Museums in a post colonial world

Plea for a historical critique of exhibitions

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The subtitle of my talk is: ‘plea for a historical critique of exhibitions’ and that is indeed what I would like to do in my talk this morning. I will present four cases that review ways of how museums deal with implicit notions of nation and citizenship, of cultural heritage, ownership and belonging. We know a lot about the historical relationships between heritage formation, museum structures and nation building. But this seems hardly to feed back into current exhibition practices. We need a stronger comparative analysis framework for the present-day cultural representations of the nation which we see in many museums. Hence my plea for more attention on the historical underpinning of the story behind individual exhibitions. This requires – what I would call – more analysis of the present inter-exhibitional discourse¹ in current exhibition practices. Like the written texts in books, the visual presentations in exhibitions also relate to each other. And the public is part of this inter-exhibitional discourse. Critics and museum staff make what is on show in Paris relevant to what happens in Amsterdam, or New York, or Kabul, Berlin, Shanghai or Singapore. Exhibitions, even museum structures are being exported from one country to another, and standards and models of representation are being negotiated. Source-critical insight into the known meaning of material culture, historical visual sources and autonomous art productions are essential to understand our own work in this field. One recurring theme in this inter-exhibitional discourse, is the notion of nation building and the meaning of the decolonization processes of the recent past. It is this notion that I will discuss here.

1 Crossroads of civilization

Let me illustrate how the nation presents an implicit frame of reference in exhibitions, with a first example, which deals with the representation of Afghanistan in recent exhibitions in the Netherlands. The motto you see here on the poster alongside an Amsterdam canal street, reads: ‘A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive’. This slogan was there to attract the attention of the public in the Netherlands early in 2008 to the exhibition Hidden Afghanistan in the New Church exhibition space at Dam square in Amsterdam.² On display were archaeological art treasures from Afghanistan’s National Museum in Kabul dating from between 2000 BC and 200 AD. These treasures had been
stored in the vault of the Central Bank of Afghanistan for safekeeping late in the nineteen eighties, because of the prevailing unstable circumstances after the Russians had departed the country. Hence the exhibition’s name of Hidden Afghanistan. When the items resurfaced in 2004 after the fall of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001, Musée Guimet in Paris took it upon themselves to launch a travelling exhibition, with the implicit purpose of continuing to ‘safeguard’ these collections. The travelling exhibition Hidden Afghanistan provided a good opportunity to publish and present the precious archaeological finds, as a contribution to their protection against art theft.

The exhibition featured extraordinary archaeological objects from the Bactrian bronze era, Hellenism, the Indo-Greek era and the Kushan dynasty. They expounded an appealing story about the age-old historical development of the Central-Asian region as being one of the crossroads of civilisation. Moreover, the twentieth century excavation practices in Afghanistan bore witness to the contemporary nature of this intercivilisational common ground. Retracing ancient history had played a role in political profiling of the modern nation of Afghanistan, ever since England had acknowledged Afghanistan as ‘an absolute independent nation’ in 1921. Already in 1922 the French came up with a collaborative archaeological project. Later on scientific cooperation, particularly with German and Russian teams had come into being as well. The Hidden Afghanistan exhibition in Amsterdam was a continuation of this tradition of political exchange via archaeology. After an initial show in Musée Guimet in Paris, the collections had travelled to Italy in order to return the Italian hospitality extended to ex-King Mohammad Zahir Shah, who in 1973 had left his country when Afghanistan became a republic. And the next stop had been Amsterdam. President Hamid Karzai spoke of the exhibition as ‘a gift from the Afghan people to their Dutch friends and (...) a new step in strengthening the
ties of friendship between Afghanistan and Holland.’ Now the exhibition continues its journey to several locations in the USA.

