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Sea of islands and poetics of relation: rethinking islandness

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Mer d'îles et poétique de la relation : repenser l'insularité

Mar de islas y poética de la relación: repensar la insularidad

Guest editors:
Marion Bertin
Jamie Allan Brown
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Ana Sol González Rueda
Louis Lagarde
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Introduction:

Sea of islands and poetics of relation: rethinking islandness

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Tell Them
"[…]
tell them we are papaya golden
sunsets bleeding
into a glittering open sea
we are skies uncluttered
majestic in their sweeping land-
scape
we are the ocean
terrifying and regal in its power.
[…]
but most importantly tell them
we don't want to leave
we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands."
(Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, 2011)[1]

From a continental European perspective, islands have long been considered as separated and isolated spaces, disconnected from one another and from the rest of their environment. Colonial histories, as well as cultural and scientific movements, have further created boundaries between islands, people and things. This double special issue of the *ICOFOM Study Series* aims to rethink such a perspective on islands by bringing together papers from around the world that draw on alternative views, notably from the Pacific and Caribbean regions concerning oceanic islands (i.e. those formed of coral or undersea volcanic eruptions [Deleuze, 2002]). Resonating through many of the papers will be the type of island thinking associated with the poem cited above by the Marshallese poet,

1 Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's best-known poem *Tell Them* (2011), warns of the consequences for Pacific atolls of the rising sea levels. https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com

performer, educator and activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, which expresses a view of interconnectivity between people and the ocean and a native resistance to displacement. Tongan-Fijian scholar Epeli Hau'ofa (1939–2009) ("Our Sea of Islands", 1994), and Martiniquais scholar and poet Édouard Glissant (1928-2011) (*Poetics of Relation*, 1996) previously emphasised related ideas of sea connectedness and subterranean relationality rather than separateness; a key concept common to many of the papers that follow.

Island studies and its misconceptions have been shaped by the distinctive features of islands, not least their state of being surrounded by water and being seen to be "remote" from a mainland perspective. For example, the term *insular/insularity*, derived from the Latin, differs in use between the French (*insulaire*, where it implies an idea of remoteness and mental isolation), and the English (where it has been associated at times with a negative form of introspection). Similarly, ideas of boundedness associated with islands can be construed as adverse if seen as a form of enclosure. From an islander's point of view, however, the richness of their culture, sense of place, and world view (*dùtchas* in Scottish Gaelic), negates metropole perceptions of the "remoteness" of islands (Brown, 2019), and opens more pathways to interconnectivity.

In the field of memory studies, the term *transnational* prompts discourse about collective memory beyond the nation state (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014). This allows new understandings of networks of commerce and exchange across national borders, and of the concept of "local" within broader transnational imaginaries (Bond, 2023). In the words of De Cesari and Rigney, transnationalism "recognizes the significance of national frameworks alongside the potential of cultural production both to reinforce and to transcend them", so that we might rather study "non-linear trajectories and complex temporalities" through a more open framework (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014, pp. 19, 23). Taking these premises as a cue for a discussion among island museums and heritage communities, the transnational prompts us to ask questions: How do island memory cultures work? How do museum narratives interact transnationally, notably along the fault lines created by colonialism, as "transnational cross-currents were also at the heart of colonialism, slavery, and other forms of exploitation by globalized capital involving the violent asymmetrical entanglement of racialized communities" (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014, p. 24)?

As noted above, writers from different islands have suggested that islands are spaces of connectivity through the sea surrounding them. Many islanders, notably those from Oceania, have a long history of multigenerational oceanic voyages of encounters (Lowenthal, 2007). In his foundational and highly cited article "Our Sea of Islands" (1994), Hau'ofa describes how Pacific islanders were not living on "islands in a far sea" but are inhabitants of a "sea of islands", rebutting the long-term continental perspective. For him, "outsiders often conceive of islands as separated and confined as well as defined through their (national) borders, which often arose from colonial and decolonial dynamics thereby overlooking connectivity, heterogeneity, and complexity" (p. 152). Hau'ofa invokes the myths, legends, oral traditions and cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania, which include the ocean, heavens and underworld as part of an Oceania that is anything but focused on smallness of scale as characterised by continental views.

Other oceans and seas across the globe have been serving as roads that connect peoples and spaces, allowing the circulation of tangible and intangible things. The Indian Ocean, for example, has long been a commercial road that connected East African empires and Asia (Bouchet, 2019; Nativel & Ragoanah, 2007). In the context of the Caribbean, the

triangular trade route is another oceanic passage carrying not only peoples and goods but also diverse cultures, histories, practices, livelihoods and memories. Through these routes, tangible and intangible things were taken from one space to another across national borders. For enslaved peoples who had been displaced from West Africa to the Caribbean islands, the trade routes created a diasporic culture rooted in the idea of exile and absence (Chamoiseau, 2016; Chivallon, 2004; Cottias et al., 2010). The mental trans-oceanic connection fostered the idea of a "Black Atlantic" that brings together African peoples with islanders of African descent in the Caribbean islands as well as continental America (Gilroy, 1993; see also the authors of the French-speaking *Négritude*).

Indeed, Caribbean island museologies feature strongly in this special issue, and the history of the Caribbean cannot be separated from the trauma of transatlantic slavery and colonialism in the Americas. Several authors from the Caribbean have endeavoured to think of the impact of this traumatic history on behalf of their populations. Patrick Chamoiseau describes exile and its consequences when creating from absence, memory lapses, and very few traces: a "*matière de l'absence*" (2016). Edouard Glissant, born in French Martinique, defends the idea of the "poetics of relation" to express the interrelations and encounters between people, things and histories in the Caribbean, especially regarding the African continent, where most of the Caribbean people originated from. He used the concept of *rhizome*[2] as a way to explain how the Caribbean peoples are linked together and with other places around the world; a concept recently taken up by scholars in the field of museology to both critique the display of art and to conceive of a Caribbean museology and community practice functioning outside the traditional museum, which is associated with colonialism and extraction (Keohane, 2023; McGuire, 2023). Within the Shared Island Stories project, Trinidadian historian Heather Cateau has recently propounded the concept of reassembling the fragments of hidden stories of the middle and working classes between Scotland and the Caribbean – involving a detailed archival project operating on both sides of the Atlantic (Cateau, 2024). With Hau'ofa, other Pacific thinkers redefined the connection between the islands and against colonial borders and defended the idea of Moana Oceania.[3] Such thinking from the Pacific and Caribbean regions and beyond has participated in the repositioning of islanders within a global context as they encourage the idea of thinking outside national borders by calling for a transnational conception of islands and the world.

Island heritages today, therefore, do not see the ocean as a barrier or the land as security. Rather, as explored by Foley et al. (following the works of Tsing, 2015; Pugh & Chandler, 2021), island studies today often focuses on the power of island thinking beyond the linear progress and development associated with modernity (Foley et al., 2023), through an emphasis on islands' relationalities and Indigenous practices. In the end they conclude: "Island cultures and islandness can emphasize mobility and movement while also remaining deeply connected to place" (Foley et al., 2023, p. 1809).

Island museologies and heritages: what are they?

