

Decolonisation of Past and Present Identities: A Discussion on the Representations of ‘Britishness’ and ‘Otherness’ in UK Museums

Yizhu Chen^{1,*}, Aline Khoury²

¹Department of Cultural Studies and Japanese Studies, Southeast University, Nanjing, China

²Online Tutor at LSE/GetSmarter Public Policy Analysis post-graduate course & PhD alumna of the University of Cambridge (Centre of Development Studies), London, England

*18851102566@163.com

ABSTRACT

In this article we analyse the role of museums in building national identities and in including migrant perspectives in this process - with a focus on the United Kingdom case. We briefly examine how ideas of otherness and foreignness were built in British museums, especially through the narratives around the objects from its former colonies and the narratives about migrant influences on contemporary UK culture. We then relate this process to the recent decolonisation movements, and suggest that decolonising British museums should not only revise the narratives about its colonial past, but also revise the representation of current migrant and minority identities.

Keywords: *Identity, Museums, Multiculturalism, Decolonisation, Nationality, Heritage*

1. THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN BUILDING NATIONAL IDENTITIES AND IDEAS OF ‘OTHERNESS’

It is important to understand the implications of the heritage sector beyond its aesthetic sphere, as it is vital to examine the political motivations behind it and the impacts it might produce. In this direction, museums play a key role not only as a repository of heritage, but as means to build and reinforce identities and to portrait narratives about it which reflect their political scenario. The way in which pieces from foreign countries were historically displayed in British cultural institutions was determined not only by its aesthetical characteristics but also its purpose to build an idea of ‘the foreign’, consequently constructing what would be considered ‘national’ [1]. In most of the largest British museums, the identities, narratives and objects from countries of the global South have for long been displayed as exotic elements to incur surprise, amusement and estrangement in British elite audiences.

When private collections of historical and artistic objects were emerging in Europe in the seventeenth century, wealthy collectors such as aristocrats, local rulers, merchants and early scientists curated the display of foreign objects in their residences [2]. The idea of

public museums started to emerge mostly by the 19th century, so that objects could be not merely locked away but observed and studied by the general public. With the rising of nation states, authorised official historians started to construct formal memory and to build narratives of an unified past with a national identity. Museums collected, preserved and exhibited materials to construct a collective memory in line with the leading power groups, with exhibitions consisting mostly of objects of the upper-class [2]. Given that, rather than simply collecting and preserving memory, museums were mainly selecting memory. The praise to leading figures and past victories associated with the nation-state was combined with the exotification of cultures from outside this nation-state.

Parallel to this praise of objects constructing the national habits and culture, collections of the late 19th century were also marked by objects from colonies and countries of the global South taken from European ethnologists. Ethnology was gradually redefining itself by deviating from natural science and turning to the study of contemporary society [3]. Ethnologists started to embrace field work in former colonies and countries of the global South, seeing objects as more reliable and authentic than written documents. In the late-19s, ethnography in museums emerged, describing material culture of global

South nations regarded as primitive [4]. Most museums had then been key to reinforcing subaltern images of the colonies of the British Empire. To follow this tradition, the colonies institutes in the UK and abroad were also used to maintain the symbolic dominance of the so-called British culture, often spreading biased information and prejudice against colonies [5]. Art crafts and objects from this colonisation period are still a highlight of British museums nowadays, and are often exhibited without adequate interpretation from the perspective of their original context, hindering a full understanding of their actual meaning and potentials [6]. With the rise of decolonisation, cultural centers were created to address the heritage of colonies and former colonies, such as the Imperial Institute (1887-1958) and the Commonwealth Institute in London [7].

