

# Introduction: Indigeneity and Museum Practice in the Southwest Pacific

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Over the past decade or more the Southwest Pacific has provided a type of laboratory for new cultural developments. For the study of culture, particularly in material form displayed in museums, the region has, as in the eighteenth century, offered novel perspectives to scholars and the public both in the region as well as elsewhere in the world. This book examines the growth of cultural centres in the area and seeks reasons both for their genesis and their continued popularity. In so doing the authors here are following up a landmark publication, Soroi Eoe and Pamela Swadling's 1991 study entitled *Museums and Cultural Centres in the Pacific*. Eoe and Swadling solicited contributions from over forty different locations across the Pacific. Each provided a pithy account of the salient features of their respective centre. Eoe and Swadling have provided the region with a benchmark against which to measure subsequent developments. This volume studies many of the same locations as the earlier study but with some notable differences. Firstly, the field of study is narrower: the focus is on Melanesia, excluding Micronesia and Polynesia. The study also includes three groups to the west of Melanesia, around the Arafura Sea: the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands in the Australian Northern Territory, the Torres Strait Islanders, and the Asmat of West Papua. The intention is to provide greater space for authors to develop the theme of the growth of indigenous museums and cultural centres in a more geographically specific region, and thereby, hopefully, to indicate the linked thinking and practice that unites them loosely.

The geographic closeness of all the case studies in this book also means that some common themes can be discerned and explored in the region. The role of the Big Man is often examined in discussions about Melanesia. This concept is certainly important when considering the key role of the museum director or curator throughout the region. But what also should be recognized is that women often have vital roles. This can be seen particularly in Bolton's chapter on Vanuatu, and Bein Juda, Herle and Philp's discussion of the Torres Strait. Another key theme in this region is the future orientation that these centres exhibit. The objects that are collected are not merely historic relics but a source for future reemployment. This contrasts sharply with the tradition of interpretation and heritage centres so widespread in Europe and North America.

There have been agents at work to promote the development of indigenous popular display. Prominent support has come throughout the decade from the Australian South Pacific Cultures Fund, which has assisted in the building of cultural centres throughout the region. The Tourism Council of the South Pacific (1990) has also played a significant role, commissioning reports on economic diversification through the tourist industry. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has also, through its Pacific Office, contributed to such discussions, and through the Pacific Islands Museums Association, it has encouraged the growth of cultural centres throughout the region. These agencies all argue that the economic problems facing the region and the logistical difficulties of an extremely small population dispersed over the largest region of the globe, militate in favour of diversification into the realm of culture as a sustainable commodity in an otherwise restricted environment.

## **The Concept of an Indigenous Museum**

In 1908 Richard Thurnwald settled in Buin, an island to the north of Bougainville and here, as Marion Melk-Koch documents (2000: 59–60) ‘after considerable effort, he started his own open-air museum consisting of models of houses from different parts of the colony, furnished with true indigenous items. People from the remote areas of Buin flocked to see them and according to a caption of a photograph, they paid an entrance fee in natural products’. Through this device Thurnwald was exporting the newly emergent European concept of an open-air museum devoted to local and often threatened indigenous culture. This model thrives today in most of the cultural centres across the Pacific.

This vignette in the history of European incursion into the Western Pacific raises a host of questions about the status of museums in the region, which I will seek to explore in this chapter. Firstly, one might ask, what was going on? Whose interests were being served and on what terms? Secondly, does this example suggest a model for museums and museum visiting? Thirdly, are there specific circumstances that either enhance or threaten the transfer of the concept of museum to this region and to this people? Fourthly, do the indigenous people as both subject and object of attention and display, see the exhibition in the same way as the designer? In particular, are the items of display, ‘the different parts of the colony’, recognizable to the inhabitants of Buin? Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, can Richard Thurnwald’s exhibition be legitimately described as a prototype for indigenous museums? At the end of the day, is the very term ‘indigenous museum’ an oxymoron or a misplaced concept? What is at stake throughout this litany of questions is a deeper concern as to whether the concept of museum and the practice of museological classification and display can have any use outside Europe and north America, and especially in those parts of the world where contestation between settler groups and prior inhabitants remains so acute. Here, I have in mind Australia, Hawai‘i, New Zealand and French-ruled areas of Polynesia.

There are those who would see the Buin exhibition as a clear example of the perils that confront any attempts to create forms of indigenous display. Ian McIntosh expresses this position clearly in his statement: 'the term "indigenous" is appropriate only when considering the inequitable relationship and claims of a subjugated "first people" with respect to their oppressors' (McIntosh 2002: 23). From this perspective the Buin exhibition seems unlikely to yield any significant benefits to the indigenous inhabitants. Their lives are reduced to an abstract set of largely arbitrary material items displayed without much sense of meaning. The exhibition serves instead, so this line of reasoning goes, merely to freeze into some ethnographic permanence the curator's image distilled from the ambiguity of an ever-changing social, political and moral life. At best, later curators (whether indigenous or Western) can subsequently salvage elements of their own or their neighbours' history, but always through the prism of the original collector or curator. As Pannell warns bleakly, 'museums act as "mirrors of production" ... True to their reflective characteristic, the images produced in this context also have the capacity to refract (and thus to distort) the relations, mode and means of their own production' (Pannell 1994: 18). Thurnwald's apparent ingenuity in uniting the subjects of his ethnography with the audience does not, in reality, ensure that the disjuncture can be overcome between the museum and world in which it exists. A live question remains, however, as to whether current inhabitants of Buin would approach an exhibition like Thurnwald's in a similar way to their forbears. But the original visitors to the Buin museum were not even looking at their lives reflected in the exhibits.