In this context, what do island heritages in the world have in common? It is difficult to consider island heritages as a whole, considering how diverse they are. However, as many authors show in this special issue, island heritages from different territories and trajec-

2 In botany, a rhizome is a plant stem that grows horizontally rather than vertically underground, producing roots at strategic points for new plant growth.

3 Moana means Ocean in Polynesian languages.

tories do share some similarities. Indeed, island heritages have suffered – some are still suffering – from dispersion, disconnection, loss, destruction, lack of interest, absence of preservation and transmission, misrepresentation, and marginalisation, amongst other issues.

During colonialism and the establishment of nation states, intangible cultures were forbidden or forgotten. Many languages, for instance, were not allowed to be spoken or they were practised secretly, whereas over the past few decades, island communities have been defending their identities through their cultures and their heritages. Simultaneously, waves of "island collecting" (Longair, 2024) caused the dispersion of material cultures (see papers by Widdis & Reisz and by Scuderi in this volume). Collecting happened in different ways, from gift-giving to violent looting. Through the history of collecting, material artefacts from islands circulated across the world and entered private and public collections (Melandri & Guiot, 2021).

Since the 1960s, museums and local communities have been working together to redefine relationships and authority, as well as change representation and narratives (Peers & Brown, 2003). As shown in this volume, collaborative projects, digital databases, exhibitions, and productions with artists are used as tools to reconnect material objects with the descendants of those who created them. The establishment of colonial societies in this "confetti of empire" has also favoured the emergence of new heritage objects: curios, trade goods, Western-inspired artistic or decorative art productions, graphic arts, military and religious heritage, and shipwrecks. The heritage – or status – of these objects, which serve as cultural and historical witnesses, still raises questions among island populations today. These examples illustrate the plurality of island heritages, the complexity of their history, and the challenges that their contemporary enhancement may face. What, then, are appropriate ways to share island heritages?

National and large municipal museums are often derived from former colonial museums built in the 19th and 20th centuries and, therefore, sometimes still adopt narratives embedded in imperial and colonial histories. Yet they are limited in number around many archipelagos. For example, in the Anglophone Caribbean, the prominent museums are the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port of Spain, Trinidad (established in 1892), the National Gallery of Jamaica in Kingston, Jamaica (established in 1974), and the National Gallery of Grand Cayman (established in 1996). Such institutions, critiqued by Alissandra Cummins in relation to Western practices as well as colonial narratives (Cummins, 2004), have been explored further through the lens of a constructed nature/culture divide in the development of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. At the same time, this small number of national museums is balanced by the predominance on the islands of community museums and grassroots community heritage initiatives, a number of which arguably model best practice in sustainable island livelihoods (Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke, 2018; Brown et al., 2019; Brown & Caesar, 2020). In Pacific islands, national museums have been reformed since the 1980s while, simultaneously, many cultural centres and community museums were created to promote and empower Indigenous cultures and heritages, a topic explored further by Conal McCarthy and Tarisi Vunidilo in this volume. The practices behind these different models of heritage management came together: national museums were tasked with considering Indigenous perspectives and practices regarding heritage. This is particularly the case in Aotearoa (New Zealand), where Te Papa Tongarewa, the national museum, was built as a bicultural institution with a strong focus on Maori culture and the Mana Taonga policy recognises the ancestral value of the col-

lections for Maori people. The Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta in Port-Vila (Vanuatu) is also an institution that has a strong focus on communities of the archipelago (Geismar, 2003). However, one of the difficulties faced by these museums is the ability to create a national narrative that reflects postcolonial societies and their diversity, namely Indigenous people, several waves of immigrants during the colonial regimes, and capitalist expansion (Bertin, 2020), as Cassandre Decorce shows in the case of New Caledonia in this issue. Marine Vallée's paper further presents the difficulties of representing a wide range of communities into one national narrative – in this case French Polynesia, which includes 118 islands.

Presentation of the volume

This special issue of the *ICOFOM Study Series* results from two conferences organised in 2023 and 2024 by the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) in partnership with other institutions based in different islands. A number of the essays come from research conducted under the auspices of the multidisciplinary research project Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future (2022-2027), which is posing a series of research questions into cultural relationships between the archipelagos.[4] Shared Island Stories was inspired, in part, by the recent evidence that emerged around Scotland's links with the transatlantic slave trade as it related to purchases of islands through the UK compensation scheme for slavery in the Caribbean, as well as a National Trust for Scotland report into historic links between their properties and this transatlantic history (MacKinnon and Mackillop, 2020; Melville, 2021). Combined with established research interests into topics of sustainability, well-being, and island life, this led to the development of a research team that is by its very nature multidisciplinary, with researchers and advisors coming from history, heritage studies, sustainable development, art history and memory studies. Questions being asked include: How can we contest histories through relevant archives, such as revealing hidden histories through stories of everyday life? What agencies are entangled with mobility and displacement; for example, sharing knowledge transnationally, using exchange as a form of resilience? As a major outcome of this project, an international conference and the 47th annual ICOFOM symposium were held at the University of St Andrews in June 2024 under the theme Transnational Island Museologies (Brown et al., 2024; Shared Island Stories, 2024).

Some of the essays included in this volume come from an international conference organised in New Caledonia as a collaboration between ICOFOM, the Association des musées et établissements patrimoniaux de Nouvelle-Calédonie (AMEPNC) and the Université de Nouvelle-Calédonie. The theme of this conference was Increase Visibility and Attractiveness of Islands' Heritage: A 21st-Century Issue for Museology. It addressed the contradictory issues for island heritage and museums regarding concerns about the impact of rising sea levels and climatic changes in addition to preservation and transmission issues. This conference was held in New Caledonia in October 2023 and was divided into two parts: three days were dedicated to the presentation of papers in the Université de Nouvelle-Calédonie, Noumea[5] and then a tour was organised to meet with museum and heritage professionals in the three provinces of the archipelago and experience tangible and intangible heritages.

4 This research project was selected by the European Research Council (ERC), funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) with reference: EP/X023036/1, and is coordinated by Professor Karen Brown.

5 Recordings are available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpyAXibUc3w&list=PLJqRix-IMtlnTz_tXddIk7kuY_14-fbmV_.

These two conferences started with a similar idea: to give a broad overview of island museologies and heritages. Working in island heritage, we recognise that taxonomies created by the Western hegemonic disciplines cannot authentically reflect how people, things, and environment are deeply interconnected – as Conal McCarthy reminds us in his essay based on his keynote speech delivered at the University of St Andrews in June 2024.

The papers received and included in this issue represent a wide range of disciplines from museology to art history, colonial history, memory studies, heritage studies, and environmental studies. The methodologies used in the papers are, by necessity, often interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary in order to consider transnational island stories and heritages in their complexity. They address common subthemes, such as narratives and power relations behind island heritages. Who tells and controls the stories? How can island heritage open up to unheard stories of Empire? Island communities were marginalised in colonial regimes and nation-state contexts: challenging national narratives to present a better representation of island heritage and identities is still an issue, as shown by essays in this volume by Nicole Bittencourt and Yi-An Chen in the context of the Ainu Indigenous peoples in Japan, and by Yi-An Chen regarding Taiwanese oceanic legacies that defy the continental Sinocentric perspectives. These papers remind us of the important role of heritage in building identities: heritage and museums can be strong tools in helping to define identities, but at the same time they are power institutions and create inclusion/exclusion dialectics.

