The Other on Display: 
Translation in the Ethnographic Museum

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The ethnographic museum in the West has a long and troubling history. The display of living ‘exotic people’ in travelling exhibitions began as early as the sixteenth century, in a tradition that flourished in the nineteenth century with London shows like Laplanders herding reindeer or African bushmen ‘going about their daily lives’.¹

However, the mid and late nineteenth century also saw the rapid expansion of academic museums as sites to display the artefacts collected – under anything but reputable circumstances – from what were considered the ‘primitive’, ‘natural’, or ‘tribal’ peoples of the world. Today the ethnographic museum, in a not dissimilar shape, is still a feature of large European cities, but it is faced with newly defined dilemmas in the postcolonial world. For how can the material culture of a non-Western people be collected and displayed in the West without its authors being translated into wordless and powerless objects of visual consumption?

In this paper I would like first to set out the sense in which the ethnographic museum ‘translates’ objects, people and cultures. I will then go on to look at the specific ways in which ethnographic museums have carried out that translation. Lastly, I will discuss some attempts to explore new translation strategies in the museum.

How is a museum a translation?

Entering the ethnographic museum, traditionally – by which I mean in the museum arrangements of the later nineteenth century, which have survived in more or less adapted form until today – we are faced with cases full of artefacts, categorised and defined by gallery titles and individual labels. The objects themselves have been disengaged from their earlier locations and functions: thus a pot or a garment ceases to be a holder of liquid or a coverer of the body (along with all the ancillary functions that cluster around any used object); instead it becomes a piece of ethnographic evidence, a metonymic statement about the originating culture. That pot, for example, might be re-written as proof of how clay technologies have developed in North Africa.² I certainly don’t want to argue that this is a loss or a falling away from some core or most authentic meaning. Objects have almost infinite meanings and why shouldn’t this be one of them? My point is rather that the rewriting of those meanings is, like any other translation, a multiply determined and politically charged affair.

The same applies to the selection of the objects and the systems used to order them. We might find the ethnographic exhibits organised by location of origin, or by type of technology, or by function, or by similarity of form (rarely does the ethnographic museum organise its exhibits chronologically, as will be discussed below). As an ordered whole, the exhibition claims to represent a people or peoples in translated form: they are offered for ‘reading’ in a familiar idiom – the idiom of scientific taxonomy or

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¹ See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 405 f.
² For detailed comments on the use of art and artefacts as “cultural evidence”, see Clifford 1988:187-252.
of wondrous strangeness. That is, to be sure, a rather odd combination, but both frameworks manage to coexist in the ethnographic museum, with its dual audience of anthropologists and lay visitors.

If western ethnographic museums have passed their glory days of public interest, this may be due in part to competition from the ‘living museum’ of TV documentary and film – or even, with cheap long-distance travel, of the tourist folklore spectacular ‘on the spot’. All these media raise somewhat similar issues of representation and translation. Yet there still seems to be a place for the more reflective, slow-paced medium of the museum. As I hope to show, it contains a range of possibilities for both ‘thick translation’ and the writing of histories of colonialism.

How the museum writes the Other
First, though, I will address in more detail some of the ways that ethnographic museums traditionally work to translate the Other. I have mentioned that the museum display echoes a key claim of western ethnographic writing, the idea that huge, disparate and multi-meaninged networks of material culture can be read systematically, that they can be understood through key terms or underlying structures or essential strands of meaning. In this sense, the traditional ethnographic account mirrors the museum display, but that twinship is not only a formal one: the growth of the ethnological museum is historically, institutionally inseparable from the emergence of the discipline of anthropology in, especially, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was the efforts of anthropologists in the field to record their findings in material form that fed the storerooms of the new museums which began to flourish in the later nineteenth century; and the rise of the museum in its modern form produced a need for academic ethnographic expertise to select, commentate and interpret. At the same time, the discipline was expanding to buttress colonialist adventures and the museum was the public face of the anthropological venture at home. Hence in the course of the nineteenth century, earlier museum cultures based on the ‘cabinet of curiosities’ (itself a significant component in Europe’s reception of the New World) developed into a more systematic undertaking, as a claim to the otherness yet also the intelligibility – and in many readings the inferiority – of the colonised lands.