Within the Netherlands, the specific geopolitical context of this blockbusting exhibition of Afghanistan’s archaeological collections resounded in other museological activities too. Almost coinciding with Hidden Afghanistan, the Army museum in Delft opened the exhibition Special Forces³ about Netherlands’ military involvement in Afghanistan, notably focusing on the efforts of the special operation commandos. The central theme here was the individual courage, self control and sense of responsibility of the special forces involved. Their actions in Afghanistan were made tangible with the help of four lifelike military man in an authentic all-terrain Mercedes, the decor being realistically replicated with an informal roadside bomb buried in the verge. Another still life demonstrated the action in the valley of Chora, of a commando’s descent along a wall to a house. Visitors entering that house were terror-struck (this was my experience anyway) when instead of being observers they found themselves party to a house search with hand grenades and other explosives going off (flash – bang) all around them. There were also a training area for physical exercise such as rope climbing, or for testing cold-blooded skills such as sharp shooting at a human silhouette. The current deployment of Special Forces in Afghanistan was illustrated in this exhibition at the Army Museum against a broader Dutch (and colonial) historical background, based on interviews with commandos involved in actions in the past. The earliest of these took place in 1944 during the liberation of Walcheren. Two stories were about Indonesia: the liberation of Sumatra by the allied forces in 1945; and, a few years later, during the police actions in 1948, the Dutch airborne landing at republican-held Yogyakarta airport. There was a ‘domestic’ contra terror story about the ending of the train hijack in The Punt in the Netherlands in 1977, and a story about the deployment of special forces within the framework of the UN peacekeeping force in 1995 at the time when Srebenica fell. In the display cases, these confrontations were restricted to a mere euphemistic visualisation
with just a few attributes such as flags, uniforms, weapons, topographic maps, communication equipment and clothing. Information lacked about just who the enemy was, or the outcome of the military involvement. This exhibition, after all, was about the courage of individuals and not about political and military events or resolutions. [The opening act of the exhibition: special forces who liberated the Mayor of the City of Delft who had been kidnapped, confirmed this. See also the registration on youtube: 
http://nl.youtube.com/watch?v=xAl4dHvXEFM]Hidden Afghanistan and Special Forces were two complementary exhibitions. Together they visualized the reasoning behind the involvement of the Netherlands in Afghanistan, with the archaeological treasures as a necessary counterpoint for the current military deployment. The Army museum invited the visitors to try to understand the work of the special forces through computer games which made you realize that one has to decide in a split second how to act. At the same time, in the New Church, the museum director asked, in his introduction to the catalogue on the archaeological treasures, for ‘compassion’, in sympathy with the people of Afghanistan who have been living under the worst possible conditions these past decades, and whose rich cultural heritage needed to be known throughout the world. President Karzai stated in the same catalogue, that Afghanistan is ‘... the front line in the war the new world has started against backwardness, ignorance, xenophobia and the negation of human values’. As such it was a statement as well against the destructive acts of the Taliban, who in 2001 blew up the Kushan dynasty’s statues of the Buddha (ca. 400 BC) in Bamiyan. At the same time, the exhibition’s motto ‘A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive’ turned archaeological history into a collective pre-history of a relatively young nation in the context of contemporary development of art and culture.

Why raise objections against the intentions of the exhibitions concerned; Was not their focal point the love of art, exquisite objects, individual creative urge, the need to protect people and cultural property, and personal courage? Still, I felt uneasy about the underlying implicit cultural struggle about Afghanistan. My doubt concerns the concept ‘nation’ in the exhibition’s motto, represented by the former king, the current president, the national museum, the vault of the national bank and the collections as such. Do these collections then represent an existent culture? How does this national age old cultural heritage relate to present-day culture? In this appreciation of classical culture, is it about the historic ‘layers’ of the cultural present or does the exhibition hark back to a distant past to avoid divided empathy with the nation at present?