The Buin museum can be seen as an early example of the workings of Wallerstein's thesis relating to the fate of economies and cultures in an age of imperialism. Wallerstein maintains not only that core economies always consistently super-exploit and render dependent all weaker competitors, but that analogous features occur within cultural development. The details of world trade and cultural exchange may vary, but there is a cultural, political and economic imperative, that ensures that the indigenous always remain clients (Wallerstein 1991: 79). Whilst the changes in technology and communications make Buin entirely different from a century ago, nevertheless, museum collections are still made in Buin by Western collectors for display in Western museums. It is only the occasional item that finds its way either into the national museums in Port Moresby or Honiara.

Taken together, such criticisms of indigenous museums and the associated term 'indigenous curation' appear powerful enough to refute the promotion of such enterprises. But the Buin exhibition, although admittedly in the mainstream of ethnological display, is not the only model available. There are at least three alternative models which involve consideration of varying degrees of voluntarism and the recognition of potential sources of indigenous power. Nelson Graburn's is probably the best known. In his celebrated *Ethnic and Tourist Arts* he admits of the possibility of exogenously inspired imperatives which can, nevertheless, be incorporated within either traditional forms or culturally embedded aesthetic and

formal standards (Graburn 1976: 5–6). In this formulation, new ideas and forms are introduced into an existent framework. These art works then become available for display both in local venues (including museums), and through exchange, for reexport to museums elsewhere in the region or further afield. In essence, this model accommodates change without previous or extant aesthetic standards coming under attack.

A second variant could be called a bi-polar model, and is commonly associated with Nicholas Thomas's argumentation in his *Entangled Objects* (1991). Agency becomes two -directional: indigenous people actively trade for European goods at the same time as they bargain for the sale of their own products. As Welsch notes, indigenous agency has often been a powerful controller in the exchange of goods. In his discussion of early collectors in Papua New Guinea he states, 'villagers brought out only what they wanted to sell and only those objects could have been purchased no matter who the collector might have been' (Welsch 2000: 175). One aspect of this model that is not often noted is that not only are Western collectors amassing substantial but often poorly integrated or documented groups of items, but the indigenous exchange partners are also acquiring items that have the potential to form a museum collection in their own right. The detritus left behind by Europeans, particularly on battlefields, could either become pathetic relics or a source for future local display (Stanley 1998: 90–91).

However, it is to a third alternative model that I wish to turn, one where agency derives from indigenous sources. I would like to stress that I am not seeking to create a single simple (or even complex) model of indigenous agency or museum practice. I would, indeed, argue, that the distinction made by O'Hanlon between period, place and people is always important (O'Hanlon 2000). Nor am I presuming a singular form of museum practice. In many cases what appear to be forms of indigenous display and curation can be traced back to what Errington calls 'an alliance composed of authoritarian third-world regimes, transnational corporations, international monetary and development agencies, and consultants from the industrialized state economies' (S. Errington 1998: 6). What I wish to consider here is whether such a situation can be avoided, challenged or overcome. Are there any grounds for repudiating Anderson's process of 'political museumizing' (Anderson 1991: 183) as an integral part of post-colonial state formation? Further, one might ask, is there any cultural space left for a genuine autochthonous museum in any shape or form?

## **Propositions for the Construction of Indigenous Art Museums**

The Buin open-air museum fails to qualify as an indigenous example for the simple but fundamental reason that there was presumably little if any indigenous agency involved in its construction. It is also unclear if the museum had any fundamental purpose apart from the display of the variety of Buin material culture. However, there have been a number of proposals for the advancement of

indigenous museums over the past twenty years, all of which question aspects of the Western notion of a museum. Mead was one of the first to explore the practical and intellectual issues in his 'Indigenous Models of Museums in Oceania' (1983). In this article Mead made a major distinction between indigenous and Western museums in terms of function. The image of the Western museum conjured up by Mead was 'a highly specialised organization that has become integrated into the socio-economic, technological, philosophical and artistic contexts of Western nations'. Mead further defined Western museums as secular institutions with academic and professional aspirations. They were, furthermore, extremely expensive to maintain and had a poorly articulated relationship with any local communities. It could be argued that Mead's Western model now looks dated. Most European and North American museums have, over the past quarter of a century, built significant relationships with their audiences and local communities (Karp, Kraemer and Lavine 1992; Peers and Brown 2003). Multicultural and pluralist agendas have also expanded museums' intellectual horizons, yet, I would still maintain that Mead's definition of Western museums is consistent with Max Weber's concept of formal and substantive rationality with an emphasis on technical competence, objectivity and detachment (Gerth and Mills 1976: 298). Such concerns remain a bedrock of the philosophy of bureaucratic organizations today, and they remain, despite some radical revision in some quarters, at the heart of museological thinking, as Proslor ruefully notes (Proslor 1996).