The most infamous nineteenth-century ethnological museums arranged their exhibits to demonstrate that contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples were not in fact really ‘contemporary’ but instead a remnant of older ways of being human – ways that were now redundant, fascinating in themselves but chiefly of interest as a document of the ‘past’ of the colonising societies. An extreme articulation of this concept was A. H. L. F. Pitt Rivers’ private museum in Farnham; it positioned objects along evolutionary

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3 The case of non-western (or “auto-”) ethnographic museums is rather different, bound up with complex issues of nation- and identity-building in the countries concerned. See Kaplan (1994) for a collection of essays on museums in the Pacific, West Africa and other locations.

4 This is a claim that has been fiercely contested within ethnography since the mid-1980s (see, especially, Clifford & Marcus 1986). Its provenance in the shape of the metaphor ‘translation of culture’ is examined by Asad (1986). For an overview of the ‘crisis of representation’ in critical ethnography and its relevance to Translation Studies, see Doris Bachmann-Medick 2003.

5 This is an unfairly terse summary; a wide range of often contradictory agendas fed into the development of the anthropological discipline in the period. For detailed studies, see Kuklick (1991) and Penny (2002).

6 See Shelton (1994) on Renaissance collections and their power to domesticate American culture for European audiences.
time lines from primitive to modern, irrespective of the actual date or any other context. The culture and technology of Australian Aborigines or the Irish, for instance, existed in a state of “arrested development”, he said, and could thus stand in for the world of their evolutionary predecessors. Locating their art and technology as close to a primitive archetype not only showed who was who on the evolutionary tree, but demonstrated that just as nature proceeds by evolution, so human societies naturally evolve via seamless steps, with no place for revolutionary breaks.

We see here a racist claim at work, legitimising the colonialist adventure while at the same time making a very specific political point for the domestic audience. Not all curators of the period were restricting themselves to these kinds of agenda; many were precisely trying to open their public’s eyes to the different realities of other parts of the world and to stake a claim for shared humanity. And indeed, the explicitly evolutionary arrangement is not the one that came to dominate western museums (though Mieke Bal notes the remnants of it in the American Museum of Natural History, where she finds human societies displayed alongside the animals\(^8\)). Instead, the arrangement schemes developed in the later nineteenth century, and broadly typical today, were geographical in design – helping to create entities like ‘Africa’ or ‘The North American Indian’ by their labelling strategies.

What does not seem to be preferred is a historical arrangement, where changes in material culture within a particular society or region are the crux of the display strategy – apart from the design that announces “Here are the remnants of the authentic culture, saved for you by ethnographers, before colonialism and the end of authenticity”. In these cases the implication is that authenticity resides in a purity, a non-time before History arrived and began to pollute the original. It’s a relatively rare exhibition in Europe that addresses modern non-western cultures precisely in their modernity (James Clifford describes in some detail an attempt to do this in the exhibition Paradis, Continuity and Change in the New Guinea Highlands\(^9\)) – or in their multiple contacts, both destructive and productive, with Europe. But the de-historicising tendency is not just a matter of general content and design. It is strongly present too in the museum’s verbal discourse, the labels and text panels.

On the one hand, the labels in a traditional museum like Berlin’s Ethnologisches Museum may use an unspecified past tense – excluding any sense of chronology, of precise continuities and discontinuities (this is the case for the South Seas gallery, headlined as portraying a ‘lost paradise’). Dates are given by century or even several centuries (“19\(^{th}\) or 20\(^{th}\) century”). Alternatively, in galleries on the present day, the labels may tend to adopt what Johannes Fabian has called the “ethnographic present” tense. Fabian is referring to the way written ethnography asserts general truth by occluding the specificity of the ethnographer’s experience: in Fabian’s example, she or he translates the personal experience “I never saw them excited” into the ethnographic “They are stolid”.\(^{10}\) Excluding the date and circumstances of an object’s acquisition (I will return to this point below) translates the complexity of its existence in culture into the monologic, essentialised and yet somehow puzzlingly bare version presented to us in the museum. The puzzlement is, perhaps, a result of the impersonality: who really