With the independences of former colonies and growing inflows of these citizens in the UK, there had been an increasing inclination to portrait the lives of these new incomers and their influences in local habits and culture. Parallely, ideas of a British identity were especially reinforced in post-conflict scenarios, when governments often emphasised glories of the past and committed to fostering national heritages not only through propaganda but through cultural institutions. In post-conflict environments rebuilt in neoliberal periods, growth and consumption are regarded as redemption ways for building peacekeeping, cohesion and social mobility. Keeler underlines this relation between neoliberal free market ideas in post-conflict peacekeeping periods, which features consumption imperatives rather than reparation of historical trauma [8]. As such, the rebuilding of the post-war UK nation is anchored in the emerging middle class and commercial environment, which was composed not only by British but also by the new incomers from former colonies. This process tried to reconcile conflicting groups and interests through a supposed unified effort to build a broader economic growth [9]. With this growing working class of British and migrant workers in post-war UK, more attention started to be put into the oral history of individuals and communities. Many museums around the UK started to give more space for folk culture and the lives and aspirations of other social classes. This has been a significant change, with the British Museum first recording and exhibiting oral narratives in 1957.

Within this process, migrant heritage started to receive more attention in museums and cultural centers, with local exhibitions addressing migrant cultures in the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in the remarkable "Peopling of London" exhibition in 1993 [10]. Museums also started to be seen as a place to learn about cultural curiosities and scientific topics, attracting a more varied audience. The selection criteria started to include more plural narratives and portraits of individuals and communities, shifting the focus from upper-class wealth to broader groups and themes. This gradual shift opened

some space for migrant narratives to be included, starting to be seen as a part of the construction of the contemporary nation. Nevertheless, this process still lacked a connection between migrants and the historical objects of their places of origin, which often continued to be portrayed with exotification and as lacking their connection with present times and current migrants.

Such connections of historical foreign objects and migrant identities are still not predominant in most of the contemporary European museums. This situation misses an opportunity to teach and reinforce the historical and artistic relevance of migrant identities, especially with the current format of museums being increasingly didactic and interactive. Since the turn of the century, museums in Europe and many other regions have increasingly adopted an interactive approach, committing not only to documenting and preserving objects and knowledge, but also to inviting varied audiences to interact with those exhibits. Digital technologies have been used to create an engaging experience with the public, allowing their own knowledge system to be constructed and renewed as proactive learners rather than passive recipients. More than transmitters of knowledge, contemporary museums often play a role of incubators of new understanding [2]. In this direction, museum curators have also created environments where past stories can resonate to visitors, fostering their sense of community belonging and the integration of different groups. Thus, they can be great spaces for valuing and praising migrant identities not only owing to their influence on the construction of the so-called national identity, but also owing to their historical and artistic relevance per se.

Following this line, several museums in Britain promote initiatives related to migrant identities, ranging from exhibitions to workshops, from face to face activities to online interactions (ie. the Migration Museum; Black Cultural Archives; Museum of London Docklands etc). Still, some of these initiatives occur in an informal, spontaneous and dynamic way, using oral stories which are sometimes challenging to access and register in the form of tangible heritage. Moreover, it is still difficult to spread a deeper knowledge about migrant influences on British identities in remote rural areas of the UK with less access to museums and cultural institutions [10]. Future initiatives in the heritage and cultural sector in UK rural areas need to put more effort on attracting children in order to engage new generations, as well as to value the fragmented migrant narratives throughout the history of the country's construction. More attention should be put on the historical influences of migrant workers not only on the urban cultures in the UK but also on its rural cultures.

2. THE ROLE OF MULTICULTURALISM IN THE FORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISH IDENTITY

The construction of contemporary British identity has been marked by challenges and controversies owing to its multinational and polyethnic characteristics. Multiculturalism ideas and policies play a core role to accommodate this multiplicity while still consolidating social unity - highlighting the multicultural society as a key shared value of national identity. In the UK multiculturalism policy, most of the citizenship criteria and the rights associated with it do not require individuals from ethnic minorities to prove cultural assimilation. A criticism commonly raised about multiculturalism is that it could stimulate ethnic and cultural fragmentations that erode the common foundation of the national identity and the shared trust among citizens. Nevertheless, multiculturalism can actually be compatible with the construction of a national identity, as it can avoid contentions that could emerge from forced assimilation of minority groups, allowing the preservation and development of minorities' ethnic and cultural conventions. This view of multiculturalism can complement national identity, respecting minorities' cultures and considering them as a constitutive part of British identity. It is important to underline that multiculturalism is expressed way beyond nationality criteria, as it also englobes ethnic, cultural, religious and social aspects that are often shared by individuals of different nationalities or not shared by individuals of the same nationality. Studies such as Manning and Roy (2017) show that especially non-white individuals in the UK (whether British or migrants) tend to attach more importance to the ethnic identity than national identity [11]. Such an approach to multiculturalism has guided important museums around the UK and contributed to raising this awareness and educate audiences accordingly.