In contrast, Mead offered two examples of indigenous structures that embody the virtues of localism in Oceania, a New Zealand *marae* and a Solomon Island *custom house*. Both of these fulfilled recognizably museum functions: each was a repository for culturally valued and historic artefacts; both served as ceremonial locations for religious and cultural practices. But there are other qualities that the *marae* and *custom house* shared that set them off from the tradition of Western museums. The first relates to audience. Both venues have explicit restrictions on who may enter, when they may enter, and what class of objects they may view. The second distinction relates to the relationship between economy and technology. Indigenous museums do not have the funds to employ large numbers of specialists or to maintain special climatic conditions of storage to sustain the collections' physical integrity. The alternative, Mead implies, is to turn, instead, to local knowledge and expertise.

Mead also hinted at some other issues which indigenous museums have to address. Most noteworthy of these is the right of such museums to display both objects and knowledge, and the rights of the viewer to see and hear these. This early article thus presages later discussions held in museums around the world about taboos associated with artefacts. As Foana'ota, Haraha and Kingston argue in this book, there may be powerful reasons why local people want to rid themselves of powerful objects and why these may coincide with museums' desires to obtain them. There may be equally telling reasons why those who deposit objects wish to control access to others to these same objects. The Mabo decision in Australia and

the NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act 1990) in the USA have made such issues pressing museological concerns.

Museums can be transformed into cultural centres. This development has happened throughout the Pacific. There are two special benefits to be derived from such a change, related to the development of communal values as well as to the promotion of the museum as an institution in its own right. Eoe argued in 1990 that museums had to develop a relevance to local issues or else they would perish. The only way that museums in the Pacific would sustain their funding, he argued, was by serving national and local needs. 'Museums should play a catalytic role in all development programmes, with special emphasis being placed on those addressing social problems' (Eoe: 1990 : 30). Eoe had two specific topics in mind – the problems of unemployed youth, and the rapid and pervasive deforestation being perpetrated by international logging companies throughout the region. Although Eoe did not spell out how museums might contribute to the resolution of either problem, the solution he had in mind was in both cases to involve members of the local community to become increasingly empowered through the exploration of traditional customs and by the study of local knowledge and practice, especially through learning the skills and achievements of their elders. In such settings, the collected objects no longer remained relics of an outdated past but material for the reformulation of a future cultural renaissance, or, as Davenport has termed it, 'a depository for working capital' (Davenport and Coker 1967: 157).

A number of individual examples of indigenous museums have been documented recently. Two, both in Papua New Guinea, are particularly relevant here. The first of these, the Onga Cultural Centre at Romonga, was established by a local man in the late 1980s. It has a faint echo of the Buin open-air museum about it, but, as will become apparent, the similarity is far from close. O'Hanlon describes the centre thus: '[it] comprises a traditional Hagen man's house and a woman's house from the pre-contact period, recreated with what seemed to me exceptional fidelity and stocked with a truly remarkable array of material culture' (O'Hanlon 1993: 74). The purpose of the centre was to preserve knowledge about the past for the future. The artefacts on display were, O'Hanlon remarks, narrowly defined in terms of traditional material culture (*ibid.*, 75). The display had a second purpose – to attract tourists and their wealth to the area.

The second example, the Nayudos cultural centre on the Huon Peninsula, was substantially completed in 1993. The orientation of this cultural centre is quite different from the Onga example. Whilst it uses the language of tradition – the centre building being designated "ancestors' ceremonial compound homestead" (*babek bema yoma*), (Kocher Smid 1994: 792) – its real purpose is the political unification of a variety of local peoples. But, as Kocher Smid states emphatically, 'it is, first and foremost, a declaration stating which segments of traditional culture should be continued and used to build a new syncretistic cultural identity' (*ibid.*, 798). This sounds not dissimilar to Anderson's notion of 'political museumizing', though conducted not at state but at local level.

In my view, both of the examples above qualify as genuine examples of indigenous museums. They are begotten by local individuals who attempt to harness traditional customary knowledge and practice for use in contemporary life. There is a clear distinction between the European model of the museum as the repository for historic artefacts, and the future orientation that cultural centres such as these display. This is a crucial distinction which is emphasized elsewhere in the Pacific (Cochrane 1999). Bolton catches this nicely when she writes, 'indigenous interests in museums can best be summarised in terms of contemporaneity. Although by no means all members of their communities are interested in museums, where Aborigines and Melanesians have this interest, their interest is in using the collections, and the institutions to address contemporary issues' (Bolton 2001: 230–31). Elsewhere, Bolton explores another facet of contemporaneity. When discussing the way that the photographs of historic collections of pandanus fabrics are perceived by present-day weavers on Ambae, Vanuatu, Bolton discovered that these women were not interested in the provenance of the fabrics depicted on the photographs. Instead, 'their interest focussed on the fabric types, the in-weave designs and the stencilled patterns, especially on those with which they were not themselves familiar' (Bolton 1997: 27). In other words, theirs was an instrumental rather than an archaeological or museological interest.

Can we discern any systematic difference between indigenous museums in the Western Pacific and European models? This is not a simple question because there are two different imperatives at work. On the one hand, the museum may merely be a useful device of temporary significance in the establishment or negotiation of cultural property between indigenous people or in their dealing with Western seekers for talismans of indigeneity. But, on the other hand, we do well to remember that museumizing is heavily implicated in the construction of postcolonial national identity throughout the region. In such modernizing agendas, traditional cultural beliefs, practices and material manifestations are seen as elements to be salvaged at the very moment that modernization would otherwise condemn them to perish.