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\(^8\) Bal 1992.
\(^{10}\)
made or used this object? in fact did anybody, or is it just pure object, alone behind glass? This is a dilemma that perhaps lay behind the use of the diorama as a display strategy – the public’s choice in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, though offered only reluctantly by more scientifically minded curators, and now quite out of fashion (except, notably, in local and children’s museums). The ethnological diorama showed a ‘slice of life’ in an exotic setting, normally including wax models of people. The translation here appears to offer contextualised reality, but that ‘reality’ takes an idealised, simplified and above all static form. No arduous piecing together is demanded from the viewer; the feeling is of unmediated understanding and human proximity – something that the academic glass case does not even attempt to deliver. The demise of the diorama seems to indicate a new division of labour, with such illusionist approaches banished to the realms of popular culture.

The tendency to ahistoricity in the museum translation of cultures is underpinned by the principle of anonymity. Almost never are either translators or source text authors named. In most cases an artefact’s authorship is defined as a ‘tribe’ or even a location. Obviously, this strategy is essential to the claim for universality or truthful extracted meaning that I have already mentioned as a feature of both traditional ethnological museums and traditional written ethnography. After all, in order to stand for a whole culture, an object – or in written ethnography a belief, a saying, an action – cannot be personal, individual or contingent; it has to exemplify an exemplifiable whole. The products of the displays are the smooth, unified entities that critical ethnography has identified as the project of nineteenth and twentieth-century anthropology and that in museum terms have been closely associated with ideologies of racial purity.

But the anonymity so important to much ethnographic representation also touches on authorship as it regards intellectual property. I mean that less in the most precise, commercial sense (though this is surely not irrelevant) than in the wider one of ownership. The fact that objects are normally not attributed to specific makers helps to conceal the ethnological museum’s biggest open yet shameful secret: how it came to own its treasures.

It is clear that an object on display in the museum is the outcome of a human encounter between the makers or users of the object and the collector or describer. Yet the historical detail of that encounter is effaced when the objects are displayed as innocent of commerce and politics. In fact, of course, they are traces of a hard colonialist exchange system – exchanges that had two sides, buyers and usually sellers, but not two equal sides. For ethnographic collecting in the nineteenth century (and that is when the bulk of the west’s great collections were gathered) went hand in hand with powerful colonialist institutions. A well-known example is the case of the Benin bronzes. These elaborate plaques were stolen by British soldiers during the so-called ‘punitive expedition’ of 1897. The looting triggered a scramble among ethnographic museums throughout Europe and America: not only were the bronze and ivory treasures of great anthropological interest, but their commercial value shot up as it became clear that the thoroughness of the British expedition had created the ultimate rarity value: these were

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12 A related form is the folklore festival and the outdoor or ‘living’ museum, where real people display ‘typical’ activities in a form of self-representation and/or for the benefit of the tourist economy.
13 For a detailed and carefully contextualised discussion of the case of the Benin ‘bronzes’ in Britain, see
all that was left. No more supply – an example of how ethnographic objects come to accrue value on a world market of artefacts.\textsuperscript{14}

In the twenty-first century the time has surely come to reappraise the status of objects acquired at the height of imperialist collecting. However, this would mean a decimation of major European and North American museums. Perhaps that’s why Berlin’s ethnological museum, for example, seems somewhat half-hearted. It still displays several of the priceless bronzes of Benin and comments on the circumstances of their acquisition. What it does not say is why they are still here in Europe, why they haven’t been returned to West Africa, despite strongly argued claims for restitution.\textsuperscript{15} The same general point applies to most such exhibits, aside from items specially commissioned and bought from contemporary artists. If the label notes a whole culture as author, who has the right to decide on publication?

