

Museums in Non-Western Contexts: *Challenging the Popular Paradigm*

The concept of the ‘museum’ has long been attributed to the European ideals of late Renaissance culture and the Enlightenment. Even its root-word, ‘*muse*’, evokes a vision of classical mythology founded in the civilizations of the early Greeks and Romans. Although it is believed that the first public museums opened in the nineteenth century¹, the foundations of these institutions can be traced back to the studios of fifteenth and sixteenth century aristocratic Italians (*orbus in domo*), the monastic libraries of the Jesuit Order, and the priceless collections held by families throughout the European continent². Regardless of their various incarnations, their goals were quite similar – to formalize and communicate an ever-expanding world of information (art, science, geography, culture, and history) that was being made available beyond that of the elite or rarified scholar, to the average person.

Today, museums continue their civilizing and educating missions, but they are not restricted to the bounds of Western civilization. In fact, almost every country in the world boasts *at least* one of these institutions. So how is it that a concept so inextricably rooted in Western history and ideals found its way into the global vernacular? How did the idea of the museum become so common in a world so diverse in geographic, religious, political, and historical traditions? As we explore this cultural phenomenon – its nature and its manifestations – we will see that the development of museums in non-Western spaces was, and continues to be, influenced by the mission, principles, philosophies, and practices of historically Western museums.

¹ Barbara Black, introduction, *On Exhibit: The Victorians and their Museums* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000) 9. Note the Ashmolean in Oxford, England opened in 1683.

² Paula Findlen, “The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy,” *Journal of the History of Collections* 1.1 (1989): 66-70.

By exploring case studies of museums in China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Namibia, South Africa, Ghana, Mali, Israel and Turkey, this essay will investigate these conditions in three parts: *first*, how the idea of museums was disseminated by the West throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; *second*, how non-Western countries applied the concept of the museum within their social and political frameworks and how this was primarily in response to some type of Western influence; and *finally*, how current practices of non-Western museums represent a paradox of principles – opposing Western norms while applying Western methods. It will conclude with a critique of the traditional museum paradigm (West/non-West) and the discourses in museums around the world today. Incorporated throughout this analysis are references to audience perspective – examining who these museums were built for and why. Thus the combined elements of this investigation aim to confirm that even in the seemingly diverse circumstances of non-Western spaces, Western principles and practices play a critical role in the development of “museum culture” – that is, a society’s understanding, appreciation and use of museums to represent, locate, and express their history, ideals and beliefs³.

I: Museums and their Civilizing Mission

Perhaps it is no wonder that the idea of museums made their way around the world. After all, the rise of these institutions coincided with an age of imperialism and the expansion of European nation-states. As Europeans began grasping the value of museums as a pedagogic and legitimizing tool, they were also traveling throughout the world annexing land to enrich their empires. This incursion of Western people and their culture into foreign lands had a dual impact. First, these colonial efforts solidified the

³ Black 31-32. Barbara Black describes museum culture as a “relational construct that establishes boundaries by which a community comes to know itself as distinct from another,” a process of civilizing a population that provides self-possession, confidence and stability.

power of empires in Europe. Their museums hosted the riches and exoticisms of faraway places, and became symbols of economic and political strength. Museums in England, for example, were “complicit with British imperialism, housing the spoils of colonization and guarding the growing perimeter of the British empire.”⁴ Barbara Black also discusses the role of museums as “offering a vision of the world,” transforming the world into “knowable and familiar” parts of a home culture and thus allowing “a culture to call the world its own.”⁵ Museums provided a nation’s citizens with a sense of stability and optimism while demonstrating to other nations their position and prowess. Second, Europe’s territorial conquests were often accompanied by the subjugation of local populations. Imperial regimes attempted to control indigenous peoples through a combination of active coercion and re-education, and many of these ‘civilizing’ tactics eventually became embedded in local culture. Thus, the idea of museums as a didactic resource, a representation of high culture, and a symbol of political power, stemmed from a type of “first-contact” situation and remained intact even after the colonized nation gained its independence.

The case studies explored in this paper make it evident that Western colonial influence was the predominant factor in museum development. While some colonial governments established local museums as a diversion for colonial residents forced to endure the hardships of living outside the civility of Europe, others used these museums as ‘transit centers’⁶ – a collection point for ‘valuable’ objects from their colonies that were transported to larger museums throughout the empire or back to the home nation as spoils of conquest. Although such explicit acts of colonialism are no longer prevalent today, one could posit that this type of cultural imperialism continues to exist in the form of Western-based foreign aid programs which require some level of oversight in

⁴ Black 11.