Transmission of traditional knowledge was a key topic for the two conferences. The case studies presented in the papers illustrate the variety of modes of transmission used when talking about island heritages. Collections of artefacts and museum exhibitions are far from the only way to transmit those heritages into communities and the population at large. Transgenerational transmission – the role of the younger generation in particular – is important, as the Shared Island Stories Project exemplifies (see Jamie Allan Brown and Kaye Hall in this volume). Their paper together with that of Leilani Wong's case study of the ecomuseum of Te Fare give an overview of the different stakeholders involved in the transmission of island heritage: young people, NGOs, governments, Indigenous and source communities, artists, heritage practitioners, museums and other heritage institutions. Ultimately, several Indigenous ways of learning, transmitting, and understanding heritage were presented at both conferences, including oral testimony and experience. These Indigenous understandings of heritage and transmission are a means to unpack the museum model inherited from the European world and the Enlightenment. Both Conal McCarthy and Tarisi Vunidolo quote from the essay by the scholar of Maori descent Hirini Sidney Moko Mead (1983) about Pacific models of preserving and sharing heritage. Cultural centres, houses, ecomuseums, community museums, micro-museologies, amongst others, are models adopted by islands around the world to better fit with their source communities (see, for example, chapters by Alexandria Bounia and Darko Babić in this volume). In doing so, these island museologies build stronger relationships with the local communities who are really a part of the museum work. They also place experience and emotions at the core of transmission, even for outsiders. A number of testimonies of island cultures are now scattered around the world as part of museum collections. Collaborative projects and sometimes new technologies, such as databases, have been used to reconnect and encourage new ways of preserving this heritage while respecting and involving the local communities. Shared authority and knowledge are important steps toward inclusion of new voices to museum collections (see in this volume Barsinas et al., Bertin & Tissandier, Vunidolo).

But what happens when knowledge transmission ends? What are the risks faced by island heritage? They include the decline of native practices brought about by colonial and missionary activity that caused destruction and loss and slavery; the climate crisis and rising sea levels; and natural disasters. What can be done? How resilient are islands?

In relation to the threats of unsustainable tourism, coastal erosion and rising sea levels, the digitization of island heritage is often posited as one solution. In a global post-pandemic world, the visibility of island heritage is increasing through digitization. Yet digitization projects can be equated with the touristic gaze, which has its roots in colonial administration (Thompson, 2007), an issue addressed by several authors of this issue, including those from the Marquesas Islands. How can museology work in tandem with these histories and the growth of technology, cognisant of the digital fractures experienced by some populations or communities and the facilitation of remote exchanges with the rest of the world? Are other forms of visibility preferable? Furthermore, is the visibility of island heritage dependent on the appropriate functioning of the tourism sector? What are the economic issues behind the visibility effort?

Related to this issue is the fact that in the face of the climate emergency, islands are often held up in the media as sites of endangered land and livelihoods. Internationally, there is growing recognition of the wisdom within Indigenous and native knowledge regarding climate resilience and the preservation of human and biodiversity. Yet while Indigenous biocultural diversity is increasingly valued, it is also being eroded at an alarming rate. Approximately one-tenth of the world's population live on islands (Lowenthal, 2007). Islands cover "only 6.7% of land surface area" of our world, but "they harbor ~20% of the Earth's biodiversity, but unfortunately also ~50% of the threatened species and 75% of the known extinctions since the European expansion around the globe" (Fernández-Palacios et al., 2021).

A major motivation behind this volume is therefore to better understand what intergenerational transmission of Indigenous and traditional knowledge brings to debates on climate justice, especially as they relate to the role of young people. This approach builds upon the recent trend in museum studies to engage meaningfully with the climate emergency. For example, Fiona Cameron, Jennifer Newell, Robert Janes, Richard Sandell and others have advocated for museums to 'wake up' and engage in climate action (Cameron et. al., 2012; Cameron et. al., 2015; Newell, 2017; Janes & Sandell, 2019). Meanwhile, museum support organisations, including ICOM and NEMO, are strongly engaged in promoting the role of museums as partners in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (McGhee, 2022). A great many heritage and related networks have also been formed to build networks and increase capacity at a variety of levels towards impactful climate action. Several papers selected for this volume therefore engage in new ways of thinking about island heritage and islandness in relation to the ecological crisis. Considering not only ideas of the Anthropocene but also more-than-human worlds, these texts are building on thinking emerging through the work of scholars including Fiona Cameron, Kirsten Wehner, Jennifer Newell, and Libby Robin, who touch on relationships between people and nature that would normally be the premise of anthropology in the context of museums (Cameron & Neilson, 2015; Newell et al. [eds.], 2017; Moran, 2017). Wehner, for example, defines *ecological museology* as a way of thinking that combines nature and culture to develop new understandings of the interweaving and inter-reliance of human and non-human worlds in the context of Australia. This is the context where this *ICOFOM*

Study Series volume hopes to fill a gap and bring food for thought for the present and the future in museum and heritage studies.

In this special issue, we seek to build knowledge around relationships between Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and museology, recognising the value of museums and heritage sites as loci of research to help us all to understand how we have adapted to climate change over time. Several papers herein seek to better understand the ways in which such traditional knowledge is influencing academia and public policies from a global perspective. At the same time, intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge helps to safeguard identities and memories at risk of being lost. Museums, heritage sites and cultural centres can be focal points for this work by offering opportunities for people from different generations to engage with their heritage, thus strengthening their sense of identity and place. In seeking to move towards an ecological museology in times of climate emergency, we therefore ask: What does Indigenous heritage and traditional knowledge in rural, coastal and island areas teach us about resilience in the face of climate change, biodiversity loss and coastal erosion? In what ways can museums and heritage sites work with local biodiversity, language and the unique nature of places to work towards local resilience? What are the challenges and opportunities in engaging with the sustainability debates from an environmental humanities perspective, notably oceanic imaginaries? What does intergenerational transmission of Indigenous and traditional knowledge bring to debates on climate justice, especially as they relate to the role of young people?

The papers in this volume have been selected by six members of the scientific and organising committees of the conferences held in New Caledonia and Scotland, representing a diversity of territories and disciplines. Our aim is for the volume to offer a strong addition to the field of island heritage and museum studies, supplementing ICOFOM's collection of publications focused on decolonising museology and under-studied territories (Caribbean museology, for instance). In what follows, we have arranged the papers into three overarching themes: Colonial Collecting and the Archive – Contesting Histories; Rethinking Indigenous Island Museologies; and Intergenerational Transmission and Island Ecologies.

Colonial collecting and the archive – contesting histories

Colonial collecting forms the basis of the opening papers of this volume. Briony Widdis and Emma Reisz's paper, "Collecting ambiguity: Objects and the afterlives of Empire on the island of Ireland," challenges narratives around the legacies of Empire on the island of Ireland (principally Northern Ireland), by adopting a novel combination of object biography, autoethnography and "non-public" history. Exposing how objects accumulate histories through time, the authors explore the role of Empire in shaping Ireland's divisions in a country in the early stages of addressing the legacies and afterlives of colonialism. They highlight how co-production alone does not answer the challenge of decolonisation processes in the context of entrenched collective histories and argue that autoethnography can elucidate entanglements with global imperialism and colonial exploitation. Museums, they suggest, can transform from repositories of contested histories to platforms for reflection, education and exchange.