There could, then, be grounds to view the promoters of indigenous museums and curation as cynical operators. They may either use the apparent similarity with Western museum models to conceal hidden motives, or, like the Indonesian state, they may be promoting ethnic distinctions to justify a form of pluralism, whilst in reality grimly pursuing a unitary national model. But, I want to argue here, such a perception is fundamentally wrong. We are assuming that we can define the Western model unambiguously, and that our comparisons are based on this sense of definitional security. What would change if we stopped treating Western museums, and ethnographic museums in particular, as stable entities, and instead saw them as institutions involved in a constant round of self-justifications for their very existence to a range of publics? In such a scenario we could have the opportunity to consider afresh the significance attached to the sovereign artefact. What indigenous museums and indigenous curation might do

is to re-open some questions that we never realized were in contention. As Kreps has put it, 'whilst indigenous curatorial practices are unique cultural expressions that deserve documentation and preservation in their own right, they can also be heuristic, awakening us to some of the assumptions and values embedded in our own practices' (Kreps 1998: 3). The longer-term relationship between indigenous museums and their curators with Western-style museums may be about to change not only in countries where both types of institution coexist like Australia, New Zealand and U.S.A., but also between postcolonial states and their former imperial occupiers who still retain almost the entire historic record of their previous possessions. Repatriation, in this context, no longer serves to settle the issue. As Pannell (1994) has argued, simply to restore objects to their rightful owners may serve only to erase the memory of the means of their appropriation and alienation. I would add that restitution also involves a consideration of wider issues surrounding ownership, rights and identity; it has consequences not only in the context of the Western ethnographic museum and its indigenous counterpart, but also in the community within which the indigenous museum and cultural centre resides.

### **Troubles within: Issues in Indigenous Curation**

Mead dropped a small bombshell into the conclusion of his article. For him, the defining difference between the Western and Oceanic museum lies in the fact that, 'there is a real contrast between how valued objects are treated in Oceania and Western countries. The tendency in branches of Western knowledge is to secularise knowledge.' Whilst he did not object to the universalist credentials professed by Western museums, they brought with them distinctive disadvantages which could prove fatal in non-Western museums. Mead continued, 'whilst this has the effect of making knowledge available to everyone, which is commendable, it also does something else. It makes knowledge itself, the means of knowledge, and the valued objects that are part of history all very common, and subject to common theft' (Mead 1983:101).

Mead's conclusion anticipated some questions that are currently in considerable contention. He sidestepped a serious discussion of the issues involved by apparently balancing two incompatible positions. On the one hand, Mead was careful to avoid what he saw as the solipsism involved in claims by indigenous peoples to the exclusive access to possession, use and control of secret or private knowledge, hence his endorsement of universalist principles, 'making knowledge available to everyone'. But Mead concluded his statement by making reference to knowledge, the means to knowledge and aspects of material culture, all of which he saw as in danger of being stolen. (Mead 1983: 100). It does not take much ingenuity to hazard a good guess as to who are the thieves: they are Western scholars, curators and those intent on appropriating the content and ownership of indigenous copyright. Mead's position appears to share many of the



features of those seeking indigenous rights. Brown characterizes this position succinctly: 'If native groups "own" their knowledge, if it was "stolen" from them by government officials, missionaries, and anthropologists, then they are simply seeking the return of pilfered goods rather than asking repositories to violate principles of free access' (Brown 1998: 199). However, elsewhere in his article Mead also noted that in many parts of Melanesia the enjoyment of events and artefacts is by no means universally available. In particular, using the example of the custom house, Mead observed that females were effectively excluded from entering or participating in events taking place within them. This was not a major problem for Mead, as he had maintained that indigenous museums should always work within the extant local belief systems, and that the primary means of operation should always be to maintain an art tradition through training in the oral traditions. Ultimately, what matters, Mead argued, is control over culture, the indigenous philosophy and educational system.

There is an unspoken and largely taken-for-granted supposition behind this formulation of the indigenous museum, namely, that there is an unambiguous entity defined as local culture which acts a source of authenticity. By collecting artefacts, histories and genealogies, and special knowledge related to particular locations, the indigenous curator can reinforce the sense of community and belonging to all who are both subject and object of representation in the indigenous museum. In this construction, the notion of copyright is accorded great significance. As Lindstrom has argued, in many Melanesian communities there exist powerful forms of copyright protecting a person's or a clan's ownership of knowledge, magic, therapies, artefacts and technologies (Lindstrom 1994: 69). These are vital resources and ultimately are treasured, as Weiner puts it, as inalienable resources. 'Ideally, these inalienable possessions are kept by their owners from one generation to the next within the closed context of family, descent group or dynasty' (Weiner 1992: 6). One of the consequences for museums is that stewardship and display of culturally significant artefacts comes to rely increasingly upon the agreement of their customary owners. As Brown has shown with respect to Native American and Aboriginal claims, a further consequence has been that specific restrictions required by the indigenous community (hinted at in Mead's custom house example) are increasingly being respected by curators. Ultimately, this may result in the museum-visiting public being segmented according to ascriptive criteria (such as gender) that accord or deny them access to sacred, ritual or secret material.