An indication that this is about a cultural conflict, was presented in a Dutch quality newspaper in May 2008. ‘Genuine art in Kabul, at last’, headed a review of the first gallery exhibition in Kabul of young female artists. It ended with a quote from one of the
artists, Yalda Noori, stating: ‘In the past my paintings on canvas were realistic. They showed what I saw, but did not express what I felt. Now, in my abstract paintings, I can show what I understand, and how I actually think and feel.’ For the Dutch cultural community of museum visitors, the interview revealed a kind of cross-medial exchange of views with the help of exhibitions: the individual courage of the special operations commando contributed to the creation of space for (‘honest’) abstract expressionism of the individual artist yonder.

2 Crossroads of genres

So far the first case that I intended to present here: three simultaneous exhibitions in which the notion of national culture and history was presented (maybe even overstated) in different but related time frames: ancient culture, contemporary struggle and autonomous art. In all three exhibitions, Afghanistan had a profile as a nation state, for which people are fighting.

I will now compare this to my second case, where the notion of a nation state is completely absent. I will make this comparison between two extremes, because, although the motto ‘A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive’ did bear reference to Afghanistan, it was phrased as universal truth. In order to better understand the political aspect of this truth, I will apply it to Sotheby’s spring auction in New York of art from Africa, Oceania and pre-Columbian Latin America, that took place in May 2008.

Baga Serpent clan sculpture at Sotheby’s auction

The most expensive object that was sold there was a splendid ‘clan object’ of the Baga in Guinea. This image of a wooden snake, had been acquired in 1957 by the art dealers Henri and Hélène Kramer, just before Guinea became independent. It subsequently turned up in New York in the gallery of Pierre Matisse (the son of...). And I quote the auction catalogue: ‘In Matisse’s gallery on East 57th Street in New York, the Baga Serpent was exhibited alongside works by Joan Miró and various group shows of
contemporary artists including Wifredo Lam, Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Giacometti. Specifically, the exhibition of the Baga Serpent in Matisse’s gallery may have had an influence on the creation of Alexander Calder’s Short Lipped Snake from 1973. This background information firmly placed this object in Western (European) art history. Together with the fact that there are only a few known clan objects such as this, and that they are unlikely ever to appear on the market again, this provenance resulted in landing a sale price of $ 3,289,000. The final bid (flash - bang, ‘setting a record for a Baga sculpture at an auction’) was followed by a release of tension in the form of applause. [The other items auctioned (originating from tribal peoples including Congo, Katanga, Tanzania, Kenya, Gabon, Mali, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Nias, the Marshall Islands and Haiti) also fetched higher sums than the estimates in the auction’s catalogue. Sotheby’s was satisfied: ‘In today’s sale, we saw significant crossover interest from collectors of Impressionist and Modern and Contemporary Art who [were] entering the field at the very highest levels of quality, seeking to collect great masterpieces.’]  

What happened there in New York – an ethnography auction as the crossroads of art genres – is not uncommon. The appreciation of ethnographics within the framework of modern art (art premier) is still growing, both from an art historical, artistic, and a financial point of view. But other than in the present Afghan context, this interest does not appear in any way at all to be linked to an appreciation of processes of nation building in the areas of origin involved. On the contrary, what is dominant in this genre is the concept of universal heritage. Suppose that for its auction Sotheby’s had used the equally universally phrased motto ‘A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive’: then the Baga statue would have been attributed several different layers of historical importance. To Sotheby’s, the primacy is the procurement history, leading to an ‘autonomous art form’ – history as vital power in a free market economy. But the clan sculpture is, at the same time, connected to the location-specific socio-cultural history of the Baga, a people that over time became part of a colonial empire. And as such it is also a component of a nation’s history, a unique and prime object from Guinea. This African country was still a French colony in 1957 when the object was taken. But this does not make the object ‘nationless’. It remains an object from Guinea, just like Afghanistan’s archaeological objects now in the hands of Musée Guimet are essentially no different from the current globetrotting exhibition of the collections of the National Museum of Afghanistan. The Metropolitan, that also owns such a statue, acknowledges this social-cultural context in its caption to the objects, stating: ‘Among the Baga, public accessibility to the instruments of spiritual power like this mask was relatively restricted. They were linked with male esoteric knowledge, and their control lay in the hands of leaders of secret associations and family lineages. Following Guinea’s independence from
France in 1958, the continuity of regional artistic practices within the new nationally defined boundaries was radically disrupted, and masquerade traditions like a-Mantsho-na-Tshol were discouraged and gradually abandoned. During the 1990s, the Baga experienced a popular revival of earlier art forms, including a-Mantsho-na-Tshol.