Maria Chiara Scuderi's paper, "From Borneo to Leicester: Colonial entanglements in the Dryad 'Handicrafts' Collection," looks at the early 20th-century global circulation and reuse of crafts from the island of Borneo in the commercial and educational context of Leicester in England. The author draws on extensive new archival evidence from the

collection of Harry Peach concerning the use of photography to enhance and propagate knowledge about Bornean material culture.

Scattered museum collections and archives are also central in the context of the inventory of the Kanak scattered heritage, a corpus of objects preserved in museums around the world and recorded on a database led by the Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie. This database and the inventory process are described by Marion Bertin and Marianne Tissandier in their essay, "The Inventory of Dispersed Kanak Heritage: Transnational museology and entangled territories." The authors demonstrate how this database is an example of transnational museology on several levels: it records the scattered Kanak collections in museums, it circulates the data, and it operates in consultation with databases around the world. Bertin and Tissandier also insist on the local importance of this database, in that it gives back information about museum collections and provides more space for Kanak knowledge.

The essay written by Vainui Barsinas, Jean-Daniel Tokainiua Devatine, Vaiana Giraud, Hélène Guiot, Tamara Maric, Magali Mélandri, and Marine Vallée, "Collaborative practice, material and immaterial knowledge transmission in French Polynesia", is a perfect example of collaborative methodologies in examining scattered collections. It looks at traditional fans from French Polynesia preserved in the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac. The project, called Rara'a, aims to challenge and decolonise museum knowledge of scattered collections, decentre the thinking behind the collecting, and give access to the descendants of those who created the fans. This project addresses Indigenous sovereignty in the context of collections and data.

Rethinking Indigenous island museologies

Opening the next section is "Learning from Pacific museologies: Heritage, culture and environment in the islands of Moana Oceania" by Conal McCarthy, which introduces several salient themes addressed in subsequent case studies. Drawing on scholarship and examples of Indigenous and Oceanian museologies, McCarthy highlights examples from Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in particular to illustrate how, in the end, the people of Moana Oceania have already shown the way to safeguarding our heritage and planet. Moving beyond a focus on museums and things towards a relational approach to museums focused on a broader continuum, including traditional heritage practices of care for "country", culture and other people, can ultimately lead to a more embedded community-led climate activism.

This point is furthered in "Pacific museums and cultural centres: Redefining & indigenizing museum spaces the Pacific way" by Tarisi Vunidilo, which emphasises the role of museums in fulfilling community needs according to traditional Polynesian Indigenous ways of designing educational programmes for all generations. Significantly, Vunidilo points out, the most effective ways to do this in the Pacific region are not so much through museums inherited from Western colonisation as through cultural centres promoting the resilience of living cultures and environments at risk through collaborative efforts. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre, for example, is defined as a living space for such work, including the promotion of sand drawing art beyond the outer islands. Here, Indigenous communities participate not only as participants but also as trainers.

In their paper "Narratives and island heritage representation: Navigating the Ainu exhibitions on Hokkaido", Nicolle Bittencourt and Yi-An Chen also engage with the representation of Indigenous culture – in this case, the people of Hokkaido Island in Japan. In examining four exhibitions from the island, they question ideas of cultural expression and agency. Engaging in critical debates based on museology relating to the rights of marginalized groups, as well as postcolonial theory more broadly, they showcase how there is a challenge in places, including but not limited to the national museum and park, to engage critically with legacies of settler colonialism, contemporary Ainu struggles, and "a more just and inclusive national memory." Their text reminds us of the important role of museums in shaping national identities and narratives through inclusion and exclusion. Chen's paper "Empowering narratives: Rethinking Taiwan through the National Museum of History in Taiwan" then looks in depth at the *Oceanic Taiwan* exhibition at Taiwan's National Museum of History to open more debate on national identity through museum narratives at the crossroads of the Pacific Ocean and continental China.

Also focused on a marginalized and disenfranchised community, Leilani Wong's paper "Museums as social action: Building equity in marginalised communities" takes the case study of the ecomuseum of Te Fare Natura ("the house of nature") in Moorea, French Polynesia, to illustrate a success story of youth empowerment through museum development. By addressing specific needs identified by the community, the ecomuseum has brought over 400 Ma'ohi students out of a situation of poverty and social issues under a dominant colonial administration to a place of growth through the revival of knowledge around Polynesian ecosystems of land and sea in a delicate insular environment. By uplifting traditional practices and cosmovisions through non-Western forms of learning, including oral transmission, the project has enabled youths to understand their value as agents of environmental protection through ancestral lineage and begin a path of emancipation. Viewing the concept of *ecomuseum* in a Polynesian context, this example shows how a museum can be a bridge between different knowledges and communities.

The case study of the Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (Paris, France), described by Cassandre Decorce in her essay "The exhibition as an emanation of voice: Symbolism and spatial design at the Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie", demonstrates an attempt to bring more of our senses into exhibitions. The exhibition refers to Kanak metaphors such as the importance of the voice, the invisible, and routes and passages, as well as the other communities living in the archipelago in the context of the definition of New Caledonian identity and nation-building. In addition to the exhibition itself, Decorce stresses the importance of people behind the scenes, here the director of the institution. Being a "house" instead of a "museum" the Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie invites us to rethink models, including the role that heritage can play as an ambassador when outside its original territory.

In their essay entitled "Rediscovering the voice of our objects: Museological approaches and cultural claims in the *fenua ènata*," Guillaume Molle, Marine Vallée, Anatauarii Tamarii, Nestor Ohu, Ranka Aunoa, and Joseph Vaatete shine a light on several topics discussed in this volume, such as the reappropriation of knowledge and heritage by source communities. Presenting examples from the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia, they discuss the role of museums in keeping "objects alive" (i.e., meaningful to the communities) and in keeping objects inside the archipelago rather than exported. The authors present the case of community and local museums made for the communities.

By contrast, in their paper "Transmission, archipelagos and audiences: the renovated museum in Tahiti", Marine Vallée and Tamara Maric discuss the new display and narratives in the Te Fare Iamanaha – Musée de Tahiti et des Îles, which opened in March 2023 in the administrative centre for French Polynesia. The challenges behind the new permanent display were to bring a more Polynesian perspective on collections and history (instead of a very European-based one), as well as to equally represent the five archipelagos of French Polynesia. One of the key questions here is: Who are museums for? How can they provide knowledge and languages for communities as well as for outsiders?