⁵ Black 31.

⁶ Mary Jo Arnoldi, “Overcoming a Colonial Legacy: The New National Museum of Mali: 1976 to the Present,” Museum Anthropology 22.3 (1999): 28.

exchange for financial assistance and resource support. Thus in these situations, Western aid can be viewed as instilling a hegemonic mindset in non-Western nations.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as museums sprung up throughout European colonies, there was recognition by non-Western countries that a nation's global power was measured not only by its economic strength but also by its cultural progressiveness. This realization fueled a need among developing nations to modify their infrastructure and the attitudes of their population towards greater cultural endeavors. One example of this initiative occurred through the late twentieth century when Indonesian President Suharto's New Order government directed considerable resources towards a rejuvenation of national institutions, including museums. According to the administration, "[m]useums are known to play a role in the modern world and museum development is evidence of a developed country."⁷ Unfortunately, the pursuit of this type of modernity was challenged by the population's lack of "*museum-mindedness*". This term was coined by Indonesian museum leaders to illustrate the idea that museums are an 'imported cultural form' that were not well understood by its indigenous population⁸. These leaders believe that creating 'museum-mindedness' involves the task of both building a museum infrastructure (*hardware*) and establishing a museum mentality (*software*). The New Order government was eager to cultivate this appreciation (a social consciousness) for museums among its citizens because they equated 'museum-mindedness' with the country's socio-economic development. Their hope was that cultural development would parallel economic development, and that modernizing one would lead to the prosperity of the other. In this sense, museums are considered a *tool* of modernity as well as a *symbol* of modernity,⁹

⁷ Christina Kreps, "Museum-Making and Indigenous Curation in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia," *Museum Anthropology* 22.1 (1998): 6.

⁸ Kreps 5-6. There are over 140 museums in Indonesia, many of which do not attract local residents. The absence of museum-mindedness is used to explain why museums have not been successfully integrated into Indonesian society.

⁹ Kreps 6.

and many of today's developing, non-Western nations fixate upon their ability to demonstrate their [Western] Progressiveness and Civilization through the establishment of museums. As Sharon Macdonald explains, museums provide "evolutionary narratives about the progress of mankind...at the national level, each country sought to represent its own story of self-betterment and of civilizing influence upon the rest of the world."¹⁰

II: Museums and Nationalism – Appropriations of the Past

This 'civilizing mission' is a critical one for museums because they were often tasked with personifying a nation's self-awareness – not only of how they viewed themselves (as a nation among nations), but how other nations viewed them. Particularly in a political arena where non-Western countries were viewed as 'lesser among equals', independent nation-states were often compelled to pursue the validation and legitimacy of their existence. In reaction to this Western-centric environment, museums were established within the framework of a political agenda. They provided a focal point for national solidarity and were used to "embody and make visible the idea of the state."¹¹ This was true in nineteenth century Europe, and remains a basic truth in non-Western contexts today.

"The nation-state was never simply a political entity. It was always also a symbolic formation – a 'system of representation' – which produced an 'idea' of a nation as an 'imagined community', with whose meanings we could identify and which through this imaginary identification, constituted its citizens as 'subjects'."¹²

¹⁰ Sharon Macdonald, "Exhibitions of power and powers of exhibition: An introduction to the politics of display," The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture, ed. Sharon Macdonald (New York: Routledge, 1998) 12.

¹¹ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Museum," Art History 3.4 (1980): 449.

¹² Stuart Hall, "Culture, Community, Nation," Representing the Nation: A Reader. Histories, Heritage, and Museums, eds. David Boswell and Jessica Evans (New York: Routledge, 1999) 38. Quote references Benedict Anderson's book Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983).

Thus nationalism proved to be a significant motivating force in the rise of museums in non-Western spaces, and burgeoning government powers realized that “a good narrative may be a more powerful tool in nation-making than an effective police force.”¹³

The construction of a national identity can take many forms which have a center of gravity in objects, people or events. One of the most common, particularly among nations arising from imperial rule, is the act of reclaiming for the state, the treasures and antiquities that had once belonged solely to the ruling monarchy or the royal court. This strategy is employed to not only demonstrate the continuity and Progress of the new government, but also as a way to legitimize their power. While some regimes used the conversion of royal collections to ‘public’ art as a means to exemplify the ideals of Enlightenment and democracy as legitimizing ideologies, some nations utilized this act as a means to consolidate and validate the power of the acting government. Examples of this type of appropriation are evident in the establishment of museums at the turn-of-the-century in China and the Ottoman Empire.