What does the expatriated Baga serpent clan statues mean for the people in Guinea? That a work of art outside the country can arouse in the viewer an intense identification with his fatherland, was expressed through poetry by a Dutch war pilot (and KLM pilot), A. Viruly. He wrote his poem in 1944 when seeing, during the Second World War, this painting by Jan van Goyen in the same Metropolitan Museum of New York and with a reference to both the Dutch revolt and the Second World War. I just read his last verse, in an unauthorized translation: (See accompanying poem).

But never, than before this painting
Felt our essential self so near,
Of quiet and of fighting.
And far away the fear.⁶

Jan van Goyen, View of Haarlem and the Haarlemmermeer (1646)
Metropolitan Museum 71.62

What is important about this Jan van Goyen painting, as well as about the items on auction at Sotheby’s, or about Afghanistan’s archaeological objects, is not in the first place that these objects dwell in another country than their country of origin. What is
important is how and when they left that country, who was in control, where and by whom the objects now can be seen and, what has been happening in the countries of origin. All these factors are components of a nation’s history and of the cultural self awareness of the people of that nation. They are relevant as well in the situations within which objects are presented.

As far as the Baga clan sculpture is concerned: when the Kramers acquired it in 1957 Ahmed Sékou Touré (1922-1984) was then head of the anti-colonial movement which, by referendum, brought Guinea in September 1958 instant independence from the (fifth) French Republic. Nowadays, it has become apparent to us that particularly in Africa, much (most) of the traditional cultural heritage disappeared to the West during the socio-cultural processes of change that accompanied the twentieth century history of colonialism, decolonisation and independent nation formation. Afghanistan already had had ‘absolute independence’ for decades, when in most parts of Africa there were not yet political structures in place that facilitated the development of understanding of and respect for the historical meaning of the cultural heritage of the communities concerned.\(^7\) On the contrary, we know that reverse was happening, originating in a dominant Western insight into the artistic meaning of this cultural heritage, together with the urge and fervour to modernise and reform traditional society. Regalia and other often ritual objects were taken from the colonies to the colonial metropolises, from where they found their way to museological establishments and private collectors. This process continued after independence when African leaders had taken over political control and developed the new nation states.

Today, we are all more aware of these issues. It is often argued that it is good that a lot of ethnographic objects have ended up in the West, because otherwise these would no longer exist for humankind. However, we have to keep thinking about cause and effect, and besides we have to consider the new cultural political context of the world’s changing society. In the first place we need to ask ourselves the historical question of why in the past such an atmosphere of neglect came to surround the material cultural heritage of ethnic communities, not only on the part of the colonizers, but also on the part of the new political elite of the independent nations. Should we not pay much more attention to the impact on society of the sheer systematic export of African cultural heritage (other than in Afghanistan, for example), during the early twentieth century up tot the period of decolonization and nation formation?

But next to these historical considerations, we also have to face the political issue in question, whether now that this cultural loss especially in Africa did happen in the past,
the situation simply should be left as it is. Countries are prepared under the auspices of the UN or NATO to even risk the ultimate sacrifice of ‘their own’ human lives in order to support combat and peace missions for sustainable nation building and community development. (Not to speak of the huge amounts of money required). So why should it be so complex to develop in such an interstate context, an international debate on the possible repatriation of items of unique cultural value as a contribution to international policies to strengthen the cultural resources of fragile nation states in political transition?