But indigenous curators may not find themselves in a position to form a ready agreement with members of a settled and unambiguous community about what may be displayed, and under what conditions. As cultural constructionists point out, culture may not consist of a set of mutually intelligible and agreed principles. It may, indeed, not be a thing in itself but rather a 'political process of contestation over power to define key concepts, including that of "culture" itself' (Wright 1998: 14). Linnekin offers a much more complicated picture where culture itself is a self-conscious model open to manipulation by powerful actors

in contention with adversaries (Linnekin 1992: 251). What may look like cultural and museological issues can often, in fact hide quite different realities. Harrison relates such disputes, ostensibly to do with intellectual property rights, to wider political issues when he remarks, 'these behind-the-scenes or sometimes open disputes are public tests of political support each contestant can muster, not only in regard to ritual claims, but in regard to other claims as well, such as political office or the control of economic resources' (Harrison 1992: 225). Curators may find themselves involved willy-nilly in highly charged political settings. Arguments within groups and between groups may be expressed in cultural property disputes which spill over into the museum itself. Harrison suggests that such disputes may relate quite as much to areas of similarity between groups as those of difference. It is when there is dispute about the ownership of artefacts, beliefs or performances that tension can become unbearable, and uncontrollable (Harrison 2002: 213). At worst, there exists the possibility of 'identity piracy', wherein the claims for individual or group respect are threatened by a successful opponent (Harrison 1999: 249). A similar fate can befall cultural products through plagiarism successfully executed by the powerful. Disputes over rights to perform ceremonies or music are common examples. Jon Jonassen, a Cook Islander, bitterly resents the cultural plagiarism of Cook Island drumming often perpetrated by other Polynesians at music festivals (Jonassen 1996).

A cultural constructionist view of culture, in Linnekin's terms, 'renders culture mercurial, unboundable, and highly problematic' (Linnekin 1992: 251). Furthermore, she argues, tradition is to be seen as a selective representation of the past, constructed according to current needs by active agents. Thus, tradition itself is subject to competitive and revisionist readings. This inevitably raises the spectre of the 'invention of tradition' argument, originally conceived in a European context, but successfully exported by authorities like Anderson to the Asia Pacific region. But the indigenous curator should be wary about embracing such a view. When Roger Keesing used the invention of tradition thesis in the context of customary practices throughout the Pacific (Keesing 1989), he was immediately denounced as wilfully ignorant of native forms of history (Trask 1991: 160). This new conflict raises the possibility that curators themselves may become implicated, whether willingly or not, in forming judgements about how representations should reflect different interpretations of events and real ownership in situations of conflict. Seeking to resolve issues about constructed identity and the political nature of claims for copyright will seldom be any easier for curators in indigenous museums than it is for their peers in Western social history galleries. As Keesing reminds us, members of political elites, whether at national or local level, will hardly take kindly to those who question their right to ownership of cultural property. They are also likely to impugn the motives of those who question their source of authority.

So far, the problems confronting the curator in the indigenous museum have largely related to the power contained within the copyright, claimed by one or more active agents. The reason that ownership of artefacts, activities or knowledge

is so important is because it represents something of overwhelming attraction to those who seek to control it. Alfred Gell sees this power in terms of what he calls 'the technology of enchantment'. By this he means that the art objects (and I would extend the example to any other cultural property) through their technical processes cast a spell on us, 'so that we see the world in an enchanted form' (Gell 1999: 163). This is exactly what is copyrighted, and which agents seek to protect from others' misuse or appropriation. To return to Jonassen's example of Cook Island drumming, it is precisely the cadence, the rhythm and the metre that is immediately recognizable as a Cook Island performance. To see this 'enchanted' quality appropriated by others does a double damage. On the one hand, it is plain theft and often brazen theft by those too powerful to convict. Secondly, it provides a constant reminder for the original owners of the keen loss they have suffered, which is revived at every performance. What the theft has done is overturn the basic tenets of intellectual property. As Strathern has pointed out, "'intellectual property" points simultaneously to an item or a technique made available to knowledge, authorising its use and circulation, and to the knowledge, on which claims are made, which has made it into an item or technique'. She pithily states, 'intellectual property rights hold up a mirror to the dazzle of creativity' (Strathern 2001: 277, 276). To lose the source of one's enchantment to another is one of the most significant losses one could suffer.

But what if the 'technology of enchantment' ceases to work? I have been assuming up to this point that copyright is a vital principle. But Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz argue elegantly that in the contemporary political and economic reality of Papua New Guinea, and specifically among the Chambri, a process entitled 'cultural generification' has taken place. By this they mean that 'the cultural particular either has become translated into the cultural general or into a general example of the cultural particular' (Errington and Gewertz 2001: 510) The authors offer a particular illustration to explain the process. A Chambri elder, named Thadeus Yambu, invited the authors to attend and document a secret, ritual procedure that he enacted to become a blow fish. Among the reasons that Errington and Gewertz offer to account for this invitation to attend the totemic procedures were Yambu's concern that younger men were no longer interested in these sorts of events, and without the continuance of these traditions it would not be possible to sustain the Chambri way of life. But another process was also at work. Unless these rituals were recorded in a scientific way, there would not be an adequate record to show in a court of law to claim copyright for the event and its constituents. But for magistrates the ritual knowledge had to be recognisable in generic terms that they could relate to other examples from elsewhere. This was what Yambu was also attempting to provide in his documented performance. As Errington and Gewertz note, a major change has occurred once the knowledge and performance cease to be directed to other Chambri and became, instead, part of a generalized 'tradition' subject to external control.