China’s Forbidden City in Beijing is home to the nation’s Palace Museum. In 1914, the audience halls of this complex began their conversion into exhibition spaces and concerted ‘museumification’ efforts began by 1920. When the last emperor of China, was evicted from the Forbidden City in 1925, this once sanctified center of the world became an official public museum¹⁴. Although the act appeared to reinforce democratic ideals, the possession of the imperial complex by the ‘people’ served as a means to usher in a new wave of despotic rule. Although China’s Cultural Revolutionary underpinnings of nation-building were rooted in wiping away all signs of the old dynastic order, there was reverence for the imperial art collection. These objects provided the nascent government with a “link to the foundational base of Chinese civilization itself” and thus

¹³ Geoffrey M. White, “Introduction: Public History and National Narrative,” *Museum Anthropology* 21.1 (1997): 5.

¹⁴ Rubie Watson, “Palaces, Museums, and Squares: Chinese National Spaces,” *Museum Anthropology* 19.2 (1995): 7.

“reflected and constituted imperial power and authority.”¹⁵ As the power struggle between the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party which eventually established itself in Taiwan) and the Communist Party protracted, control of the imperial collection became a sought after prize, one that was a symbol of the nation¹⁶. The procurement of the past for the present was an important political act. And as described by Baudrillard (and cited in Barbara Black), museums are a symbol of “a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends.”¹⁷ The link to the past, contained in these objects and in the museum, provided the nation with a sense of continuity and stability during a chaotic, politically charged period of their history. The imperial collection was a powerful tool that the ruling Chinese government (whether Nationalist or Communist) wielded to demonstrate their legitimacy, particularly in the face of Western powers who were carefully watching this turn of events in Asia.

In the Ottoman Empire, a similar pattern was evident. In the nineteenth century, the Ottomans were economically dependent on the West and with heavy debt the sultan had the increasingly difficult task of ruling his expansive and internally fractured territory.¹⁸ The Ottoman Empire began to weaken and by the onset of World War I, the “Sick Man of Europe” was threatened by Europe’s colonial aggression. The Empire’s solution was to secure a national identity and develop strong political reform that would resist any European incursion. Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876-1909) aimed to establish an identity that was modern, and which opposed the romanticized ‘Orientalist’ stereotypes projected by the West. The concept of “*Tanzimat*”, an Ottoman version of European Enlightenment, was instituted throughout the Empire and involved a radical program for

¹⁵ Watson 9-10.

¹⁶ This struggle between Taiwan and China for the imperial collection continues today. The Kuomintang who was in power from 1920-1949 believed they are the rightful guardians of the collection and actively transported thousands of objects from the mainland in the 1930’s fearing a Japanese invasion. These objects were shipped to Taiwan when they realized defeat at the hands of Mao’s Communist Party was inevitable. Currently, there is an ongoing effort by the mainland Chinese to repatriate the collection from the Taiwanese government.

¹⁷ Black 38.

¹⁸ Greece gained independence in 1832, Cyprus in 1882. The French occupied Algeria in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881.

economic and cultural rejuvenation.¹⁹ Like its European counterpart, Tanzimat established a new relationship between the state and society, promoting a new cultural identity and introducing ideas into the population. The new state identity was described as “Europeanese Ottoman” accentuating a combination of modern Western ideas and Ottoman (Islamic) traditions. Public education was a critical component of this new philosophy and as such, museums were used as a space for the construction and projection of the history, culture and identity of the Ottoman state.²⁰ By ‘recycling’ the objects of the past into new didactic symbols for its citizens, museums both housed and embodied the values of the state and society. The sultan’s collection was used to demonstrate the longevity of the Empire, define the nation’s position of power, and glorify Islam. Objects from the imperial treasury were exhibited in museums throughout the Empire and today are housed in Topkapi Palace [Museum] in Istanbul where they remain an enduring symbol of the nation’s heritage and culture.²¹

While the examples of China and the Ottoman Empire demonstrate that the appropriation of objects representing the past can be a powerful strategy in defining the goals of the present, Vietnam illustrates a slight variation of this theme. Rather than centering power on imperial objects, the Vietnamese built a national identity and a corresponding museum complex around a single man – Ho Chi Minh.²² As the visionary leader of the people’s revolution, Ho embodied the ideals of a Golden Age of Vietnam where its citizens would live in peace, harmony and independence. Subsequently, the myth of Ho was crystallized into what is known as the Ho Chi Minh Complex, situated in Ba Dinh Square, Hanoi. Over the course of fifteen years, three structures were built on

¹⁹ Tanzimat was initially established in 1839, but did not gain political support until the Empire was faced with growing Western threat at the turn of the century.