We have looked at some of the ways in which the ethnological museum acts as a translation of cultures – and how, like written ethnographies, that translation is problematic in form and effect. The ethnographic museum has traditionally served to generate and bolster domestic identities, in particular the identities of colonialism. Today, parallel to the crisis of representation in ethnography, there is much rethinking of the translation strategies of the museum.

**New paths in museum representation**

Adapting ethnographer Clifford Geertz’s call for “thick description”,\textsuperscript{16} Kwame Anthony Appiah has advocated ‘thick translation’ – translation heavily glossed and annotated to enable engagement with the original’s complexity.\textsuperscript{17} That poses difficulties for a museum, with its mainly visual representations. However, there are some elements of this type of approach that can most certainly feed into museum translations of cultures, and in some cases already are doing so.

Most relevant here is the verbal discourse of the museum – that is, the labelling and thematic panels as well as booklets, accompanying multimedia material and catalogues. Labels may physically be marginal to the text of the artefacts, but as ever marginal notes have a key role in framing and guiding readings of the text body. As such, they are full of potential for new dimensions: by multiplying voices and adding reflexivity. To take these in turn, let us first consider the multiplying of voices.

The traditional museum label has been anything but polyphonic, anything but ‘thick’: in a display like the ‘A Wider World’ section of the Royal Museum of Scotland\textsuperscript{18} or the Berlin museum’s South Seas gallery, we read place, ‘tribe’, material, an approximate date, the donor’s name. Often, too, a short text is added explaining the object’s function in general terms: the words are those of the ethnographer/curator, alone and anonymous. The Horniman Museum in London, in its ‘African Worlds’ gallery, has tried to subvert this type of label by including commentary\textsuperscript{19} – commentary as a kind of translation of

\textsuperscript{14} Penny 2002: 77.
\textsuperscript{15} Coombes 1994: 223.
\textsuperscript{16} Geertz 1973.
\textsuperscript{17} Appiah 2000.
\textsuperscript{18} The gallery, formerly entitled ‘Tribal Art’, is currently awaiting the funds to update itself in line with contemporary thinking (Chantal Knowles, personal communication).
\textsuperscript{19} I am thinking here of a notion of “commentary” that has recently been proposed by Johannes Fabian
the artefact and ultimately, in view of the museum setting, of the originating culture. The labels include a short text by one of the makers or users of the object, both personal and ‘ethnographic’ (the latter by citing proverbs and describing uses), first in the relevant African language and then in English translation. The speaker – the ‘translator’ of the object for the viewer – is named and is visually present in a photo. Finally, the compiler of the label is named as well.

These labels alter the power balance of the museum. The exhibit seems to speak back to its collectors and the interpreting voices are now multiple. At the same time, the inclusion of obvious, verbal translation makes visible the gap of language that exists between most of the visitors and the objects they observe. This strategy of quotation, breaking up the monologic organising voice, is reinforced by the use of source language words within the English text in several of the theme panels. The multilingual text seems to refuse to be absorbable into western categories – so obstreperous is it that bits remain ‘over there’ and we have no fully intelligible version ‘over here’. Even if the theme panel keeps to the generalising ethnographic present tense, at least geographically it is pulled down to earth by the intrusive words from ‘there’ – and of course, the addressee is redefined to include speakers of the other language.

I would not want here to idealise the use of glossed source language words in the museum text. The strategy has its own tradition within colonialist ethnography. As Dennis Tedlock has pointed out, the use of ‘native words’ scattered in the text has been used as a token of the writer’s authority, to mystify and impress, to demonstrate the ethnographer’s unique access to the Real Meaning of such items. And when a simple one-word gloss (“altar, or pe”) is all the Horniman panel provides (especially coming before the original item), it seems that little is gained in terms of referential meaning. What is added, though, is a reminder of the existence of the source ‘text’. In fact, that small reminder might be quite a significant gain – and it certainly seems preferable to the very domesticalatory approaches we find in the Berlin museum’s African gallery. There, a theme panel on African religion uses unabashedly Christian language to describe what are for a line or two “gods”, but then become just “God” with “commandments” and a “will” being done. This translation strategy generates a unified source text – all African cultures – which is simultaneously posited as fully commensurate with the target culture’s own rituals and ritual language.

