

Who am I? An identity crisis Identity in the new museologies and the role of the museum professional Eduardo Giménez-Cassina

Whilst the title of this essay suggests more than one “new museology”, it was rather a *licence poétique* to emphasize the two major theoretical movements that have evolved in the second half of the 20th Century¹. As a result of the place(s)/contexts where they originated, and for clarity purposes, they have been labelled in this essay as the “Latin new museology” and the “Anglo-Saxon new museology”; however they both identify themselves by just the name of “New Museology”. Even though **they both** shared similar ideas on participation and inclusion, the language barriers were probably the cause for many ideas not to be fully shared by both groups.

The “Latin New museology” was the outcome of a specific context that started in the 1960s (de Varine 1996); being a product of the “*Second Museum Revolution*”(1970s)², it provided new perceptions of heritage, such as “common heritage”. In 1972 ICOM organized the Santiago Round Table,

¹ There have been at least three different applications of the term (Peter van Mensch cited in Mason: 23)

² According to Santos Primo, this Second Museum Revolution was the result of the **Santiago Round Table** in Chile, 1972, and furthered by the **1st New Museology International Workshop** (Quebec, 1984), **Oaxtepec Meeting** (Mexico, 1984) and the **Caracas Meeting** (Venezuela, 1992) (Santos Primo : 63-64)

which advocated for museums to engage with the communities they serve, assigning them a role of “problem solvers” within the community (Primo 1999:66). These ideas lead to the concept of the Integral Museum. The Quebec Declaration in 1984 declared that a museum’s aim should be community development and not only “the preservation of past civilisations’ material artefacts”, followed by the Oaxtepec Declaration that claimed for the relationship between territory-heritage-community to be indissoluble (Primo 1999: 69). Finally, in 1992, the Caracas Declaration argued for the museum to “take the responsibility as a social manager reflecting the community’s interests”(Primo 1999: 71).

Amidst these new concepts and goals, a new type of museum that was described as a “cultural process” was born (de Varine 1996), the ecomuseum, a key player of the new museology. However the term soon became a label often used for content that differed a lot from the original ideas of Rivière and Varine, who coined the term in the 1970s (Rivière 1989).

The concept of “New Museology” appeared in the Anglo-Saxon world following the publication of Peter Vergo’s “New Museology” in 1989. Vergo defined it as “a state of widespread dissatisfaction with the ‘old’ museology” and advocated for less focus on the museum methods and a deeper discourse about the museum purposes (Vergo 1989:3). According to MacDonald, this ‘new museology’ was more humanistic and theoretical, and she points out three main characteristics drawn from Vergo’s theory: firstly, a deeper understanding of the contextualisation and situation of museum objects, as opposed to an inherent meaning. Secondly, an expansion on the sphere of influence of museology as a whole, dealing with matters that previously would not have been seen as part of the field. Thirdly, an increased awareness of the audience and the various perceptions of the museum and the exhibition (McDonald 2006:2).

Even though both movements advocate for the opening-up of the museum as a platform and museology as a science, both tendencies still need to be differentiated for their different political aims and processes. However, both trends acknowledge the core role that heritage plays in cultural identity and the social capacity of the museum as a platform to promote change, subsequently it is of no surprise that often communities use the museological framework as a tool to community and identity empowerment.

There is no doubt that we are living in an increasingly globalized world. Cultural diversity is gradually becoming the foundation of the social reality in the modern world, a menace to many groups of individuals that want to secure their unique identities. They often decide to adopt excluding attitudes in their community, rejecting to deal with the difficulties that result from multiculturalism (Hall 1999:42). Similarly, ecomuseums tend to have an origin in tension areas, producing mobilisation against threats to cultural or natural heritages (Davis 1999 cited in Elliot 2006), often with an underlying intention geared towards the protection of the community's "sense of belonging".

Cuban scholar Marta Arjona believes that it is generally understood that cultural identity is expressed as a consequence and not as an end in itself (Arjona 1986:11). By contrast, some Anglo-Saxon authors point out that there are two understandings of identity: an essentialist approach, in which identity is considered static and fixed, assuming identity as innate biological bonds and characteristics between individuals. A second approach regards identity as a concept that should include notions of contingency and fluidity (Hall 1990 cited in Newman and McLean 2002:57), and thus identity is perceived to morph over time, and presaged through contingency (Newman and McLean 2002:57). Hall goes even further arguing that cultural identity is the product of "diasporic consciousness", in serious need to understand the modern

world, and thus become open and complex, always under construction (Hall 1999:43).

