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Paulette Dellios

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Abstract

Extract:

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Paper presented at the International Conference on Empowerment of Museums: Problems and Solutions, Bali, Indonesia, 29 Nov - 02 Dec 1999.

Museums in the Global 'Kampung': Mixed Messages[1]

by Paulette Dellios

Introduction

Before we can identify problems in the museum world and seek solutions, we must undergo a process of questioning our assumptions. "Museums in the Global 'Kampung': Mixed Messages" aims to interrogate common museological assumptions. The mixed messages of globalisation and of museums will be viewed through the windows of the global 'kampung'.

The Kampung Boy in the Global Kampung

To introduce the topic of "Museums in the Global 'Kampung'", it is appropriate to begin with an artefact from the global 'kampung'. In Malaysia and several other Southeast Asian nations, 'kampung' is the word for 'village'. The book *Kampung Boy,* created by the Malaysian cartoonist Lat, was recently transformed into a television series. It is of interest to note the closing credits from the cartoon *Kampung Boy*: it was produced in Los Angeles and Kuala Lumpur, and animated in Manila and Ho Chi Minh City.

The television series is global in two senses of the term. The first sense is the geographical reach of this cartoon originating in Malaysia which is being broadcast globally on satellite and cable networks. The second sense is the cross-fertilisation of ideas and the involvement of several countries to produce it. The *Kampung Boy* is the product of the global 'kampung'. This television series is an artefact, an animated artefact on display around the world. It could be considered both a global artefact and an artefact of globalisation.

What does all this imply for museums and what is meant by the term 'global kampung'? The 'global kampung' is a regional re-interpretation of Marshall McLuhan's Western concept of the 'global village' which emerged in the 1960s, and which is still a prevalent worldview. I shall also argue that one must rethink the Western concept of the museum to fit the regional landscape. An apt example of the museum world's inability to think beyond its Euro-centred borders is the international symbol of the museum—a Greco-Roman temple. The term 'international', like the term 'global', is often deceptive for it only refers to one part of the world.

Global Exhibition Themes

One of the recent museum orientations to globalisation has been the emphasis on cross-cultural exhibition themes. For instance, Shelton's article, 'Constructing the global village' (1992), recommends comparative thematic exhibitions which are concept-led. Shelton suggests that Gallery 33 of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery exemplifies such an approach. Gallery 33 received much attention in museological literature of the early 1990s (see, for example, Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 205; Jones 1992; Karp & Lavine 1993: 83). Gallery 33 opened in 1990. In 1989 the National Museum of Malaysia opened its comparative thematic exhibition: 'Treasures from the Grave'. The exhibition of 1989-1990 was the first of a series of exhibitions presenting a comparative, cross-cultural perspective. 'Treasures from the Grave' explored the universal theme of death, and spanned the past to the present, with objects from over forty countries.

The unavoidable question is why did this comparative exhibition, which opened in 1989 in Malaysia's

National Museum, not receive the same museological attention as Birmingham's Gallery 33 which was to open a year later? A museum may present global themes, yet it appears that global coverage in the museum world is dependent upon which part of the globe the museum is located.

Globalisation: Mixed Messages

One argument pursued throughout this paper is that the combination of museums and globalisation is not confined to our contemporary era. The international traffic in museum ideas and objects has a long history. Colonial museums provide a pertinent example of global networking. In colonial Malaysia, a report on the Selangor Museum for 1904 (Robinson 1906b: 100) gives some indication of the expanding circles of correspondence and object exchanges, involving the British Museum, the Imperial Indian Museum (Calcutta), the Pitt-Rivers Museum (Oxford), the Hope Department, University Museum (Oxford), the Raffles Library and Museum (Singapore), and the Royal Museum of Zoology and Ethnography (Dresden). Globalisation has an historical axis which is often eclipsed by the current focus on global economies and information technology.

However, it is also necessary to examine these two common connotations of globalisation. Some newspaper articles from Australia may help put its meanings into context. The information technology aspect is exemplified by 'Global villages' (Callaghan 1999), illustrated by a globe mapped by computer terminals (significantly, manned by men). Museum interpretations of globalisation follow a similar path. In 'Museums of the future' (Blakeney 1996) the implicit message is that museums will have a future once they have attained technological mastery. Similarly, in 'Masterpieces direct to your home' (*Weekend Australian* 1997, 9-10 August, p.3), the unstated assumption is that all homes have the prerequisite technology.