The current rise of immigration in the UK has been followed by an increase of migrant claims for cultural rights. Cultural rights reflect political and economic rights for migrants and their descendants, in a scenario where many of them feel isolated and discriminated by local communities. Migrant claims for rights, respect and recognition have been increasingly done through cultural practices, from theatre, films and music, to dance, visual arts and other forms. The culture of migrants and their descendants has become an organic ingredient of young, popular and militant culture in many European countries, including the UK. The expression of cultural rights echoes the claim of cultural diversity and the fight against discrimination. It also anchored on concepts of multicultural citizenship, the sense of belonging and cultural integration. As more concepts of cultural rights emerged, the public gradually realises the impact of immigration on the national identity and recognises

cultural rights of migrants, as well as the inclusion of immigration in the new construction of heritage [12].

However, despite policy efforts to create a common national identity built by multiple cultures, many groups in Britain are still subjected to discrimination in political, economic, ethnic and social terms. Such discrimination is detrimental to the idea of national identity, as it hinders the construction of a sense of integration and belonging. Given this scenario, museums can also play a role to boost the representation of marginalised migrant groups and minorities as a crucial part of the national history and present story of the country. This integration effort should be done not only in portraying these groups as exhibition protagonists, but also engaging them as frequent and loyal audiences. In this direction, free entrance by its own does not guarantee more engagement from such public, as it should also include a direct promotion of museums as a welcoming and diverse place. This includes promoting ways to access museums more easily from marginalised areas - enhancing public transportations, holding long hours exhibitions for people who leave work late, creating friendly environments for children, sharing information with an accessible vocabulary and format etc. Technology is also a strong ally in this decolonising and diversifying effort, helping to energise exhibition formats and promoting a more engaging experience.

Another major step for decolonising museums is to redress the sources of foreign pieces and the methods obtained, and then establish dialogues and agreements with the countries from which these pieces have been taken. This is a step to identify the most suitable, fair and sustainable way of addressing the issue - for example by repatriation, co-exhibition, collaboration, knowledge sharing etc. A common worry about repatriation is guaranteeing an adequate preservation of culture heritages repatriated, given the lower capacity to invest on cultural heritage maintenance that many governments face in the global South. In this direction, as an alternative to physically bringing the pieces to the places of origin, the British Museum has been developing a "Digital Repatriation", which employs 3D images to establish the relationship to the native group. Still, this is not enough to address the difficulties faced by these countries to maintain tangible cultural heritage. A more effective initiative in this direction could be to partner up with the community where the pieces were taken from, physically repatriating the piece but also collaborating with local staff for knowledge sharing about heritage preservation.

Additionally, it is crucial for museums to be more embedded in their communities, providing spaces for community voices to be heard and considered, such as forums, debates, manifestos and dialogues with relevant authorities. The narratives of people who were under colonial rule must also be a core part of this process. This effort can also include a more direct link with historical heritage of the places of origin of many of these migrant

groups, promoting exhibitions and workshops which connect the past and the present. Some initiatives in this direction have been held in core UK museums recently, such as the British Museum's exhibition 'South Africa: the Art of a Nation', blending archeological art work and contemporary artists' quotes from South Africa [6]. The Southeast Asia gallery of this museum has also invited the audiences to learn about the region through both antique and contemporary pieces and texts. Most importantly, it also dialogues with the contemporary South Asian diaspora living in the UK now, and avoids a singular curatorial voice. This was an effort to complement the partial narratives of colonisation provided in school education, and to evoke the youngsters, the artists, the media to interact with the living collection [6]. Such exhibitions inevitably evoke a necessary discomfort among British audiences facing the absurdities and abuses of colonial history and contemporary exploitations held by British dominance abroad. In all these efforts, it is crucial not simply to include more artworks from developing countries and/or created by BAME (black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) artists, but also to display them by their perspectives and narratives.