According to these authors, identities can be grouped according to external factors such as ethnicity, race, gender, nationality and social class (Newman and McLean 2002:57), the distinguishing feature of these factors, however, being the acceptance by diverse groups of “self-definition history, dress and material culture” (Kaplan 2006:153).

Arjona argues that the voluntary selection of cultural goods from a community confronts its cultural heritage, and a relationship between the community and that heterogeneous group of items is created; thus the cultural identity is done through and as a consequence of heritage (Arjona 1986:13). It is a similar discourse to Kaplan’s, however Arjona rejects the notions of externally imposed factors³ that Kaplan, Newman and McLean defend, and advocates for a more intrinsic sense of identity, coming from the individual towards the selected cultural goods that are defined as “heritage” by a specific group. She centralises the notion of identity around the cultural goods (tangible or intangible) that constitute a given group’s heritage and the relationship with the community. In other words, the *selected items* as opposed to the *selection factors*.

Catalonian sociologist, Manuel Castells, talks about three forms and constructions of identity (Castells 1997: 36):

- Legitimized identity: introduced by the dominant society to rationalize their control over social actors, often reflected in various nationalist movements.
- Resistance identity: developed by groups that perceive themselves as stigmatized or in a worse position in society.

³ i.e. ethnicity, nationality, etc.

- **Project identity:** social actors, based on the cultural goods available to them, redefine their position in society, hoping to change structures of the society as a whole.

According to these three approaches of building identity that Castells proposes, we will now look at examples of three different identities that used, through grassroots movements, the framework of the new museology as a tool to develop their sense of identity.

Legitimized identity: The people(s) of Western Sahara and the National Museum for the Saharian People

The insurgence of a strong identity often coincides with the rise of nationalist feelings (Newman and McLean 2002). This could very much apply to the nationalist development in Western Sahara that started shortly before the abrupt decolonization from Spain and the invasion from neighbouring Mauritania and Morocco. The Saharian leaders, whilst in the resistance movement, had already coined the term the “saharawis”⁴, an umbrella term to talk about the large spectrum of Erguibat, Ulad Delim, Aarosien (Caro Baroja 1955: 202) and other desert tribes that inhabited the territory. Shortly after the “Green March” of 1976 that culminated with the Moroccan-led invasion, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to refugee camps in Algeria, where they have been living ever since. The development of a nationalist front, the POLISARIO⁵, led to a renewed sense of identity where the community felt as “Saharawi”, speaking one language, the Hassania Arabic and Spanish, different from the Arabic

⁴ A.k.a. Saharians

⁵ “Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro” - Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro

dialects and French that were spoken in the invading nations - Mauritania and Morocco.

The National Museum for the Saharian People -NMSP- was built in Rabuni -Algeria, home to the Saharian government -POLISARIO- in exile. This unique situation is double sided: on the one hand it is motivated by the “establishment” -the POLISARIO front-, however this establishment is the result of a grassroots social movement that started towards the end of the Spanish rule. The museum has a physical presence since 1997, and recently it has expanded online, reaching the large Saharian Diaspora, in an attempt to enlarge the participation (<http://www.arqueotur.org>).

This process has empowered the community and has led to the creation of “workshops”⁶ where different traditional skills are taught as part of the identity-forming heritage. The NMSP displays objects from day to day life and, through panels, describes the history of the “Saharawis” avoiding any differentiation between the different desert tribes (www.biblioteca.udg.es).

In the context of the NMSP, the exhibition is a means to an end, the end being the development of a shared communal identity (Crooke: 176), crucial for the survival of their cause. However, this revised version of the collective history has led to re-enactments of battles and relevant historic events during festivals. This process of ethnomimesis is a powerful tool of social construct (Cantwell).

The NMSP has been working in this new museology format, triggering processes of social dinamization and

⁶ These workshops have resulted in Communities of Practice, in which different members share skills and information to increase their knowledge pool. Examples that I have witnessed include a workshop where women teach each other different camel hair weaving techniques that have been passed down in their clans and tribal groups generation after generation.

communal identity development. These processes can be found in various ecomuseums and community museums throughout the world, but could they still be denominated new museology if not done purposefully? Saharians have been successful in not labelling it -not unlike their limbo-state of state-less refugees-; hence I will not do it. However, according to one of the founder-father of ecomuseums, Rivière, says it could, as he did when he visited a similar example in Gennevilliers in 1953⁷(Rivière 1989:141).