The other equally ambiguous meaning of globalisation is its economic substance. This is illustrated in Nicholson's cartoon of 'Australia unlimited' (*Weekend Australian* 1999, 8-9 May, p.6) which questions the economic inequalities of global economies. Again, the economic content of globalisation is evident in the activities of a number of cultural heritage organisations from Australia (Museums Australia, Asialink Arts, AusHeritage, and Artlab) which are seeking markets in the Asia-Pacific region (see, for example, Cochrane 1996; Devenport & Ramsey 1998; Kronenberg 1995; *Smarts* 1995, 2: 16-17). In an article tellingly entitled 'Selling heritage in Asia', the executive director of AusHeritage (Ramsay 1997: 14) informs: "In addition to commercial gains, trade offers leverage when defence pacts are negotiated, and a rigorous multilateral trading exchange enriches all countries involved." 'Selling heritage' is thus a package deal of culture, politics and economics which in linguistic seduction 'enriches all'.

These heritage exporters—whether based in Australia, North America, the U.K. or Europe—aim to benefit economically and politically from the Asia-Pacific region. Does globalisation mean the same thing to all nations? Or should we recast our terminology to the 'globalisers' and the 'globalisees'? In the interrogative frame of Featherstone (1990: 9), is globalisation a process in which 'other cultures are largely mastered'? Is the global village a convenient fiction that disguises asymmetric global power relations in the museum world? Cameron (1995: 51) justifiably argues: "The international museum movement ... raises questions of cultural transfer, or export." Notably, Cameron's comments did not take into account the recent emergence of commercially-driven heritage exporters to the region.

Museums: Mixed Messages

If globalisation means different things to different nations (and to the museums within those nations), one should also inquire what does globalisation mean to museum visitors? Are we talking about overseas or domestic visitors? Within the domestic category, are we discussing urban dwellers or those from kampungs and rural areas? Are we talking about young, middle-aged or older generations, about visitors who come singly or in families or in groups? Are we referring to visitors who are monolingual or bi- and tri-lingual? One must concede an immense diversity of audiences, yet visitor

studies consistently reveal that visitors interpret museums according to their own socio-cultural identities (see Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 47). Hence, whatever messages museums attempt to communicate may, and will, be received differently by different audiences.

An instructive lesson is provided by colonial museums, particularly those in colonial Malaysia. Colonial museums in Malaysia were manifestations of social Darwinism which became a global ideology of imperialism. The colonial museums were sites of racial ordering, of misrepresentation and symbols of civilisational and political monopoly. However, visitor statistics reveal some unexpected findings. The majority of visitors to colonial museums comprised the local inhabitants. In a report for the year 1912, the Director of Museums, Federated Malay States, lamented the poor response of Europeans to the Perak Museum (Robinson 1913: 7):

> The Museum continues to attract very large numbers of visitors, but Asiatics are overwhelmingly in the majority and it is open to question whether the very long hours during which the Museum is open both on week-days and on Sundays are justified by the very meagre European attendance for whom, in the main, these hours are arranged ...

Visitor statistics of the early 1900s for the Selangor Museum and the Sarawak Museum also confirm this pattern (see respectively, Robinson 1906a: 36; Moulton 1913: 4). It appears this was not an isolated colonial circumstance. The colonial museums established by the French in Indochina also drew the bulk of their visitors from local populations (see Wright 1996: 130, 140, fn. 15).

The colonised were interpreted by colonial museums but, simultaneously, the colonised interpreted the museum. One possible explanation for the non-Europeans' overwhelming and sustained patronage of these European institutions is the concept of 'semangat', a familiar cosmology of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago. Objects had a spirit, life-force or soul. Colonial museums may have been interpreted as vast storehouses of 'semangat'. The colonised actively constructed the museum's meanings; they were not passive recipients of the colonisers' messages delivered through the museum medium.

Although over a century has elapsed, belief systems still hold strong in parts of Asia and the Pacific. Consequently, the Western museological premise that objects are 'lifeless' (see Lowenthal 1991: 13) is Eurocentric and must be challenged. Mainstream museology has yet to acknowledge that in many non-Western cultures, other perceptions of reality adhere to 'real things'.

Both the museum and Coca Cola claim to possess the 'real thing'. Coca Cola and, increasingly, the museum talk in the identical language of the 'consumer'. The similarities do not end here: a Coca-Cola museum was opened in Sydney, Australia, in 1995. If the museum's explicit message is "to tell the Coca Cola story" (*Sunday Mail* 10 December 1995, p.152), one cannot ignore that other, unspoken stories permeate the Coca Cola Museum. Museums can be powerful conduits of globalisation.

Re-created Kampungs in the Global Kampung

To house an object in a museum or to dedicate a museum to a particular theme, gives the implicit message this object or theme is museum-worthy. Kampung culture has yet to spread around the world like Coca Cola culture. However, there are some clear signs of the elevation of kampung culture to a museum-worthy status in Malaysia. Since 1986 ten museum-style villages have emerged in Malaysia. Significantly, seven more have been proposed and if these come to fruition nearly all the states of Malaysia will possess a heritage or cultural village.