²⁰ Wendy M.K. Shaw, Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 24.

²¹ Ergun Çağatay, “Topkapi’s Treasures,” Saudi Aramco World, January/February 1995, 12 January 2007 <<http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199501/topkapi.s.treasures.htm>>.

²² Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Monumental Ambiguity: The State Commemoration of Ho Chi Minh.” Essays into Vietnamese Pasts. Taylor, K.W., and John K. Whitmore, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University South East Asia Program, 1995) 273.

this site to commemorate the revolutionary hero – his mausoleum (1975), his museum, and his historic house (1990). All three buildings represent a different phase in Vietnam’s evolving national identity and each reinforces specific ideas: a Communist revolutionary victory, the political and social ideologies of their founding father, and the traditional Vietnamese virtues of selflessness, loyalty, service and sacrifice.²³ Each exhibition linked the man with the nation, and it is through these messages that a national identity was formed.

In addition to objects and people, non-Western museums appropriated events to embed and fortify nationalistic ideals. The Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes in Phnom Penh, Cambodia is an example of how a historical incident was used to develop a “master narrative of a successor state”²⁴ and develop a collective memory about a horrific period of in the nation’s history. The goal of the museum is to provide evidence of the crimes perpetrated against the Khmer people by Democratic Kampuchea (DK) government. Through its morose iconographic program, it establishes a “monologic historical explanation of events”²⁵ that evokes varying responses. Foreign visitors are asked to bear witness to the devastation of this country, sympathize with its loss, and validate the current government’s role²⁶ in rescuing the Khmer people from the brink of extermination. When survivors of the Pol Pot Regime visit the museum to locate relatives missing since the DK occupation, the government uses the opportunity to reinforce their legitimacy with daunting messages of “*you must support us because to fail to do so will result in the return to power of the Khmer Rouge.*”²⁷ While skeptics view this museum as a form of installed propaganda with conveniently delineated ‘good

²³ Christoph Giebel, “Museum-Shrine.” The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam. Tai, Hue-Tam Ho, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 90.

²⁴ Judy Legerwood, “The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative,” Museum Anthropology 21.1 (1997): 82.

²⁵ Legerwood 90.

²⁶ The current government, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was installed by the invading Vietnamese army in 1979. Although the Vietnamese officially withdrew from Cambodia in 1989, there are still questions as to the autonomy (and legitimacy) of the PRK.

²⁷ Legerwood 91.

guys' and 'bad guys', others see it as telling a shared national story and representing a focal point for a nation's emotional consolation.

The idea of *solidarity in suffering* often attaches itself to motivations of cultural preservation. It is commonly used by non-Western nations who seek to unify a disparate or disenfranchised population, or to consolidate momentum and strength around specific objectives. Through this strategy Israel successfully implemented their nationalistic agenda. Since the emergence of the Zionist movement in the nineteenth century, ideologues, activists, academics and politicians have struggled (and continue to struggle) with how to align the Zionist identity with the geographic territory of Israel. In a region fraught with religious conflict and historical instability, the establishment of Jewish sovereignty and a claim to an unambiguous geographic heritage was essential to Israel's assertion of political control and independence from the British Mandate.²⁸ In reaction to this situation, Israeli cultural agencies developed different tactics to emphasize Jewish solidarity through their museum programs.

Tel Aviv's Jewish Diaspora Museum is an example of how different, distinct Jewish images and identities were "*flattened*" – an act of affirmative, convenient inclusion – and cast into a hegemonic image of the past.²⁹ Through this process, individual Jewish communities in the Diaspora were inextricably linked together, assumed to participate in a common lifestyle and share the same Zionist-framed history of poverty, suffering and persecution. It was important for Israel to quash non-sanctioned interpretations of the hegemonic story in order to present a united front that countered threats to the nation's sovereignty.