Resistance Identity: The Ak-Chin Him Dak ecomuseum in Arizona

Nancy Fuller talked in detail about the development of the Ak-Chin ecomuseum publishing an article at the very beginning of the 1990s, one of the first case studies of ecomuseums in the Anglo-Saxon world. Using the label “ecomuseum”, coined more than 15 years earlier by Varine and Rivière, the Ak-Chin Indians of Arizona engaged in a project that expanded over half a decade. Using the concept of “ecomuseums” excited the community, as they “liked the idea

⁷ *“En 1953, à Gennevilliers, village devenu ville industrielle de banlieu, une vaste exposition temporaire d'histoire naturelle et humaine est organisée à l'initiative du Sénateur-Maire, qui m'en confie le programme. La municipalité, les écoles, la paroisse, les grands établissements industriels locaux, la population de toutes générations, dont les enfants et les travailleurs immigrés, y apportent leur concours. A la durée près, c'est déjà un écomusée.”* (Rivière 1989:141)

(“In 1953, in Gennevilliers, a village that became an industrial town, a vast temporary exhibition of natural and human history was organized under the initiative of the mayor, who trusts me with the programme. The municipality, the school, the parish, the corporations, the local businessmen, the population of all generations, even the children of and the migrant workers, add their bit. To this point, it is already an ecomuseum”: Translation by Eduardo Giménez-Cassina)

of being first in the nation to attempt the model”(Fuller 1992:348).

The main drive for the project was to preserve their identity as a community (Fuller 1992:336). The rapid decent of Ak-Chin native speakers was an alarming fact. According to Fuller, it was a decisive aspect to take measures for culture and identity preservation (Fuller 1992:336). This distressing situation led many of the community members to the decision of creating an ecomuseum to deal with these problems (Fuller 1992). Language became so central to the community’s idea of identity that, when a questionnaire asking each family about their expectations of the museum was distributed, it occupied the top position, followed by oral history (Fuller 1992:347).

The project involved all the members of the community in one way or the other. The appointed board for the project decided in October 1987 that they would build a museum (Fuller 1992:348). There was a lot of community participation when deciding what shape the actual building was going to have (Fuller 1992:358) and the museum the Ak-Chin Him Dak opened on 29th June 1991 (Fuller 1992:343). It is interesting to mention how Fuller implies that the “ecomuseum started with the inauguration of the physical museum” (Fuller 1992:359), as if this form could only be significant once it transcended a physical and tangible dimension, a very different perception from de Varine’s who sees it as a “cultural process” (de Varine 1996). The Ak-Chin Him Dak followed a model that was based on the idea of ecomuseum, but one is left to wonder to what extent the community thought of the process as the actual outcome rather than the physical museum as the ultimate end. Fuller mostly uses the term ecomuseum for the Ak-Chin Him Dak, though she sometimes refers to it as a “community museum”. This loose use of the term ecomuseum made de Varine to prefer talking about “community museums” (de Varine 1996).

The programme was successful in engaging the community and providing them with empowerment, self confidence⁸ and in creating long-lasting relationships with other communities. It indeed helped development, but one is to question whether the use they gave to their “ecomuseum” was appropriate or rather a missed chance. Certainly, using the label of “ecomuseum” opened many doors to the community, and possibly more funding, but was this what the Ak-Chin community needed or wanted? Did they achieve their goal of language fluency among younger community members? Despite seeing their language as the central pillar to their identity, the museum staff had not yet organized language workshops at the time Fuller wrote her article (Fuller 1992:360). Is this to be interpreted as a managerial mistake? As a lack of engagement to the initial proposal from the museum professionals? Or did the needs of the community change dramatically once the enclosed physical museum opened its doors? Only time will tell the success of this endeavour, however one is left to wonder that if their identity was centred around the language, why did the museum professionals not address it in a more straight forward fashion?