It should be stressed this phenomenon of the re-created village is not confined to Malaysia but extends to other Asian nations. This landscape includes Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Korea, China and India (see, for example, Greenough 1996; MacDonald 1988; Shackley 1994; Wood 1980).

It is premature to conjecture whether the cultural or heritage villages of Asia will come to be seen as a particular regional orientation, as in the case of Pacific 'cultural centres' or African 'culture houses'. In all these three forms, which notably abandon the term 'museum', the display or preservation of objects is only one facet in a wider repertoire of culture that embraces tangible and intangible heritage, performance-based culture, domestic architecture, handicraft-making, local cuisine and other forms of living traditions. In Malaysia, one of these activities in museum-style kampungs is the traditional wedding as 'the real thing'.

These re-created kampungs, characteristically with a local identity, have their roots in a globalised past. The history of the open-air or outdoors museum is usually traced to the Swedish 'Skansen' which opened in 1891 and from Sweden the movement spread to other parts of Europe, then America in the 1920s and 1930s, and the idea "soon spread throughout the world" (Alexander 1983: 8). This late nineteenth-century, European museum idea has found a renewed context in contemporary Asia.

Globalisation, Tourism and Museums

As has been emphasised, globalisation is not a new phenomenon for museums. Nor is tourism, which is considered a relatively recent and important role for museums throughout the world. Again the colonial period in Malaysia discloses some pertinent parallels. The contents of the guidebook, *An Illustrated Guide to the Federated Malay States,* edited by C.W. Harrison in 1910 and with its fourth impression in 1923, proposed an alluring mixture for the potential tourist: 'Big game shooting', 'Museums', and 'Mining'. Moreover, big game shooting (as taxidermic products) and mining (as displays) also featured in colonial museums' contents. Thus, museums were an important component of colonial tourism promotion.

Nevertheless, as shown previously, it was the local visitors who came. Similarly, in a contemporary context, most museum visitors belong to the domestic tourist category. Equally significant is that, according to 1994 statistics in Malaysia, the Asian region contributed 88.1% of the country's tourist arrivals (see Menon 1995). Intra-regional tourism is a museum reality of the region but it is equally important to consider other interpretations of reality.

Schouten (1989), a museologist, discusses the benefits of globalisation on culture and tourism. He recommends that museums "make their expertise and authority available to the cultural tourism industry" (ibid: 112). He then advocates the example of a museum in Amsterdam, with its tourism programme "in which experienced travellers in the Third World advise those planning a journey on the situation in different countries and the various do's and don'ts" (ibid: 112). Why is this so-called 'Third World' category singled out for the museum's authoritative attention? Is the Eurocentric assumption that Europeans (and European museums) have superior, 'real' knowledge of non-European countries?

Global Diffusion of Museums

The museum itself has been termed a 'global symbol' (Macdonald 1996: 2), but is the global proliferation of museums a cause for celebration? In the 1992 edition of *Museums of the World* the total tally of museums was 23,997; in the 1995 edition the number had risen to 24,624 museums; and by 1997 this had increased to 27,380 museums. Because of selection procedures these statistics under-represent the actual number of museums around the world. Sola (1991: 128) makes the valid point that the global trend of museum growth is cause for concern: "[T]he news about museums is good and bad: the good news is that they grow like mushrooms indeed, and the bad news is that much of that quantity is inedible. At least, not in the sense that we would like to call the healthy food for this world."

Does the global takeover by the museum signal a global concern with heritage? The museum's mixed messages cannot be ignored. Does the mushrooming of museums signal the amplification and diffusion of the culture of materialism; more objects transformed into 'real things' severed from

reality, and removed from the cycles of life? Is there any sense of unease that museums have created a model for a global culture of collecting, possessing, and hoarding? The standard museum rationale—that all these worldly goods belong to future generations—is unconvincing. Museologists do not agree on what constitutes a museum, nor on its purposes or future prospects. Yet, a conveniently silent posterity will inherit globally-distributed storehouses of materialism. For all the talk of globalisation and 'transnational transformations' (see Macdonald 1996: 14), why are future generations imagined as exact replicas of the present?