²⁸ The British Mandate ended in 1948 when Israel was declared an independent nation. The order specifically affected the control of the City of Jerusalem, and Israel's claim was hotly contested by Jordan and Palestine.

²⁹ Ariella Azoulay, "With Open Doors: Museums and Historical Narratives in Israel's Public Space," *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, eds. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): 103.

History museums, like the Tower of David Museum of the History of Jerusalem, have become crucial elements in defining the power relationship between people and geography. By controlling this museum and by extension the [disputed] history of the city, Israel was able to substantiate their entitlement to the city and relegate the positions of Jordan and Palestine to minor players with uncorroborated claims. In this vein, most Israeli historical museums reside on critical *sites of memory* which serve as a “crossroad for practices aimed at claiming and preserving the past” and which integrate the past into “the daily life of the present.”³⁰

Inherent in this reconciliation is the *act of discovery*, or recovering of the past. This process removes layers of historical sediment and rescues the ‘inscribed’ past from its contemporary landscape. This act of clearing-away and rediscovery demonstrates a Judeocentric continuum and sanctions the Zionist version of a history that, for them, has existed since the beginning of time.

Through these strategies of transforming Diaspora into unity, connecting memory and history to geography, and reclaiming the past through acts of discovery, Israeli museums have carved out a role in its nation’s cultural politics as a purveyor of truths that authenticate the existence of a nation and a people.

These preceding cases demonstrate how the present can be legitimized by the past; and how museums, as containers of the past, symbolize a seat of power in the socio-political framework of non-Western nations. They reveal the connection between the rise of museums and the rise of nations. Museums were established as a means to fortify a nation against foreign advancement and a way for people to memorialize a social, political, and even moral victory. They were also a powerful instrument which could firmly express the competency of a new government and the solidarity of communities.

³⁰ Azoulay 88.

III: Museum Practices – A Cultural Hybridization

Just as there are many motivations for the establishment of museums in non-Western spaces, there are diverse and culturally specific types of museum practices. While many of these evolved from and conform to Western modes and methods, some practices are clear contradictions to Western ideals. The resulting compromise develops into a “process of *cultural hybridization* whereby local cultural complexes are merged with those of the wider, transnational museum culture.”³¹ Though this fusion is prevalent in many non-Western museums today, the paradox of resisting and embracing the influence of the West continues to exist and is revealed in the following examples.

Because many non-Western museums were established to reify their nation’s self-identity, they often abandoned or alter the ‘universalist’ ideals of order, preservation, purity and authenticity common in the great museums of the West³². For example, whereas Western museums used their institutions to represent social evolutionary principles and assemble fragments of various civilizations that demonstrated the pinnacle of their own humanity, non-Western museums reinforce local culture and construct narratives that are representative of *their* existence, not the existence of other cultures. In Turkey and Vietnam, European art was shunned as a ‘mode of resistance’ against Western imperialism³³ and in Malaysia, the histories of colonizing powers were depicted through, and promoted as, the work of local artists³⁴ rather than those of Western artists.

To encourage visitation among its citizens, many museums in non-Western spaces remain as *active sites*, rather than places where the past is permanently

³¹ Kreps 12.

³² Specifically, this refers to universal survey museums described by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach.

³³ This was evident in Turkey and Vietnam, both of whom battled against European colonialism for much of their modern history.

³⁴ Malaysia’s National Museum has wall murals depicting their British colonial past. These paintings were commissioned by the museum and are promoted as local artwork.

enshrined and preserved in stasis. In the National Museum of Cambodia, local visitors rub and touch objects while young women sell fragrant garlands to be offered to sculptures of Buddha. Incense is burned throughout a building which has little concern for Western sensibilities of object conservation. Similarly, Malaysian museums reinforce culturally familiar themes of royalty and religion. Images of the King and Queen are displayed in all of their fourteen institutions, and following an Islamic-based iconographic program all religious objects are placed on the uppermost floor of the museum which signifies their closeness to God³⁵. *Suraus*, or prayer houses, are located on the grounds and throughout the building for active worship. Thus by incorporating these types of objects and practices into their museum culture, Malaysians have blurred the lines between ritual and aesthetic, altering the idea of visiting museums as a “*ritual of citizenship*” to suit their local traditions and practices.