3. CONCLUSION

Decolonising cultural institutions is a duty not only with past generations of former colonies but also with current generations of migrants. It includes considering some repatriations and reviewing exhibition narratives, but also promoting more BAME and migrant artists of the present times. This includes tackling the disproportion between the high ratio of minority people in the UK and the low percentage of related exhibits in its museums. Such a responsibility is historical but also present, and in this direction it is also vital to connect exhibitions of ancient civilisations from developing countries with the current cultural productions from these countries and from its descendants. As a result, attention should be paid to the use of the word 'heritage' and its implications, as 'heritage' is often associated with the past, and therefore might resonate to audiences as a matter of previous generations - whereas it is an effort that concerns audiences nowadays too. The use of the word 'culture' might be preferred in some contexts, as it invokes a more present and current subjectiveness - and therefore might highlight the present impacts and duties of the public. In addition, museums should not only review the sources and methods through which they acquired arts from developing countries, but also engage with minority groups related to these countries more proactively. Decolonising efforts should also go beyond the tangible sphere of art crafts, embracing the intangible dimension of narratives from the communities creating this art.

REFERENCES

- [1] Crinson, M., 2003. *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate.
- [2] Black, G., 2011. *Museums, Memory and History. Cultural and Social History*. 8. 415-427. 10.2752/147800411X13026260433275.
- [3] Lafont-Couturier, 2007 -The Musee National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration: a museum without a by Hélene Lafont-Couturier (p.41), , in 'The Cultural heritage of migrants', UNESCO Digital Library, 2007
- [4] Grognet, 2007 - How to Reconcile the Irreconcilable: the place of ethnology in the Museum of the Cite nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration by Fabrice Grognet (p.48), in 'The Cultural heritage of migrants', UNESCO Digital Library, 2007
- [5] Wintle, Claire., 2013. Decolonising the Museum : The Case of the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes. *Museum & Society*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2013, pp. 185–201.
- [6] John Giblin, Imma Ramos & Nikki Grout (2019) *Dismantling the Master's House*, Third Text, 33:4-5, 471-486, DOI: 10.1080/09528822.2019.1653065,
- [7] Bremner, G., 2003. "Some Imperial Institute": Architecture, Symbolism, and the Ideal of Empire in Late Victorian Britain, 1887-93. *Journal of the Societ of Architectural Historians*, 62(1), 50-73. doi:10.2307/3655083
- [8] Keeler, S., 2014. *Peacebuilding: The Performance and Politics of Trauma in Northern Iraq*. In Monk D. & Mundy J. (Eds.), *The Post-Conflict Environment: Investigation and Critique* (pp. 68-102). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctt22p7hj9.7
- [9] Wickramasinghe, N., 2014. *History as Heritage: Producing the Present in Post-War Sri Lanka*. In Sandis C. (Ed.), *Cultural Heritage Ethics: Between Theory and Practice* (pp. 43-56). Cambridge, UK: Open Book. Retrieved April 16, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287k16.10
- [10] Stevens, 2009 *Stories old and new: migration and identity in the UK heritage sector*, IPPR:
- [11] Manning, A., & Roy, S., 2010. *Culture Clash or Culture Club? National identity in Britain*. *The Economic Journal*, 120(542), F72-F100.
- [12] Wenden, 2007- *Immigration and Cultural Rights: political recognition and cultural Acceptance* (p.24) by Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, in 'The collection Cultural heritage of migrants', UNESCO Digital Library, 2007