In the above example, it could be argued that the instantiation of such practice in museum display could perform a significant role, having the potential to underpin the specific case for cultural recognition in the wider world. The museum could provide the visual equivalent of an ethnographer's record. This sort of role is certainly consistent with Mead's vision of an indigenous museum. But there are a number of stumbling blocks that confront the alert curator before this can become possible. The first risk is one that emanates from the example cited above. What has happened to this knowledge and ritual now that Yambu is dead? How are the next generation to relate to such historically significant but no longer efficacious systems of belief and practice? It is likely that one of two processes will take place. The first is, following a term created by Joep Leerssen, 'auto-exoticism' (Foster 2001: xix). Once a gap has been created between lived experience and the account of such experience a sense of unreality creeps in. The account, the performance, come to become utterly self-conscious and exotic, and they gradually congeal into a meaningless muddle. The very self that is displayed becomes an alien presence, never to be fully captured. This, in turn, leads to the second process, the loss of belief. As Errington and Gewertz note on another occasion, 'the Chambri did not understand that if they continued to sell their initiations (and perhaps other ceremonies) as tourist attractions, they would themselves no longer find them convincing and effective' (Errington and Gewertz 1989: 51). O'Hanlon, in his discussion of the Wahgi also detected in the young a sort of ethnographic self-consciousness about their former practices. 'Now they know better' (O'Hanlon 1993: 74).

What confronts the indigenous curator once the first generation has passed, whether it be in Buin at the start of the twentieth century or the Chambri and the Wahgi at the end, is a public that bears little resemblance to the one envisaged by Mead. The gap between lived experience and the historic record now requires an intellectual feat of interpretation. Furthermore, a major change has taken place in the role of the artefact and in its power to enchant. I do not mean to imply that authenticity has entirely leached from objects displayed in the museum, nor that contemporary collections lack value. What I intend to discuss in the next section is how the processes of mediation may operate. For this I use one case study to explore how tradition and current interpretations may fare together.

## Against Teleology

History is not about manifest destinies, but  
about unexpected and unforeseen futures.  
R.F. Foster, *The Irish Story*, p.54

When considering museums, we are often tempted to read their manifestos or prospectus, in order to gain an understanding of their purpose. Usually this attention is well rewarded, but there is a danger that we consider museum display

and content as though they merely illustrate the principles of the authors of the prospectus. As Foster reminds us, the future is usually full of the unexpected. We can extrapolate further, in the context of museum display, and recognize that retrospective analysis usually uncovers factors at work that were unforeseen by the curators at the time of the gallery construction and which also undermine any sense of teleological imperative, however coherent the designers' plans might originally have been. If this could be said to be true for museums in general, I want to argue that the warning operates *a fortiori* in the case of indigenous museums. To explore this proposition I intend to take one case that I have written about in more detail elsewhere (Stanley, 2002a, 2002b). I use the example of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress (*Museum Kebudayaan dan Kemajuan*) founded in 1973 in Agats, Papua Province, Indonesia, not to provide a detailed case history but rather as an occasion to exemplify some of the issues that museums of indigenous culture have, perforce, to face. The museum in question does not purport to offer general principles or specific lessons for others. Indeed, what is most significant in many respects is how singular an institution it is. But it is my major contention that the specific qualities of each indigenous museum are the most salient point of distinction. Nevertheless, there are, I suggest, some useful ideas that can be gleaned from looking at a case study for consideration in other contexts.

The Museum of Culture and Progress has been in existence for thirty years. This has given the institution time to develop, rethink principles, and adjust to changed circumstances. This time span also enables one to consider elements of both continuity and change. The very title of the museum encapsulates this tension, having both a commitment to cultural preservation and an orientation to the present and future. The museum catalogue expresses the intention clearly:

The museum ... would be the medium through which young Asmat would see the culture of their ancestors and living relatives as one that produced works of art that through their power and intensity demanded attention and respect from the outside world ... The Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress was primarily build to preserve the artefacts, to keep the people from losing their sense of identity, and to encourage their renewal of carving. (Schneebaum 1985: 28)

This manifesto neatly brings together a number of the themes to be found classically in the formulation of an indigenous museum. The first element, tradition, is given pride of place. This is consistent with Gell's insistence on the power of agency. Gell in fact uses an Asmat shield to illustrate the very point. Asmat warrior shields, Gell argues, are designed to cast spells on their opponents, 'the warrior's shield is an index which, in context, possesses agency, having the power to demoralize the enemy warrior' (Gell 1998: 31). So, a major intention of the Asmat Museum was to celebrate the persistence of ancestral power. Shields, bis poles, ancestor skulls, all celebrate and memorialize significant forbears. They also, traditionally, call for the revenge of those killed in headhunting raids. This reality clashes, of course, with the modernizing agenda of the museum, for the

modern artist 'to stimulate them into renewing the artistic side of their heritage without resorting to the violence of the past' (Schneebaum 1985: 28).