In Ghana’s Asante society, the varying presence of objects in the Manhyia Palace Museum (their national museum) represents the active-state of the institution. Because certain objects in Asante culture are shrouded in secrecy and can only be viewed during ritual festivals and celebrations of the Asantehene (king), the museum’s collections undergo a continuous process of display and storage. As explained by a visiting curator, the museum “did not need to house a collection of used objects to validate its existence. Nor did it have to have objects on perpetual display. Asante art was a ‘public art’.”³⁶ This meant that consistent with Asante culture they were only occasionally on view to the public, but mostly secured away. The comings and goings of this Asante collection as well as the interactive nature of the museums in Indonesia and Malaysia illustrate the unique practices and norms of non-Western museums, as compared with those of the Western world. It also underscores the necessity of incorporating museums into an

³⁵ Laurie Beth Kalb, “Nation Building and Cultural Display in Malaysian Museums,” *Museum Anthropology* 21.1 (1997): 72.

³⁶ Enid Schildkrout, “Royal Treasury, Historic House, or Just a Museum? Transforming Manhyia Palace, Ghana, into a Site of Cultural Tourism,” *Museum Anthropology* 22.3 (1999): 25.

existing and familiar cultural framework in order to make them relevant in places which lack ‘museum-mindedness’ or an understanding of the museum’s role in society.

Likewise, the notion of *authenticity* is often challenged by non-Western museums. In many of these institutions, replicas and reproductions are a common fact. Most museums cannot afford insurance and elaborate security systems are not practical. As in the case of Ghana’s Asante collection, valuable objects are often taken out of displays and locked in vaults when the museum closes. Furthermore, the issue of uniqueness and authenticity are simply less of a concern for these museums than the idea of what the object represents in their national narrative. For Cambodians, the idea of preserving an old and useless object, regardless of its authenticity, is a completely foreign concept. They have evolved the belief that it is more important to preserve the *tradition* of art and hence reproduction takes precedent over restoration and conservation³⁷. This notion of reproduction is extended to the case of Israel’s ‘fabricated exhibitions’ – the practice of using documents, photographs, dioramas and constructed evidence (e.g. contemporary mud on ancient tools) to tell a story. Preservation became an increasingly difficult practice given the inherent political and geographic instability of the country. What the Israelis realized was that the outward appearance of authenticity was equally as valid for interpretive purposes. Israeli museums view this hybrid of real and fictitious artifacts as a “broadening of the bounds of possible museum objects”³⁸ and the practice is one that has become popular in historical museums around the world.

Although establishing culturally relevant museum practices may be the best choice for many non-Western museums, the challenges of economic reality often force them to comply with the methods prescribed by the West. Available human and financial resources are fundamental to a museum’s ability to function. They dictate the

³⁷ This belief is exemplified in the numerous craft villages and artisan schools throughout the country which make countless reproductions of traditional objects to be sold to visiting tourists and are shipped around the world.

³⁸ Azoulay 93.

scope of their mission, the practices the museum will endorse, and the people involved in their upkeep. Unfortunately, most non-Western institutions suffer from a lack of both professional museum staff and sufficient operating funds, the result of which is a reliance on external sources for consultants, experts and financing. Each dependency carries with it advantages and problems. For example, while local cultural experts, like those used by Indonesia's Museum Balanga, can provide museums with interpretive proficiency and a greater sense of authentic interpretation, dependence on them by other staff members can result in debilitating inaction. Knowledge gaps filled by foreign experts, such as those who helped Ghana and Cambodia develop important national exhibitions,³⁹ allow museums to benefit from subject-matter expertise and organizational agility; however, handing control over to 'outsiders' can raise questions among the museum's indigenous audience about the integrity and credibility of its narrative. Compounding these issues of human resources is a museum's reliance on external financing – from the government or foreign agencies. Institutions that receive monetary support from their government as part of an educational supplement program (e.g. India⁴⁰) or national renovation project (e.g. Indonesia) are fortunate, but the money usually comes at the cost of management autonomy and an independent voice. Likewise, funding from agencies like UNESCO and ICOM or large, well-known museums are often prized, but lingering questions as to whether foreign oversight will influence the local implementation and interpretation of museum narratives remain. Thus, an ironic tension exists as non-Western museums struggle to define their own methods of

³⁹ In 1990, Malcolm McLeod was asked to lead the renovation of Ghana's Manhyia Palace Museum. A former curator at Britain's Museum of Mankind, McLeod had curated 'Asante: Kingdom of Gold.' In 1979, Cambodia's Ministry of Culture hired Mai Lam, a Vietnamese research specialist on war crimes, to lead the development of Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes.

