards for us today the most visible and immediate points of contact with

Third World societies; most of the general points concerning our relationship with those societies find a concrete expression in our interaction with their museums.

### Anthropology Museums in the Third World

I assume that everybody in this audience is more or less familiar with museums in the Third World. I will limit myself, therefore, to a few remarks which I think have a bearing on the last part of this presentation.

In a very small number of non-Western countries there are museums which derive the core of their holdings from collections assembled by ancient indigenous ruling elites. In a number of others, museums were established in administrative centers during the heyday of colonial rule. In both cases, most of these institutions were transformed into some sort of central or national museums, generally in connection with the establishment of post-colonial national independence, and they often hold rich and important anthropological collections. However, there is also a very large number of Third World countries, many of whom attained independence late, who established central museums only relatively recently, some time after major elements of their traditional cultures had already vanished. Their collections are, therefore, no match to the holdings for the respective culture areas in many Western museums. Finally, in many countries and regions there are either isolated instances or whole networks of provincial museums. They may trace their origin to an individual missionary or colonial administrator, a wealthy patron, or - more recently - to government fiat. The organization of such museums and the quantity and quality of their collections are accordingly varied.

It is not possible to make universally valid statements concerning organization, social roles, and problems of Third World museums. Still, there are some observations which I believe are widely applicable, and I want to discuss them briefly before turning to details about our role in working with these institutions. In my, admittedly limited, experience, many Third World museums face a philosophical dilemma. On the one hand, they are called upon to be keepers and preservers of cultural heritage, interpreters of tradition, and cultivators of the seedbeds of national identity. On the other hand, the cultural heritage and national identity in question is often not defined on the basis of indigenous culture history but on the basis of developments that took place as a result of colonial processes. That is, national museums are chartered by political entities which were superimposed through direct or indirect colonial influence on often heterogeneous local socio-political traditions. As a result, there is a strong tendency to overemphasize and overrepresent the interests and traditions of the dominant groups while down-playing, or even disregarding, minority traditions which may be perceived as primitive, embarrassing, or at least without importance in the national development. (The classical syndrome of museums being institutions of the ruling elite.)

In general, many museums in the Third World are quite impressive institutions if one considers what they accomplish under difficult conditions and with extremely limited means. They have to fulfill the traditional museological duties of collecting, preserving, curating, researching, exhibiting, and educating; at the same time, they are often charged with licensing and administering field research by visiting scientists; commonly they are

responsible for the administration and enforcement of antiquities legislation; they are usually called upon to interpret a poorly defined national heritage; and in a number of cases they have been put to work on applied problems of social and technological development. Given the economic situation of most developing countries, it is not surprising that many of the museums face these extensive duties with inadequate facilities (storage, laboratories, libraries, display space, etc.), inadequate personnel that is commonly overburdened with administrative duties, and a general lack of financial support.

I am not drawing this picture in order to be disparaging. On the contrary, I am honestly impressed by the idealism, optimism, and ingenuity of many museum professionals in the Third World. However, the conditions of these institutions have to be realistically assessed before we can contemplate meaningful programs of interaction and cooperation as a means of fulfilling our professional responsibilities toward Third World societies.

### Cooperation with Third World Museums

The stage is now set for a more concrete discussion of possible forms of cooperation. I will make a series of specific suggestions which are, of course, neither intended to be exhaustive nor to be adopted in toto. I should also note that many of these proposals are not new and some of them are already being successfully practiced in specific instances. The proposals are based on a very few simple principles: that the cooperation should not result in any harm to either party; that it should benefit both parties; that it should, wherever possible, involve full partnership in the planning and execution of projects; and that it should safeguard dignity and integrity of all involved.

I have mentioned earlier that, for a variety of reasons, large-scale repatriation of anthropological collections to countries of origin is neither desirable nor feasible.<sup>4</sup> What would in many cases be far more useful to Third World countries and their museums is comprehensive and detailed information on the materials we hold in our store rooms. This means that we should not just exchange publications but that we ought to send, as a matter of courtesy, complementary copies of all our published catalogues, inventories, and analytical studies to the relevant museums in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Latin America. I would also go further: I think that it would not be too much to ask that we specifically survey our holdings in some details by culture area and supply the resulting information to museums in the countries of origin. This could either be done by individual museums separately, by cooperative groups, or on a nationwide basis. I do not want to suggest yet another bothersome questionnaire, that in the end, furnishes information of only very limited usefulness which will end up in the wastebasket. Surveys in the nature of union catalogues have variously been proposed as being useful for our own use (e.g. Fenton 1960) and may well become fairly easily attainable as museum catalogues are being increasingly computerized. I will return to this point once more below in a different context.

With regard to new acquisitions through either purchase or collecting, one can propose a few very simple but useful things. That the broadly accepted ethical code with regard to artifact traffic needs to be observed goes without saying.<sup>5</sup> The same applies to the removal of artifacts from ethnographic contexts where they still fulfill a significant cultural role. More to the point, in our own collecting we ought to attempt making complete duplicate

collections one set of which we should deposit--together with copies of all field notes and other documentation--at an appropriate central or provincial museum. Never should we export unique artifacts, even if we can talk national authorities into giving permission. I would also suggest that in some cases we might be of assistance to Third World museums by calling to their attention artifacts offered for sale in Western art galleries or antique stores which might be of particular interest to them. Considering the financial problems of most of these museums, it might be possible in cases of special importance and urgency to cooperate in some arrangement of purchase on our part and subsequent exchange. That many of these approaches might have long-range pay-offs for both sides should be evident.