'Shifting house' to the Global Kampung

The mixed messages of the global village and the globalised museum must be confronted. One must ask: who is the village headman in the museum world? One must ask: why do museums ignore the issue of the technological haves and have nots? Are museums of the future reverting to their elitist past? Those who can afford the technology can afford to visit museums on-line. Similarly, those who can afford the entrance fees, can gain entry to museums. Why does the museological rhetoric of the democratisation of museums avoid these issues? Have museum theorists and practitioners understood globalisation processes? More importantly, have we understood the museum? Prösler (1996: 40) maintains that museums are active participants in globalisation but he (ibid: 21-22) also argues that museology has failed to understand concepts and theories of globalisation. From where will our models of understanding be drawn? These questions must be addressed before museums contemplate the question: what roles should museums play in the global kampung?

The global kampung is not coterminous with the global village, not only because of the linguistic difference but because of the divergence in worldviews. The global kampung is not an exercise in converting the rest of the world. A 'kampung' provides a sense of identity and place; it nurtures interdependence and participation, and forges a network of relationships and societal obligations—without attempting to be master of the universe. The problem or the solution is not whether museums accept, reject or contribute to globalisation processes but whether we are sufficiently aware to respond with 'hati' and 'akal', that is, with heart and reason.

The global kampung seeks balance between 'hati' and 'akal'. In contrast, the global village is a disproportionate map of the world. Concepts of the museum and cultural heritage mirror this imbalance. Cultural heritage is not about things: it is the beliefs we pass on about things. Heritage is how we engage the 'xin' ('heart-mind'), employing the apt Chinese term. Heritage is a cultural worldview that is culture-specific.

To conclude, it is appropriate to allow Lat, a perceptive cartoonist and cultural analyst, to have the last word on heritage. One of his cartoon's depicts the launching of Malaysia's first satellite, a symbol of technological success. However, the symbol of the 'bomoh hujan' (a ritual expert to ward off rain) shows the hold of living tradition. Similarly, museums in the region must come to terms with the global kampung rather than reside in a global village of someone else's making.

Footnote

Paper presented at the *International Conference on Empowerment of Museums: Problems and Solutions,* Bali, Indonesia, 29 November - 2 December 1999. In Malaysia and several other Southeast Asian nations, 'kampung' is the word for 'village'.

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Postscript: The *International Conference on the Empowerment of Museums: Problems and Solutions,* Bali, Indonesia, 29 November - 2 December 1999

The conference was organised by Indonesia's Ministry of Tourism, Art and Culture. The conclusions of the museum conference were distilled into a list of problems and possible solutions in the context of Indonesian museums. Many of the problems identified during the proceedings concerned practical matters such as museum training, conservation and exhibition techniques. More difficult to classify were problems in the realm of heart-mind. Indeed, the conference embraced a broad range of issues

engaging *hati* and *akal.*

Several participants from both Indonesia and overseas concluded that the Western model of the museum (a colonial inheritance in most Southeast Asian nations) was part of the problem and hence was unlikely to be one of the solutions to Indonesia's unique circumstances. This perspective may be summarised as a statement of *hati* and *akal.*

Some participants advocated shifting the museum's focus to "successful" American techniques such as museum shops and museum volunteers. Significantly, in those Southeast Asian nations where a volunteer program has been initiated, the volunteers are overwhelmingly expatriate. Those who were still in the museumland of reality indicated that Indonesians had more pressing things to do, such as fill their rice-bowls (a much needed touch of *akal*).

'Empowerment' may speak in many tongues. Not surprisingly, a representative from one of Australia's commercially-driven organisations (the heritage exporters) proposed a national museum body, national strategy and master plan for Indonesia which would be modelled on Australia's. This recommendation that the only solution was for a "top-down approach"—a hierarchical structure of increased bureaucratic meanderings (and potential economic gain for the heritage salesmen)—was contrary to the entire spirit of the conference. *Hati* eventually erased this vision of 'empowerment'.

The conventional museological message that the museum is nothing without its collections was reiterated at this conference. However, as the conference proceeded, it became increasingly clear that a museum is nothing without a public. One of the major issues that emerged was the 'problem' of an indifferent public. Towards the conclusion of the conference it became manifest that it was not the public that was the problem—it was the museum. Possible solutions to this problem, as well as others highlighted during the conference, will form the basis of future Indonesian discussions, workshops and conferences.

The desire for "museum *reformasi*" was expressed by more than one Indonesian participant. The conference title—the 'empowerment of museums'—also reveals a borrowing of political terminology. My initial misgiving that museum 'reformation' would be shaped by borrowed hands was short-lived. The hydra-headed issue of the national museum body which could have entirely crushed the conference was eventually and most politely buried. Now, it will be possible for Indonesian museum personnel to concentrate on the problems or challenges *they* have identified, not ones created for them.

'Empowerment' was a multi-layered presence in the *International Conference on the Empowerment of Museums.*

The Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies,

The School of Humanities and Social Sciences,

Bond University*,* Queensland, Australia