The term “ecomuseum” became such a powerful marketing tool, that the use of the label might seem convenient. However, it does not always stick to its original intentions, the foundations that de Varine and Rivière proposed in the 1970s. The term today evokes feelings of ecological sustainability, minorities and grassroots participations; however these notions are not central to the idea of ecomuseum. The Ak Chin community should have worked with the notion that not all museological endeavours involve an exhibition, and target their key problems, in this

⁸ Though, one is to question if the community felt more empowered from the complex irrigation systems that made them famous and they had developed before they engaged in the “ecomuseum” project (Fuller 1992:335)

case the disappearing oral tradition, and develop a strategy to deal with it. Creating a language centre might not have been an extremely popular idea, and would have probably attracted less funding than the label “ecomuseum”, but could have provided the community with a direct answer to their problems. Moreover, an ecomuseum could have been built around a language centre, based on a community of practice of elders that share their oral tradition and aim to pass it down to younger generations. This possibility does not involve the physicality of a space and breaks with the notion that anything museum-like needs to be confined within four walls and have a label next to it.

Project Identity: The gay community in the West and the no-museum

With the exception to the Schwules Museum in Berlin and the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) museums are almost non-existent in most western countries, even in those with tolerant societies where the gay community has been completely assimilated.

This “gap” in the museum spectrum could be argued to be a consequence of the fact that the gay community forges its identity in being part of the larger spectrum of society to survive –core pillar of project identities-, unlike the national/legitimized identities, or the increasing trend of Jewish Museums in the West⁹ and the Ak-Chin –resistance identity. As social actors, and based on the cultural goods available to

⁹ Though it could be argued that the Jewish identity in the West has transformed from a project to a resistance identity, in Castells terms, thus the importance of museums as a tool for identity, however I will leave this for another essay.

them, they aim to redefine their position in society, hoping to change structures of the society as a whole.

LGBT-related subjects are the focus of certain exhibitions in city museums, with initiatives that spread from San Francisco, with the LGBT Archives, to Glasgow with the Glasgay exhibit (Vanegas 2002: 104). Most of the times, these exhibits deal with ideas of homophobia or health (Vanegas 2002:99), issues that do not necessarily form part of the “gay identity” *per se*. However, there are clear distinct elements of the gay identity, such as dress codes and meeting places, or literary and musical preferences, but they fail to be present in most exhibits (Vanegas 2002:99), and as Vanegas argues “*The underlying message seems to be that, because lesbians and gay men are defined by their sexuality, they can only be represented by objects relating to sex, an approach that denies other aspects of gay and lesbian culture*” (Vanegas 2002:99)

However, this lack of museums and adequate representation seems to be compensated by other cultural manifestations, such as LGBT community centres and gay parades. Gay Villages can also be considered a larger representation of this idea¹⁰. Harry Britt, political advocate for LGBTs in San Francisco, argues that “*When gays are disseminated in space, they are not gays due to their invisibility*” (Harry Britt quoted in Castells 1997: 303), stressing the importance of such focal points, when members of the community do not feel alone; arguably a factor to community empowerment and identity forming.

¹⁰ Castells advocates for associating them to the term “freed areas” as opposed to the idea of “ghetto” (Castells 1997:304) parting from the idea that the homosexual community is drawn to those places from an inner wish, as opposed to being forced to live in there.

These “freed areas” and/or LGBT community centres act as a catalyst for identity forming. Because the gay community does not have a “*heimat*” –it would be like saying that women or blue-eyed people have a motherland- but is part of society as a whole, these physical entities become focal points for the community. Even if certain members of the community do not see themselves identified with them, they do however provide an identitiary framework that often evolves into stereotypes, by which they will be considered by other communities.

The role of LGBT centres –using the loose sense of the term, and including “gay villages”, community centres, meeting spaces targeted for the community such as cafes, bars, clubs, parks and so on- thus often fulfil the role of an ecomuseum in terms of community empowerment and identity forming. They trigger mechanisms that in a way could be labelled as communities of practice: a group of gay men getting together to go shopping, sharing their knowledge of fashion trends in the community or a seminar set up by transsexuals informing others about operations and procedures for transitioning. This notion could include larger aspects, such as a specific way of speaking, the so-called “Gayspeak” pointed out by many among them James W. Cheesbro, or performance art done, for example, by dragkings; can we not say that the only reason these cultural manifestations exist is because they are in an environment –whether oppressed, ignored or promoted- that can nourish them?