Intergenerational transmission and island ecologies

The development of professional skills and cultural reconnection is a theme of the paper "Tides of change: Youth, museums and heritage in the climate emergency" by Jamie Allan Brown and Kaye R. N. Hall, which argues for the "transformative potential of youth-led initiatives" in the case study of the Shared Island Stories youth exchange between Barbados and Scotland's Outer Hebridean islands. Noting the agency of young people today through their enhanced political awareness and adeptness with new technologies, the example shows how communities affected by the worst impacts of climate change, including sea level rise and biodiversity loss, and sharing histories of colonial legacies and extraction can exchange ideas and practices for more sustainable futures, ultimately influencing museum policy. For example, engaging in workshops on traditional plants and TEK in both countries was seen to promote sustainable behaviours.

This is a topic explored in depth by Hannah Reid Ford in her paper "Reactivating traditional environmental knowledge to increase plant awareness." Engaging with ideas of "plant blindness" on the small Caribbean islands of Cayman and drawing from archival and ethnographic research, Reid Ford recognises the links between loss and degradation of biological diversity and cultural diversity (naming this phenomenon "biocultural diversity") and argues for the revitalisation of Caymanian awareness of plants through museum education aimed at enhancing nature-connectedness and awareness of more-than-human worlds, resulting in pro-environmental behaviours.

These two chapters, therefore, join a major theme in this special issue, that of the role of museums – especially small, local, community, ecomuseums or micro-museums – in fostering cultural sustainability through a living connection between the past and present, preserving personal and collective memory, and promoting intergenerational learning, notably about traditional knowledge and climate change. This topic is further explored in the essay "The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding: Small step for museology, giant leap for local community" by Darko Babić, which showcases this European award-winning museum on the island of Betina in Croatia. Begun as a bottom-up community initiative, the museum is shown to be very sustainable in a local context through its collections, open-air museum, community engagement and surrounding activities, including an inspired initiative to display living heritage in the local harbour by mooring active and maintained boats to both preserve traditional crafts and promote sustainable island tourism.

Also highlighting the role of the sea as a vital component of local heritage is "Layered legacies: Building the future on the knowledge of the past" by Ana Katurić. It discusses how the Croatian Coral Centre at Zlarin Island goes beyond presenting the history of coral harvesting to become a platform for climate action, cultural memory and participatory heritage-making involving the local community, NGOs, and the scientific and artistic

communities. In exploring the relationship between the community and the sea, co-creative activities have ranged from exhibition design and equitable resource management to plastic-free island action. In this way, important artefacts become interwoven with accurate scientific data and artistic intervention to display and share island lives and society in an effort to move towards cultural revitalisation and community empowerment.

These themes are present in the paper by Alexandra Bounia on the topic of "Micromuseology in Lesvos: Reflecting on large ideas through 'small places'," which reflects upon three grassroots museums on the island of Lesvos in Greece that are focused on refugee memory, resin collection, and local folklore. Usually created by elderly members of the community to preserve the memories of their past, to transfer memories and a sense of shared value to younger generations, and to support community futures, these institutions are presented as alternative, emotive and protected forms of memory-making. In so doing, the author also seeks to answer the question, "How can the knowledge and expertise generated by and in these small institutions introduce new ideas and/or allow for new perspectives in debates that are very pertinent to museology today?" Here, the author describes how emotions are part of the community museology, a topic that relates back to the idea of emotions as revealed in Widdis's and Reisz's essay opening this volume.

We hope that this double issue will give voice and light to the numerous island heritages and museologies presented here, and that it will encourage more research on them in the future.

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Introduction :

Mer d'îles et poétique de la relation : repenser l'insularité

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Tell Them
"[…]
tell them we are papaya golden
sunsets bleeding
into a glittering open sea
we are skies uncluttered
majestic in their sweeping land-
scape
we are the ocean
terrifying and regal in its power.
[…]
but most importantly tell them
we don't want to leave
we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands."
(Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, 2011)[6]

D'un point de vue européen continental, les îles ont longtemps été perçues comme des espaces séparés et isolés, déconnectés les uns des autres et du reste de leur environnement. L'histoire coloniale, ainsi que les mouvements culturels et scientifiques, ont renforcé ces frontières entre les îles, les peuples et les choses. Ce double numéro spécial des *ICOFOM Study Series* vise à repenser cette perspective en rassemblant des contributions venues du monde entier qui proposent des visions alternatives, notamment depuis les régions pacifique et caribéenne en ce qui concerne les îles océaniques (c'est-à-dire celles formées par des coraux ou des éruptions volcaniques sous-marines [Deleuze, 2002]). De nombreuses contributions résonnent avec la pensée insulaire incarnée dans le poème cité ci-dessus

6 Le poème le plus connu de Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, *Tell Them* (2011), met en garde contre les conséquences de l'élévation du niveau de la mer pour les atolls du Pacifique. https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com

rédigé par la poétesse, performeuse, enseignante et militante marshallaise Kathy Jetnīl-Kijiner, qui exprime une vision de l'interconnexion entre les peuples et l'océan, ainsi qu'une résistance autochtone au déplacement. Le chercheur tongien-fidjien Epeli Hau'ofa (1939–2009) (« Our sea of islands », 1994) et le poète et penseur martiniquais Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) (*Poétique de la relation*, 1996) avaient déjà souligné des idées similaires sur la connectivité maritime et la relation souterraine plutôt que sur la séparation – un concept clé partagé par nombre des contributions incluses ici.

Les études insulaires se sont arrêtées sur certaines caractéristiques particulières des îles, notamment le fait qu'elles soient entourées d'eau et perçues comme « éloignées » depuis une perspective continentale. Par exemple, le terme *insulaire/insularité*, dérivé du latin, diffère dans son usage entre le français (où il implique une idée d'éloignement et d'isolement mental) et l'anglais (*insular,* où il est parfois associé à une introspection perçue de manière négative). De même, l'idée d'enclavement associée aux îles peut être perçue négativement si elle est considérée comme une forme d'enfermement. Du point de vue des communautés insulaires, cependant, la richesse de leur culture, leur sentiment d'appartenance et leur vision du monde (*dùtchas* en gaélique écossais), contredisent la perception métropolitaine de l' « éloignement » des îles (Brown, 2019), et ouvrent la voie à une interconnectivité plus vaste.

Dans le domaine des études mémorielles, le terme *transnational* suscite des discussions autour de la mémoire collective au-delà de l'État-nation (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014). Cela permet de nouvelles compréhensions des réseaux de commerce et d'échange au-delà des frontières nationales, et de la notion de « local » dans des imaginaires transnationaux plus larges (Bond, 2023). Comme l'expriment De Cesari et Rigney, le transnationalisme « reconnaît la pertinence des cadres nationaux tout en soulignant le potentiel de la production culturelle à la fois pour les renforcer et les transcender », de sorte que nous puissions plutôt étudier des « trajectoires non linéaires et des temporalités complexes » à travers un cadre plus ouvert (2014, p. 19, 23). En prenant ces prémisses comme point de départ pour une discussion sur les musées insulaires et les communautés patrimoniales, le transnational nous pousse à poser comme questions : comment fonctionnent les cultures mémorielles insulaires ? Comment les récits muséaux interagissent-ils à l'échelle transnationale, notamment le long des lignes de fracture créées par le colonialisme, puisque « les courants transnationaux étaient également au cœur du colonialisme, de l'esclavage et d'autres formes d'exploitation par le capital mondialisé, impliquant l'enchevêtrement asymétrique et violent des communautés racisées » (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014, p. 24) ?