The translating voice in panels like that is as single as it can be. Only the western expert can be heard. In contrast, the inclusion of ‘native voices’ in the Horniman labels undermines the singular authority of the western museum as cultural translation. The locus of translation and the power to interpret has shifted. And the very fact of highlighting translatedness is itself an attack on the fiction of universal meaning. By casting doubt on the capacity of its own words to translate fully and transparently, a label can prompt its reader to ask whether the ‘reading’ of the exhibit is really as easy as it seems. But the technique is not a confrontational one, it does not cast doubt on the from Swahili (and French) of a colonial history of Katanga, together with the commentary on the text and its translation by a Shaba Swahili-speaking informant (this in the shape of transcribed interviews between translator and commentator), and as a third layer the ethnographer’s own commentary on the dialogue itself. It’s a richness of interpretation that is enabled by the electronic form – the translations are published on the internet (www.pscw.uva.nl/lpca/aps) – but the back and forth of interpretation seems an interesting practical application of the call for a more dialogic, less authoritative form of ethnographic translation.
whole project of cultural translation.

To do that, the ethnographic museum would have to take up a reflexive translation strategy. This would mean gearing the whole interpretative strategy – the whole structure of a gallery – to the histories of collection. The ethnographic collection would then serve as evidence about western society, not evidence about the exotic. Museologists Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles put it this way: the museum is wrong, they say, to see collections as “partial, but well-documented records” of other realities. Instead, collections can be viewed as themselves “complete, although particular, outcomes of individual sets of colonial practices”\(^{21}\). The metamuseal function (the phrase is Mieke Bal’s\(^{22}\)) would be to debate the museum’s past and present as a knowledge-building institution, and ask visitors to interrogate their own relationships to the institution and its objects.\(^{23}\)

The Horniman Museum makes an attempt at precisely this in its Centenary Gallery. Not very informatively named, perhaps – and in fact, this failure of labelling for the gallery as a whole does weaken its thrust, which is to thematise systems of collecting and display. The drawback here is an interesting and far-reaching one: read without – or against – the panels, the cases are huge, colourful cabinets of wonders, replicating older ways of display that, however, are by no means obsolete or unintelligible to the modern visitor. Adults and children move round with gasps of appreciation for the craftsmanship, the strangeness, the glorious jumble of exotica, undated, uncommented, appealing to a visual response. My point here is not that the project of a display about display is doomed, but that just as in written translation the reader has plenty of say in how the text is read, in the ethnographic museum the audience arrives with habits of looking and enjoyment which may well be stronger than curatorial attempts to subvert familiar forms.

This is where the ‘African Worlds’ gallery with its extensive labelling perhaps wins out. It takes a familiar framework – explainer and explainee – but reallocates the roles. The display puts existing representational resources into the service of a new set of interests, addressing itself to African diasporas in Britain and the indigenous population alike. According to the author credits listed in the gallery’s opening panel, there is a degree of self-ethnography here, something that may not offer a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ translation of culture\(^{24}\) but does open up the field to competing translations by previously silenced voices. In the end it seems that the ethnographic museum, just like the ethnographic translation in written form, can best move forward by breaking open the smooth surface of its presentation – by addressing head on its inherited illusion of scientific objectivity, transparency, of wholeness and pure meaning.

\(^{21}\) Gosden & Knowles 2001: xix.
\(^{22}\) Bal 1992.
\(^{23}\) Something of this kind is attempted by the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, UK, where the original nineteenth-century design and labelling is left standing in some of the cases. In an ironic move, a dual object is produced in each case: the exhibit itself and the exhibition of its exhibition. For a discussion of the possible pitfalls of irony as a display strategy, see Riegel’s (1996) paper on an exhibition which was received as reaffirming the colonialist categories it had set out to undermine.
\(^{24}\) On issues of authenticity and self-ethnography in the museum, see the essays in Kaplan (1994) and
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