Of course there is a lot to say about this. [In his argument in ‘Cosmopolitanism; ethics in a world of strangers’ the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (Princeton University) reasoned out why cultural art treasures, archaeology and ethnographics can best be regarded as universal heritage. Among other things, he objected to specific nations laying claim to masterpieces that had been made before those nations even existed. He remains reticent about the idea of repatriation, owing to his distrust of nationalistic claims. I agree with him. Indeed it is a good thing, for instance, that a Jan van Goyen painting hangs in New York. Culture is not exclusive heritage belonging to a single nation, but should be for everyone anywhere and everywhere to enjoy and appreciate and, ideally, art contributes to an international and intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding of differences. Regardless of this cosmopolitan approach, however, Appiah ends his argument, saying that some of these objects can better fulfil their universal function within the context of where they originally came from. ‘The connection people feel to cultural objects that are symbolically theirs, because they were produced from within a world of meaning created by their ancestors – the connection to art through identity – is powerful. It should be acknowledged.’ To Appiah, this refers to unique objects. Others, such as the Africanist Kwame Opoku (Africanet Vienna/Ghana), categorically advocate substantial restitution.9 In a critique of the Benin bronzes exhibition that now tours the world, he wrote: ‘And I am left thinking that the “Enlightenment principles on which public museums in the United States were established” have perhaps contributed to the irreversible destruction of our universal, or cosmopolitan, cultural heritage’.10] However, I leave it at this brief remarks, in order to introduce my third and fourth cases.

3 Crossroads of people
These last cases deal with the meaning of landscape as the cultural heritage of a changing nation, and with the cultural heritage of a person who changed his nationality. Again these examples are based on two recent museum presentations where the motto ‘A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive’ could well apply and get an other meaning yet.
To mark the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the state of Israel, the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam organised the exhibition entitled Palestine 1948 – memories of a lost fatherland. It is a retrospective of Palestinians looking back on events that have occurred in 1948 with short snippets of filmed interviews from the Nakba archives in Beirut.\(^{11}\) Besides, the exhibition features a series of paired photographs taken by the American photographer Alain Gignoux: each pair combining a portrait of a Palestinian taken in his or her present living conditions juxtaposed with a current photograph of the place where the family had been living in 1948. Here you see Fawzi Mohammed Tanzji from al-Tantura, with his identity card and the current archaeological museum near where he used to live. Other photographs, by Khalil Raad (1854-1957) from the 1920s, and from the glass lantern slides collection of the Jewish History Museum in Amsterdam, depict the landscape way back in the past before the state of Israel was established. These historical photographs bring up the question of landscape and nation and what the retroactive meaning is of these depictions of the landscape. In fact, the same question arouse in the context of Afghanistan, with archaeological finds as a pre-national history. (www.tropenmuseum.nl)

Lydda, at the background the St. Jorischurch, c. 1920
American Colony Glass-slides Collection Jewish Historical Museum Amsterdam

The Afghanistan exhibition was about compassion, this exhibition Palestine 1948 is about exclusion with respect to nation building and citizenship (and it is certainly not accidental that this story is unfolded based merely on text and images with no objects at all). By contrast, my last exhibition example is about explicit inclusion.

In autumn 2007 a new museum opened in Paris Cité de l’histoire de l’immigration.\(^{12}\) In a semi permanent set-up, the history of French emigration and immigration is explicitly framed in a periodisation of French history and a presentation of the founding republican values of French national identity (les valeurs républicaines constitutives de l’identité de France), namely, liberté, égalité, fraternité, and since 1905, laïcité (the separation
between church and state) and *le contrat social*. In this new immigration museum, just like in the exhibition *Palestine 1948*, personal accounts lend an image of the ‘casual nature’ of history.