Comme mentionné plus haut, des auteurrices issus de différentes îles ont proposé que ces dernières soient vues comme des espaces de connectivité via la mer qui les entoure. De nombreux insulaires, notamment celleux d'Océanie, ont une longue histoire de voyages océaniques multigénérationnels (Lowenthal, 2007). Dans son article fondateur et largement cité « Our sea of islands » (1994), Hau'ofa décrit comment les insulaires du Pacifique ne vivent pas dans des « îles dans une mer lointaine », mais sont les habitant.e.s d'une « mer d'îles », en opposition à la perspective continentale dominante. Pour lui, « les étrangers conçoivent souvent les îles comme séparées et confinées, définies par leurs frontières (nationales), qui résultent souvent de dynamiques coloniales et décoloniales, négligeant ainsi la connectivité, l'hétérogénéité et la complexité » (p. 152). Hau'ofa invoque les mythes, légendes, traditions orales et cosmologies des peuples d'Océanie, qui intègrent l'océan, les cieux et le monde souterrain comme faisant partie d'une Océanie qui ne se concentre en rien sur la petitesse, comme le suppose une vision continentale.

D'autres océans et mers à travers le monde ont servi de routes reliant des peuples et des espaces, permettant la circulation d'entités matérielles et immatérielles. L'océan Indien, par exemple, a longtemps été une voie commerciale reliant les empires d'Afrique orientale et l'Asie (Bouchet, 2019 ; Nativel & Ragoanah, 2007). Dans le contexte caribéen, la route empruntée pour le commerce triangulaire est un autre itinéraire maritime transportant non seulement des personnes et des marchandises, mais aussi des cultures, des histoires, des pratiques, des modes de vie et des mémoires diverses. Par ces routes, des éléments tangibles et intangibles ont été transportés d'un espace à un autre au-delà des frontières nationales. Pour les peuples réduits en esclavage, déplacés d'Afrique de l'Ouest vers les îles des Caraïbes, ces routes commerciales ont créé une culture diasporique enracinée dans l'exil et l'absence (Chamoiseau, 2016 ; Chivallon, 2004 ; Cottias et al., 2010). Cette connexion mentale transocéanique a nourri l'idée d'un « Atlantique noir » réunissant les peuples africains et les insulaires d'origine africaine dans les Caraïbes ainsi qu'en Amérique continentale (Gilroy, 1993 ; voir aussi les auteurrices de la Négritude francophone).

Les muséologies insulaires caribéennes occupent en effet une place importante dans ce numéro spécial, car l'histoire des Caraïbes ne peut être dissociée des traumatismes de l'esclavage transatlantique et du colonialisme dans les Amériques. Plusieurs auteurrices originaires des Caraïbes se sont attachés à réfléchir à l'impact de cette histoire traumatique pour leurs populations. Patrick Chamoiseau décrit l'exil et ses conséquences, qui invitent à créer à partir de l'absence, des lacunes mémorielles et de très peu de traces : c'est-à-dire une « matière de l'absence » (2016). Édouard Glissant, né en Martinique, défend l'idée d'une « poétique de la relation » pour exprimer les interrelations et les rencontres entre les personnes, les choses et les histoires dans les Caraïbes, notamment en lien avec le continent africain, d'où sont originaires la plupart des populations caribéennes. Il utilise le concept de *rhizome*[7] pour expliquer comment les peuples caribéens sont liés entre eux et avec d'autres régions du monde ; un concept récemment repris par des chercheur.se.s en muséologie pour critiquer à la fois les modes d'exposition artistique et penser une muséologie caribéenne et une pratique communautaire s'inscrivant en dehors du musée traditionnel, trop souvent associé au colonialisme et à l'extraction (Keohane, 2023 ; McGuire, 2023). Dans le cadre du projet *Shared Island Stories*, l'historienne trinidadienne Heather Cateau a récemment développé le concept de reconstitution de « fragments d'histoires cachées » des classes moyennes et populaires entre l'Écosse et les Caraïbes – un projet archivistique approfondi mené de part et d'autre de l'Atlantique (Cateau, 2024). Avec Hau'ofa, d'autres penseur.se.s du Pacifique ont redéfini la connexion entre les îles, au-delà des frontières coloniales, et défendu l'idée de *Moana Oceania*[8]. Ces réflexions issues du Pacifique, des Caraïbes et d'ailleurs ont contribué à repositionner les insulaires dans un contexte mondial, en encourageant une vision transnationale des îles et du monde, au-delà des frontières nationales.

Aujourd'hui, les patrimoines insulaires ne considèrent donc ni l'océan comme une barrière, ni la terre comme une sécurité. Comme l'explorent Foley et al. (à la suite des travaux de Tsing, 2015 ; Pugh & Chandler, 2021), les études insulaires actuelles mettent souvent l'accent sur le pouvoir d'une pensée insulaire libérée du modèle de développement linéaire associé à la modernité (Foley et al., 2023), en valorisant les relationalités propres aux îles ainsi que les pratiques autochtones. Comme le concluent Foley et al. : « Les cultures insulaires et l'insularité peuvent mettre l'accent à la fois sur la mobilité et le déplacement, tout en restant profondément ancrées dans un lieu » (2023, p. 1809).

7 En botanique, un rhizome est une tige souterraine qui pousse horizontalement plutôt que verticalement, produisant des racines à des points stratégiques pour permettre la croissance de nouvelles plantes.
8 *Moana* signifie « océan » dans les langues polynésiennes.

Muséologies et patrimoines insulaires : de quoi s'agit-il ?

Dans ce contexte, qu'ont en commun les patrimoines insulaires à travers le monde ? Il est difficile de considérer les patrimoines insulaires comme un ensemble homogène, tant ils sont diversifiés. Toutefois, comme le montrent de nombreux auteur.rice.s de ce numéro spécial, les patrimoines insulaires de différents territoires et trajectoires partagent certaines caractéristiques. En effet, les patrimoines insulaires ont subi – et certains subissent encore – la dispersion, la déconnexion, la perte, la destruction, le désintérêt, l'absence de préservation et de transmission, la mauvaise représentation et la marginalisation, entre autres problèmes.

Pendant la période coloniale et lors de la formation des États-nations, les cultures immatérielles furent interdites ou oubliées. De nombreuses langues, par exemple, étaient interdites ou pratiquées en secret. Or, depuis plusieurs décennies, les communautés insulaires défendent leurs identités par leurs cultures et leurs patrimoines. Parallèlement, des vagues de « collecte insulaire » (*island collecting*, Longair, 2024) ont provoqué la dispersion des cultures matérielles (voir les articles de Widdis & Reisz et de Scuderi dans ce volume). Les collectes ont pris diverses formes, allant du don au pillage violent. À travers l'histoire de ces collectes, les objets matériels issus des îles ont circulé à travers le monde et intégré des collections publiques et privées (Melandri & Guiot, 2021).