A number of potentially fruitful areas of cooperation present themselves with regard to exhibits. An important concern is whether the image of foreign peoples and cultures which we communicate through exhibits is acceptable to these peoples. I am not suggesting that we should only say and show what has been approved, but it seems only just and reasonable to take into account cultural concerns and sensitivities of those whom we portray. Some German museologists have suggested that geographically arranged exhibits should first go on loan to the country of concern. Audience reaction should then be taken into account in modifying the exhibits before putting them up in the home museums. While this is an interesting concept, it would in most cases be impractical and too expensive. However, in this age of global society it appears both feasible and logical that a native museum anthropologist be involved, at least on a consulting basis, in the planning of geographically oriented exhibits in our own museums. I believe that the exhibits could only profit in a general way from such an involvement of local experts. Furthermore, consultancies would also enable museum anthropologists from the Third World to come to our museums on a somewhat regular basis which would improve information exchange, understanding of mutual concerns and problems, and cooperation on a broad basis. For some of our Third World colleagues, such professional travel would also afford them much wanted--and needed--opportunities for accumulating further professional training and experience.

Something more needs to be said on the subject of personnel exchange. Some of our museums have research associateships and fellowships. Only rarely are they publicized, or known, in countries of the Third World. It would seem that it could well be of mutual benefit to invite, at least occasionally, museum anthropologists from abroad to take up these positions. While these fellowships would enable them to get away from the demands of their everyday duties to pursue their own research and further their professional development, these visitors could be most helpful in improving information and documentation of our existing collections. At the same time, such visiting scholars might conceivably become instrumental in compiling the surveys of our holdings by culture area of which I spoke earlier. I know of several scholars in Third World countries who would be eager to come here to compile such surveys, if they had the financial means to do so.

Finally, I suggest that we consider the exchange of collections and exhibits on a broader basis. What I have in mind is not so much as exchange, say, with the National Museum in Dar-es-Salaam of one Tanzanian collection for another, but rather an exchange of exhibits or collections of American or European artifacts for others of contemporary Third World origin. The rationale for this proposal is quite simple and lies in the nature of

anthropology as a comparative discipline. It is neither in our interest, nor in the interest of Third World societies that the horizons of anthropological analysis and understanding be limited to traditional societies which for the most part have disappeared as living systems. For some time now, American society has been the subject of anthropological analysis, but this relatively new aspect of the changing scope of our discipline has yet hardly penetrated the walls of our museums. I think that it would be most fitting that this anthropological perspective should find its first major museological expression in Third World countries, who otherwise learn about American society primarily through the efforts of such agencies as USIS and the import of Hollywood films and television shows. On the other hand, systematic ethnographic collections from contemporary Third World societies could become invaluable data banks, particularly as they might complement older traditional collections from the same societies and thereby would make possible a new breed of studies of cultural and social change. I submit that, partially under the impact of recent archaeological work, we are gaining a new understanding of the nature of material culture and the way in which it is patterned by, and reflects, the organization and operation of society. This understanding is revolutionizing our approach to the collecting as well as analysis of material culture and technology.

### Conclusions

The question has on occasion been posed as to whether anthropological museums, as we know them today, have a future. While it does not pay to be a prophet, it is clear that our museums, like any other social institution, will not be able to exist for a long time without change. Being part of a larger social whole, they have to reflect and incorporate the inevitable changes in that social system. I do not want to suggest that anthropological, or any other, museums have to be swayed by every movement of short-term consumer demand. But they do have to be responsive to over-all societal interests and needs. For anthropological museums, the social framework within which they are embedded and operate includes those societies from whom they have assembled their collections. This means, then, that our social responsibilities and responsiveness has to include this world-wide constituency as well. This entails a challenge as well as a promise. Some aspects of the challenge have been briefly discussed in this presentation. The promise is, that, if we meet the challenge in flexible and imaginative ways, our museums will remain vital institutions that can have significant social and intellectual impact on our own society as well as peoples in the Third World.

### Notes

- 1) Paper read at the joint annual meeting of the American Association of Museums and the Canadian Museums Association, Boston, June 8-12, 1980.
- 2) Although only a minimum of references are quoted, much of what is said in this paper is not new and has been stated--in different contexts--elsewhere. A good bibliography of publications relating to anthropological museums has been compiled by King (1978-79). Also see Lohse et al. (1976).



- 3) In this regard, it is worthwhile to point out that hoarding and collecting are in no way Western traits but are generally typical of the elite groups and classes of societies with complex socio-political organization. What is typical of the Western socio-political system are museums open to a broader public.
- 4) Time and space do not permit to be more specific than this general assertion. The philosophical, ethical, and practical considerations concerning the problem of "repatriation" are complex enough to warrant a separate treatment.
- 5) Concerning artifact traffic, a collection of national laws of countries from around the world has been published in Burnham (1974).

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