Each colourful showcase tells another story, such as here the account of Thonn Ouk, who in the spring of 1975 was in France, for his work. But, he states, ‘Phnom Penh felt just in that period, and we became exiles. Of our previous life, almost nothing was left.’ *Mais Phnom Penh est tombée à ce moment-là et nous sommes devenus des exilés. De notre vie d’avant, il n’est pratiquement rien resté.*’ Here on display is a passport with an entry stamp dated 1975. It euphemistically points to the deep inroads of geopolitical events in a (recent) past.

To summarize: In the example of Afghanistan, cultural heritage had been attributed a role to contribute to (international support for) the recovery of a nation state that faced and still faces an immense crisis. The example of the Baga clan sculpture illustrated a development where cultural heritage had moved from a location specific communal context to a context of autonomous art without any reference to national histories. And whereas the identity papers of the Palestinian Fawzi Mohammed Tanji stresses a history that excluded him from citizenship in the current nation state of Israel, did the identity papers of Thonn Ouk refer to a history which stressed his inclusion as a citizen of the French nation. Each of these four museological representations addressed it visitors with implicit statements far beyond individual histories and biographies. They ask for empathy, compassion, engagement, historical understanding, respect, with imaginative references to geopolitical developments of a recent past that cut deep in the lives of people, and has major consequences for their political and cultural citizenship. Visiting
these exhibitions therefore implies an act of citizenship as well. Our museums together and in interaction with each other, create an international framework for this discourse on citizenship, ownership and belonging.

We should be more aware of this international context of how museums respond in their exhibitions on the major cultural debates of our times, and how they find their public appeal in the way they mediate imagination about national identity and all the accompanying processes of inclusion and exclusion. I hope to have illustrated that a-historical references to universal values are embedded in historical notions of the nation. We therefore need a *historical* critique of exhibitions, since the dominant framework of the nation state in our current discussions about art and culture is politically charged and needs such an historical underpinning.

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1 Compare ‘inter-exhibitionality’ to intertextuality. Both refer to a discourse analysis which for literary texts (and book reviews) is well developed; however, concerning exhibitions discourse analysis is rare. The sheer ‘appearance’ of the exhibition to the reviewer in most cases dominates the review.


4 Quote from the internet report of *Artdaily.org* 18-5-2008. The same wordings are used in the auction catalogue and in the announcement of the auction in newspapers, as in *NRC-Handelsblad* 2-5-2008.

5 Jean Fritts, Sotheby’s Worldwide Director of African and Oceanic Art, quoted in internet report of *Artdaily.org* 18-5-2008.

6 Poem by Viruly

**Metropolitan Museum New York**

From afar did I fly
Over an ocean calm,
When stacks of hay did I spy
On the water so balm.

I saw a ship a sailing,
Three riders did I pry,
Long did I keep staring
To Haarlem in the sky.

Two wooden mills at rest.
Idle and wide lay my country
Beyond its low-lying coast
For all eternity.

Rather late to be haymaking.
Painted was that grass
By our Jan van Goyen
The war had still to pass.

Three hundred years later
I see his Holland as I stare;
Three thousand miles of water
Far away was I from there.

But never, than before this painting
Felt our essential self so near,
Of quiet and of fighting.
And far away the fear.

A. Viruly


7 In the colonial context of for instance the netherlands East Indies or British India, this was in many respects the more the case.
9 Refers to Benin: Kings and Rituals Court Arts from Nigeria in Vienna, Augustus 2007; after Paris and Berlin in the USA in Chicago from 10 juli til 21 september 2008. The Oba of Benin, Omo N’Oba Erediauwa writes in the catalogue: ‘It is our prayer that the people and the government of Austria will show humaneness and magnamity and return to us some of these objects which found their way to your country.’
11 Palestina 1948 herinneringen aan een verdwenen vaderland. 1-3-2008 t/m 4-1-2009; The Nakba Archive is an initiative of an international team of researchers, based in Beyrout.
12 Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration – in le palais de la Porte Doree, (originally built for the colonial worls exhibition of 1931. After decolonisation it was transformed into the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie. That museum today is part of the Musée du quai Branly.