Depuis les années 1960, les musées et les communautés locales travaillent ensemble pour redéfinir les relations et les autorités, ainsi que pour transformer les représentations et les récits (Peers & Brown, 2003). Comme l'illustrent plusieurs articles de ce volume, les projets collaboratifs, les bases de données numériques, les expositions et les collaborations avec des artistes sont autant d'outils utilisés pour reconnecter les objets matériels avec les descendant.e.s de celleux qui les ont créés. L'établissement des sociétés coloniales dans ce « confetti d'empire » a également favorisé l'émergence de nouveaux objets patrimoniaux : curiosités, objets de commerce, productions artistiques ou décoratives d'inspiration occidentale, arts graphiques, patrimoines militaire et religieux, épaves. Le statut de ces objets – qui servent de témoins culturels et historiques – continue de susciter des questionnements parmi les populations insulaires aujourd'hui. Ces exemples illustrent la pluralité des patrimoines insulaires, la complexité de leur histoire et les défis que pose leur valorisation contemporaine. Quelles sont, dès lors, les modalités appropriées pour partager les patrimoines insulaires ?

Les musées nationaux et municipaux de grande envergure proviennent souvent d'anciens musées coloniaux construits aux XIXe et XXe siècles, et conservent parfois des récits ancrés dans l'histoire impériale et coloniale. Or leur nombre reste limité dans de nombreux archipels. Par exemple, dans les Caraïbes anglophones, les musées les plus connus sont le Musée et galerie nationale d'art de Port of Spain à Trinité (fondé en 1892), la Galerie nationale de Jamaïque à Kingston (fondée en 1974), et la Galerie nationale de Grand Cayman (fondée en 1996). Ces institutions, critiquées par Alissandra Cummins pour leurs pratiques occidentales et leurs récits coloniaux (Cummins, 2004), ont été analysées sous l'angle de la construction d'une séparation entre nature et culture, ce dont témoigne le développement du Musée de la Barbade et de la Société historique. En parallèle, ce faible nombre de musées nationaux est compensé par la forte présence de musées communautaires et d'initiatives patrimoniales locales, dont plusieurs peuvent être considérées comme des modèles en matière de recherche durabilité des modes de vie insulaires (Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke, 2018 ; Brown et al., 2019 ; Brown & Caesar, 2020).

Dans les îles du Pacifique, les musées nationaux ont été réorganisés à partir des années 1980, tandis que de nombreux centres culturels et musées communautaires ont été créés pour promouvoir et valoriser les cultures et patrimoines autochtones – une thématique explorée plus en détail par Conal McCarthy et Tarisi Vunidilo dans ce volume. Les pratiques issues de ces différents modèles de gestion du patrimoine se rapprochent : les musées nationaux sont aujourd'hui appelés à prendre en compte les perspectives et les pratiques autochtones relatives au patrimoine. C'est notamment le cas en Aotearoa (Nouvelle-Zélande), où Te Papa Tongarewa, le musée national, a été conçu comme une institution biculturelle mettant l'accent sur la culture māori, où la politique du Mana Taonga reconnaît la valeur ancestrale des collections pour les Māoris. Le Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta à Port-Vila (Vanuatu) est également une institution centrée sur les communautés de l'archipel (Geismar, 2003). Toutefois, l'un des défis majeurs pour ces musées est de parvenir à construire un récit national reflétant les sociétés postcoloniales dans leur diversité – à savoir les populations autochtones, les vagues migratoires liées aux régimes coloniaux et à l'expansion capitaliste (Bertin, 2020), comme le montre Cassandre Decorce pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie dans ce numéro. L'article de Marine Vallée illustre aussi les difficultés à représenter une grande diversité de communautés dans un récit national – ici, celui de la Polynésie française, composée de 118 îles.

Présentation du volume

Ce numéro spécial des *ICOFOM Study Series* est le résultat de deux colloques organisés en 2023 et 2024 par le Comité international pour la muséologie (ICOFOM), en partenariat avec diverses institutions situées dans différents territoires insulaires. Plusieurs articles proviennent de recherches menées dans le cadre du projet pluridisciplinaire *Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future* (2022–2027), qui interroge les relations culturelles entre ces deux archipels[9]. *Shared Island Stories* a notamment été inspiré par les récentes déclarations concernant les liens entre l'Écosse et la traite transatlantique des esclaves, en particulier via l'achat d'îles à travers le système britannique de compensation esclavagiste dans les Caraïbes, ainsi qu'un rapport du National Trust for Scotland sur les liens historiques entre ces propriétés et l'histoire transatlantique (MacKinnon et Mackillop, 2020 ; Melville, 2021). En lien avec des recherches déjà engagées sur les questions de durabilité, de bien-être et de vie insulaire, ce contexte a conduit à la constitution d'une équipe pluridisciplinaire réunissant des chercheur.se.s et expert.e.s implqiué.e.s en histoire, en études patrimoniales, en études pour le développement durable, en histoire de l'art et en études mémorielles. Parmi les questions posées par ce projet figurent notamment : comment contester les récits historiques à travers des archives appropriées, notamment dans l'objectif de décrire les histoires cachées de la vie quotidienne ? Quelles sont les formes d'*agency* impliquées dans les mobilités et les déplacements – par exemple, le partage des savoirs comme forme de résilience ? En lien avec ce projet, une conférence internationale et le 47e symposium annuel de l'ICOFOM ont été organisés à l'Université de St Andrews en juin 2024, sur le thème *Transnational Island Museologies* (Brown et al., 2024 ; *Shared Island Stories*, 2024).

9 Ce projet de recherche a été sélectionné par le Conseil européen de la recherche (ERC), financé par UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) sous la référence : EP/X023036/1, et est coordonné par la professeure Karen Brown.

D'autres articles de ce volume sont issus d'un colloque international organisé en Nouvelle-Calédonie, en collaboration entre l'ICOFOM, l'Association des musées et établissements patrimoniaux de Nouvelle-Calédonie (AMEPNC) et l'Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie[10]. Ce colloque, intitulé *Favoriser la visibilité et l'attractivité des patrimoines insulaires : un enjeu muséologique du XXIème siècle*, portait sur les contradictions auxquelles sont confrontés les musées et les patrimoines insulaires face à la montée des eaux et aux changements climatiques, en plus des enjeux de conservation et de transmission. Le colloque s'est tenu en octobre 2023 et s'est déroulé en deux temps : trois jours de présentations à l'Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, à Nouméa, suivis de visites dans les trois provinces de l'archipel, permettant des rencontres avec les professionnel.le.s du patrimoine et la découverte des patrimoines matériels et immatériels.

Ces deux colloques sont nés d'une même idée : offrir un large panorama des muséologies et patrimoines insulaires. En travaillant sur les patrimoines insulaires, il devient clair que les taxonomies créées par les disciplines hégémoniques occidentales ne peuvent refléter de manière authentique l'interconnexion profonde entre les personnes, les choses et les environnements – comme nous le rappelle Conal McCarthy dans son essai, issu de sa conférence plénière prononcée à l'Université de St Andrews en juin 2024.