More similarities can be found between these cultural manifestations “alternative” to museums -or put simply, not labelled as such- and the principles of the “New Museology”, such as the gay parades. Could they be a form of ethnomimesis? According to the ideas exposed by Cantwell in his book “Ethnomimesis”, they could be, as they re-enact previously learned elements of their “culture” and in the process gain a deeper understanding to their social identity (Clifford 1997)- think of dragqueens, dancers etc. Even though

they do not have the “ethnic” dimension most ethnomimesis processes have, we can definitely speak of a cultural sphere. However, as with most communities, there are of course clusters that react to this portrayed identity that feel does not reflect them, an element that adds on to the complexity of this project identity.

This model could be applied to other social movements. Thinking outside the box (or in a museological context, the white cube) that the new museology broke away from, many similarities between venues where social interaction happens and produces a spin off of community empowerment and identity forming, and ecomuseums can be drawn. It is probable that these communities do not see themselves as part of a museological process, as this was not the intention in most cases, however, if we extrapolate Rivière’s impressions on the French village of Gennevilliers, they are already working within an ecomuseological framework.

THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL

The museum is generally thought of as an institution of recognition and identity par excellence (MacDonald 2006: 4). The social value of museums can be understood if so is the process that they play constructing identity by being containers of cultural goods (Newman and McLean 2002:56). With the understanding of museums that the new museologies advocated for, the role of the museum in identity forming became a major element and, thus, did the role played by the museum professional.

When we look closer at the way museums work, we can immediately talk about a selection process; a selection of cultural products for official protection. This process can “recognize and affirm some identities, and thus failing to recognize others”(MacDonald 2006:4). But who makes that

selection? In other words, who should decide what is to be remembered (and, by default, what is to be forgotten)?

The New Museology advocates for participative collecting, involving the community in the process. In a very Anglo-Saxon new museology approach, Crooke campaigns for museums and communities working in partnerships to deal with contemporary problems (Crooke 2008:182), as opposed to the probably more ideological stand of the Latin perception that would advocate for the community *being* the museum. This dilemma goes hand in hand with *how* we should perceive identity: should we view it as something that can be grouped in external factors or rather the relationships of individuals to certain objects?

If the museum and the community are two different actors, the relationship between both is critical. Vanegas talks about the advantages of stressing a “shared identity” between some of the museum professionals and the source group, talking “about ‘us’ rather than ‘them’ when referring to their interviewees” (Vanegas 2002:100). Whilst there is no doubt this framework would work with certain communities -such as LGBT, it would be too idealistic to hope for museums to have in-staff members of each of the communities they work with. A solution could involve hiring members of the researched groups on a project basis, and this arrangement would probably enjoy the benefits that Vanegas refers to. By this token, the role of the professional should be to allow for a situation in which the source community feels confident when selecting their own heritage, and use its professional knowledge to display it in a faithful fashion, according to the message intended by the source community. This can be misleading, but it would also avoid the (community) museum to become an artificial construct that only allows a defined version of reality to transcend.

Identity empowerment is dealt within the context of museums in a myriad of forms, however Hall points out that

"[identity] always moved into the future through a symbolic detour through the past" (Hall 1999:43), a trend that is often visible in community museums throughout the world, with an underlying sense of nostalgia and tradition. According to Arjona, if we think in a framework in which culture is in constant change through hundreds of means, so should the cultural identity, as opposed to "mummifying" traditions of the past to attract tourists (Arjona 1986:18-19). The cultural identity should be a "*spontaneous assimilation of what we were and still are, a coherent empowerment of our origins, that exist side by side with our modern reality*" (Arjona 1986:19)

The role of the professional has a larger area of influence that goes beyond the notion of identity: a lack of sense of belonging is associated with exclusion from society, whereas an individual with a sense of identity is considered the main precursor to inclusion (Woodward 1997 cited in Newman and McLean 2002:57). Inclusion and participation are paradigms that are constantly challenging contemporary museology.

The 1992 Caracas Declaration intended that the role of the museum heritage professional to be that of a "social manager" (Primo 1999:71), a notion that overlaps in the field of sociology. I would advocate for creating a platform in which sociologists, ethnographers, art historians, source communities and other relevant stakeholders meet to discuss their interest. The role of the museum professional should be the managing of this "*Greek agora*" space, a great opportunity for a contact zone that cannot be missed. These relationships and roles will be the great challenges the museum professional will face in the coming years.

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