⁴⁰ Arjun Appadurai & Carol A. Breckenridge, "Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India," Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, Heritage, and Museums, eds. David Boswell and Jessica Evans (New York: Routledge, 1999). Developing nations are often challenged to find funding for educational and cultural programs. In India, museums are considered an important supplement to formal education, and subsequently receive financial assistance from the government.

operation while concurrently being reliant on resources from those who may seek to mitigate their independence.

While it appears that the ongoing practices of non-Western museums are fraught with difficult choices, a range of consequences, and an inherent struggle with the West, they often find ways to negotiate the challenge. There are numerous success stories that demonstrate how structural and organizational hybridization have been incorporated into the museum practices of non-Western nations. Mali, for instance, recently embarked on a grand reorganization project that aimed to “democratize” and “decentralize” its colonial museum infrastructure. Their hybrid combines architecture and programs which promoted greater cultural familiarity with Westernized policies and methods of collection and conservation. Malians improved local accessibility and encouraged public participation in defining the programs and exhibits at the museum. They established a support network of museum professionals which strengthened their self-sufficiency and independence. Rather than attend a conservation workshop in Europe, the museum invited the International Center for the Study of Preservation and Conservation of Cultural Property (ICCROM) to Mali to teach African museum professionals new techniques within the bounds of local African museums, thus combining the benefits of educating local workers with the opportunity to sensitize the ICCROM conservators to the needs of local institutions.⁴¹ The New National Museum in Mali provides just one example of how hybridization, the blending of local and Western practices, can be successfully implemented in a non-Western context.

⁴¹ Arnoldi 31.

IV: Conclusion – What is a Non-Western Museum?

As we explored the historical development and modern evolution of museums in non-Western contexts, we have seen how the museum concept was transmitted outside of Europe through periods of colonial expansion; how the rise of many museums were a result of the urgency of nationalism; and how museums today struggle with the challenges of implementing practices that are culturally relevant and economically feasible. Although many non-Western museums still demonstrate an embedded cultural hegemony – a historical Western influence that remains articulated in contemporary museum thought and behavior – they have also developed new models and methods. They have allowed for cultural treatments and responses to objects to be integrated into their display practices. These case studies illustrate the diversity of their missions, strategies, values, audiences, resources, and expertise.

This maturing of non-Western museums and their adaptation to contemporary societal needs provides us with an opportunity to reconsider the established discourse of West and non-West. There is no doubt that historically, the scheme of organizing the world in these particular terms provided a way to delineate a transfer of ideas and information from parts of the world known to Europeans to that which was less familiar. However, we should question whether this dichotomy is relevant or even useful in describing and classifying museums today. The categorization of West and non-West implies a duality and a double-standard of measurement which remains rooted in a colonial framework. What we have seen in this paper suggests that regardless of their geographic orientation or root of their origin, museums have evolved into complex, multi-dimensional institutions which defy this rudimentary classification.

Thus the question lies in how museums should be described and compared today. Should we classify museums by their purpose, their audience, or their methodologies? Perhaps we should sort them by their size, resources or affiliations? Or should we try to classify museums at all? Given the variety of criteria available for such an exercise, it is unlikely that we will find a single, uncontested organizational model. It is also unlikely that we would be able to define models as “advanced” or “developing”. For example, who’s to say that the cultural hybridization practiced by the museums in Asia and Africa is less advanced than methods promoted by universal survey museums of Europe and America? In fact, as we think about how some museums in the US are only now incorporating communities and local cultures into their practices, we could suggest that museums in Southeast Asia and West Africa are actually one step ahead in their attempts to establish relevancy among their constituency.

Today’s museums must grapple with their dynamic and changing environments and “find new ways to engage with new realities.”⁴² Although their problems and solutions may differ, their underlying purpose is shared – to promote the formation of a community’s identity and provide a means for it to represent, engage, and express its history, ideals and beliefs. Within this scope, categorizations of West and non-West become less important. Museums should be viewed in situ, and the complexity of classification and comparative evaluation must be acknowledged. As museum professionals, we are responsible for recognizing that we view the world through a variety of lenses – and *how* we view objects, ideas, people, cultures, and nations is just as important as what we are viewing.

⁴² Elizabeth Rankin and Carolyn Hamilton, “REVISION; REACTION; RE-VISION. The Role of Museums in (a) transforming South Africa” *Museum Anthropology* 22.3 (1999): 10.

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