The manifesto advances two other causes: firstly, 'attention and respect from the outside world', and secondly, the renewal of carving. Respect from outside has come from two major sources. The Indonesian state has used Asmat imagery, and in particular the spectacular bis pole, as a metonym for Papuan non-Malay culture. Whether this attention represents respect rather than caricature is something of a moot point. But, in any case, Asmat imagery is ubiquitous in Indonesian publications and public displays. Hence, the Asmat Museum, by extension, attains a public importance wider than it might otherwise expect to generate. Outside world respect has also been extensively generated by the collection and export of historic artefacts to major international ethnographic museums. The Asmat Museum has been involved in both locating and authenticating such objects for sale. But this has been at the expense of the other objective of the museum, to renew the traditional art of carving, albeit in new traditions. For the first ten years of the museum's history the emphasis on representing the past was clearly dominant, but already in 1983 the museum started to look to a present and future orientation. The museum was instrumental in creating a carving contest that began in that year and which has developed over the past twenty years into a major event that draws in over a thousand entries per year. The winning entries are then exhibited in the museum, thus generating a continuously evolving set of contemporary carvings. But, equally importantly, the contest has also served as an opportunity for the carvers to sell to an international clientele which gathers to bid for items both during and at the end of the event.

None of these developments were envisaged at the inauguration of the museum. Nor were the exogenous changes that contributed to such changes. What became clear, once the museum was established, was that carving represented one of, if not the sole, source of cash income for local people in an environment with few other saleable resources. Logging, arguably the only other major resource of value, also coincidentally, contributed to the development of the carving tradition. Asmat carvers had traditionally used soft wood, but the cutting down and sawing up of hardwood planks provided offcuts of ironwood which rapidly became the staple material for contemporary carving. The annual carving contest contributed to the substitution on a general scale of hardwood. This new material also had the ability to be worked in a more detailed way, leading to the establishment of delicate filigree work, and the incorporation of new sources of imagery previously only to be found on paddles and canoes. So, although early attempts to stimulate a renewal of the tradition of master carvers involved 'picture books and photographs of old Asmat carvings' being shown to artists to suggest imagery (Mbaid 1973: 36), nevertheless, what was produced rapidly took on a new form, narrative rather than symbolic. These narrative pieces dominate the work produced for the annual contest and represent a major new element in the current museum display. From the early period's emphasis on the past, the current

displays offer an ever-changing perspective on contemporary development in a manner consistent with an internationally orientated institution.

The notion of a contest adds another dimension to artistic change. Copyright issues come to play a new significance if family and clan tales are rendered in visual form. In addition, such literal transliteration poses a serious risk to secret knowledge, traditionally only to be exhibited in rituals attended by initiates of one sex. Furthermore, the fact that carvers are entered by the village in which they live adds a further element of potential dispute between competitors. The closeness of resemblance between people sharing common sets of memory inevitably means that conflict is likely to arise over ownership of overlapping or identical forms of design or knowledge. Such conflict becomes the more significant as financial stakes are raised by the presence of international clients.

Why are international clients, whether museum agents or private collectors, attracted to such an out-of-the way location? The Museum is, accidentally, heir to some quite serendipitous events. Firstly, at the time of its inception, it was celebrated as the place where Michael Rockefeller, son of the U.S. Vice-President, Nelson Rockefeller, lost his life. As a memorial to his son, Governor Rockefeller made a large donation of the artefacts that his son had collected in Asmat in 1961, which formed the highlight of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art at the Metropolitan Museum opened in 1982. The Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation have continued to support the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, and contributed to the renovation undertaken by the mining company Freeport Indonesia of the major gallery in 1994. The link between the Roman Catholic Church, which constructed and still maintains the museum, and North America has continued major movement of carvings internationally. But the link with the Netherlands has proved of equal significance. The fact that decolonization of West Papua occurred so late (effectively in 1969) has meant that there is a lively interest both museological and in the public imagination in Papua in general, and in Asmat as Papua's best-known centre of carving, to this day. This has resulted in a continual trickle of visitors, particularly among artists and film makers, that continue to animate interest in Asmat art on the world stage.

Does the museum that I have considered here deserve to be considered an indigenous museum? I think that the Buin example helps us come to some tentative positive conclusions. There are two major issues to consider. The first relates to agency. Who created the institution? In the Asmat case, the answer is clearly the Roman Catholic Church, in order to preserve elements of traditional culture under threat from the newly emergent Indonesian civil administration at the termination of Dutch colonial rule. But the curator of the museum has, until this year, always been Papuan, and trained in international museological settings. The second question relates to audience. To sustain the museum requires both indigenous support and international involvement. It can be argued, effectively in my view, that the carving contest ties men in all the villages across Asmat in a very direct manner into vital principles of museology at first hand. But, the museum

is not necessarily the focus of Asmat concern; rather it is a medium through which international sales and rapport are established. Such men are very present-orientated. The museum is unlikely to continue without such evident support.

My example confirms that local considerations are always primary in the construction and then the maintenance of an indigenous museum. Furthermore, circumstances change. Whilst the early museum was dedicated to continuing the relationship with ancestors, albeit on a new footing, the current museum has the look and feel of an internationally orientated institution of major importance to the economic well-being of the Asmat. One of the major concerns that persists thanks to the presence of the museum, is the question of artistic authority and authenticity. It may be the major claim that any indigenous museum can make: that artistic standards, their mediation among the creators of the art, and the justification to institutions outside the community are the defining differences between societies that have museums and those that do not.

## Conclusion

Indigenous museums may, over time, become empty terms. But as long as the term 'indigenous' itself continues to represent a source of authority and power (and powerlessness, it must also be admitted) the joining of the elements represents something significant. At the same time, it must be readily conceded, indigenous museums are among the most precarious of all museums. Communities that lack ready and constant sources of funding may find their commitment to the concept threatened by more pressing and immediate concerns. Limited resources in term mean that such museums are always subject to political and cultural brokerage. What may serve one particular interest (the example I have in mind here is the Roman Catholic Church in the era of Vatican II) may lose its appeal in a time of political crisis (such as the whole of Indonesia is currently suffering, and Papua is undergoing to a bewildering degree).

The Big Man thesis in Melanesia may apply to museums as well as to other institutions. What is significant about all of the examples cited above that have developed over the past twenty years, is the vital importance of the curator as a major player in the community, as Dundon's and Haraha's chapters in this collection testify. It would seem logical to suggest that if this ceases to be the case in any instance, then the viability of the institution comes into question.

The internal workings of the indigenous museum seem to be fundamentally different from the bureaucratic model that we recognize as the Western model. If Mead is to be credited, issues like conservation and inventories are of minor concern. Collection policies are likely to be well integrated into other economic and political realities of period, place and people. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in settings where museological activities are understood as a real part of social life, indigenous individuals are likely to pay far greater attention to their copyrights than those operating in a Western setting. And this is not a concern that I see



necessarily waning over time. The examples I have hinted at of indigenous peoples claiming copyright in countries where they form a disadvantaged minority may indeed point to a future where indigeneity certainly does not fade away in the face of modernization but, on the contrary, becomes more sharply focused and more effectively advanced.

However, I do not wish to conclude on a triumphalist note. Indigenous museums are of necessity fragile institutions and often lacking power to sustain their momentum. This is not the same as saying that they are merely ephemeral and insignificant. They may, indeed, in a relatively short life, act as the catalyst or channel for cultural, religious and political drives that would otherwise lack direction. Thurnwald certainly had few such considerations when he opened the Buin museum. I think it would be unlikely that any architect of a cultural centre in the Western Pacific could so naively stumble into making a museum for indigenous people without at least considering the sorts of questions that the authors raise in this book.

Readers will find that the first section of this book provides more than a survey of Island Melanesia. A key theme running throughout this section of the book is the treatment of custom. On the one hand, items from traditional sources can be hard to handle, as was the case with the relics of Bell's fatal ambush in Foana'ota's account, or represented photographs of ancestors, as related by Kingston. How to handle the colonial past, including its leitmotif of violence and oppression, remains problematic for all who wish to make visual representations in museum contexts. The whole enterprise might prove too fraught with danger and potentially disrespectful of forbears to undertake at all. This is the burden of Kingston's chapter. However, there persists a ready intention across the region to use historic records, artefacts and oral culture to address the future, as Bolton exemplifies in her account in Vanuatu. But this future may be as problematic as the past as the two complementary chapters on New Caledonia demonstrate. On the one hand, modern structures may merely obscure in their very construction the history and persistence of struggle with a colonizing presence, as Losche illustrates. On the other hand, Le Fevre argues that even tourism can be controlled and used to the benefit of traditional social and cultural development.

The second section deals with two indigenous museum complexes at the south of the Arafura Sea, to the south of Western Melanesia and just off the northern Australian coast. The proximity to mainland Australia has in both cases meant that the relationship between people, place and associated objects has been crucially mediated by issues relating to performance, selling work and marketing. They can both be seen, as Venbrux notes, as 'destination cultures' for visitors and are conceived as being integrated into tourist itineraries. Bin Juda, Herle and Philp also stress that at the Gab Titui Cultural Centre attention has to be paid to the needs and representation of the non-Torres Strait Islander inhabitants in the representation. Sensitivity to dealing with cultural difference is also a feature that Venbrux points to in Tiwi, with the development of what he terms 'stranger handlers'. Both of these chapters underline the significance of dealing effectively with an outside world.

It is unsurprising that New Guinea should have four chapters devoted to it. The sheer variety and depth of both research into the cultures of the sub-continent and to the forming of museum collections means that this is a fertile territory to explore the inter-relationship between local craftspeople and collectors from outside. But more interestingly, it gives us the opportunity to look at the dynamics of this exchange and to see how museumizing has been integrated into daily life in a variety of ways. This is the major burden of this section of the book. This continues the trend so excellently begun by Michael O'Hanlon in his small but elegant set of reflections in his book *Paradise* (1993). The chapters in this section further underline the crucial significance of a Big Man, whether in the form of the Director of the Papua New Guinea Museum in Haraha's tale, Crawford and Bege Mula in the case of the Gogodala Cultural Centre, and the local MP who, in Kocher Schmid's account, acted as the creator of the Babek Bema Yoma. My own treatment of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress shows how complex a set of conditions have to be met in order for an indigenous collection in an inaccessible place to survive at all. The different forms of indigenous enterprise collected in this book are a testimony to persistence, innovation and a desire to use custom as a way of thriving in an ever-changing world. It is a precarious business, as both Welsch and Kreps demonstrate in their assessments in the concluding chapters.

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