Les articles sélectionnés et publiés dans ce volume couvrent un large éventail de disciplines, de la muséologie à l'histoire de l'art, de l'histoire coloniale aux études mémorielles, des études patrimoniales aux sciences de l'environnement. Les méthodologies mobilisées sont nécessairement inter-, trans- et pluridisciplinaires, afin de saisir la complexité des récits et patrimoines insulaires transnationaux. Ils abordent des sous-thèmes communs, notamment les récits et les rapports de pouvoir sous-jacents aux patrimoines insulaires. Qui raconte l'histoire et qui contrôle la mise en récit ? Comment le patrimoine insulaire peut-il s'ouvrir aux récits invisibles de l'Empire ? Les communautés insulaires ont été marginalisées sous les régimes coloniaux et les États-nations : remettre en question les récits nationaux pour mieux représenter le patrimoine et les identités insulaires reste un enjeu, comme le montrent les articles de Nicole Bittencourt et Yi-An Chen sur les Aïnus au Japon, ainsi que celui de Chen sur les héritages océaniques de Taïwan qui défient les perspectives continentales sinocentriques. Ces textes nous rappellent l'importance du patrimoine dans la construction identitaire : les musées et les patrimoines peuvent être de puissants outils d'affirmation des identités, mais ce sont aussi des institutions de pouvoir, qui créent des dynamiques d'inclusion et d'exclusion.

Transmission des savoirs traditionnels : quels enjeux ?

La transmission des savoirs traditionnels était un thème central des deux colloques. Les études de cas présentées dans les articles illustrent la diversité des modes de transmission lorsqu'il s'agit de patrimoines insulaires. Les collections d'objets et les expositions muséales sont loin d'être les seules voies de transmission vers les communautés et le grand public. La transmission intergénérationnelle – notamment le rôle de la jeunesse – est essentielle, comme l'illustre le projet *Shared Island Stories* (voir l'article de Jamie Allan Brown et Kaye Hall dans ce volume). Leur contribution, ainsi que l'étude de cas présentée par Leilani Wong sur l'écomusée de Te Fare Natura, offrent un aperçu des multiples acteurrices impliqués dans la transmission du patrimoine insulaire : jeunes générations, ONG, gouvernements, communautés autochtones et d'origine, artistes, professionnel.le.s du patrimoine, musées et autres institutions patrimoniales.

10 Les enregistrements sont disponibles en ligne : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpyAXi-bUc3w&list=PLJqRixIMtlnTz_tXddIk7kuY_14-fbmV_.

Au final, plusieurs approches autochtones pour l'apprentissage, la transmission et la compréhension du patrimoine ont été présentées lors des deux événements, incluant des témoignages oraux et d'expériences vécues. Ces visions autochtones du patrimoine et de sa transmission permettent de déconstruire le modèle muséal hérité du monde européen et des Lumières. Conal McCarthy et Tarisi Vunidilo citent tous deux l'essai du chercheur māori Hirini Sidney Moko Mead (1983), consacré aux modèles océaniens de préservation et de transmission du patrimoine. Centres culturels, maisons, écomusées, musées communautaires, micro-muséologies, entre autres, sont autant de modèles adoptés dans les îles du monde entier pour mieux correspondre à leurs communautés d'origine (voir, par exemple, les chapitres d'Alexandria Bounia et de Darko Babić dans ce volume). Ce faisant, ces muséologies insulaires renforcent les liens avec les communautés locales qui sont véritablement des actrices du travail muséal. Elles situent également l'expérience et les émotions au cœur de la transmission, y compris pour les personnes extérieures aux communautés d'origine. De nombreux témoignages des cultures insulaires sont aujourd'hui dispersés dans les collections muséales à travers le monde. Des projets collaboratifs, et parfois les nouvelles technologies telles que les bases de données, sont mobilisés pour reconnecter et imaginer de nouveaux modes de préservation de ce patrimoine, tout en respectant et en impliquant les communautés locales. Le partage de l'autorité et des savoirs est une étape essentielle pour inclure de nouvelles voix dans les collections muséales (voir dans ce volume les contributions de Barsinas et al., Bertin & Tissandier, Vunidilo).

Mais que se passe-t-il lorsque la transmission s'interrompt ? Quels sont les risques auxquels les patrimoines insulaires sont confrontés ? Parmi eux citons : le déclin des pratiques autochtones causé par le colonialisme, les missions religieuses et l'esclavage ; la crise climatique et la montée des eaux ; les catastrophes naturelles. Que peut-on faire ? Quelle est la résilience possible des îles ?

Face aux menaces que représentent le tourisme intensif, l'érosion côtière et la montée des eaux, la numérisation du patrimoine insulaire est souvent présentée comme une solution. Dans un monde post-pandémique globalisé, la visibilité du patrimoine insulaire augmente grâce au numérique. Toutefois, ces projets de numérisation peuvent reproduire le regard touristique, hérité de l'administration coloniale (Thompson, 2007) – une question soulevée par plusieurs auteur.rice.s de ce numéro, notamment dans le cas des îles Marquises. Comment la muséologie peut-elle conjuguer histoire et technologie, tout en prenant en compte les fractures numériques subies par certaines populations, et faciliter les échanges à distance avec le reste du monde ? D'autres formes de visibilité sont-elles préférables ? Et par ailleurs, cette visibilité est-elle dépendante du bon fonctionnement du secteur touristique ? Quelles sont les logiques économiques sous-jacentes à cet effort de visibilité ?

Face à l'urgence climatique, les médias présentent souvent les îles comme des lieux menacés dans leur territoire et leurs modes de vie. À l'échelle internationale, on reconnaît de plus en plus la valeur des savoirs autochtones et traditionnels en matière de résilience climatique et de préservation des écosystèmes humains et naturels. Pourtant, bien que la diversité bioculturelle autochtone soit de plus en plus valorisée, elle est également en voie de disparition à un rythme alarmant. Environ un dixième de la population mondiale vit sur des îles (Lowenthal, 2007). Celles-ci ne couvrent que « 6,7 % de la surface terrestre » mais « abritent environ 20 % de la biodiversité mondiale et, malheureusement, également près de 50 % des espèces menacées et 75 % des extinctions connues depuis l'expansion européenne à travers le monde » (Fernández-Palacios et al., 2021).

L'un des principaux objectifs de ce volume est donc de mieux comprendre ce que la transmission intergénérationnelle des savoirs autochtones et traditionnels peut apporter aux débats sur la justice climatique, avec une importance particulière accordée au rôle des jeunes générations. Cette approche s'inscrit dans une tendance récente des études muséales qui prend position face à l'urgence climatique. Par exemple, Fiona Cameron, Jennifer Newell, Robert Janes, Richard Sandell et d'autres ont plaidé pour un réveil des musées et leur engagement dans l'action climatique (Cameron et al., 2012 ; 2015 ; Newell, 2017 ; Janes & Sandell, 2019). Des organisations muséales telles que l'ICOM et NEMO soutiennent activement le rôle des musées comme partenaires dans l'atteinte des Objectifs de développement durable (ODD) (McGhee, 2022). De nombreux réseaux patrimoniaux ont également vu le jour pour renforcer les capacités à différents niveaux et favoriser une action climatique concrète. Plusieurs contributions à ce volume s'inscrivent donc dans des réflexions nouvelles sur le patrimoine insulaire et l'insularité face à la crise écologique. En mobilisant non seulement les idées de l'Anthropocène mais aussi celles des mondes « autres qu'humains », ces textes s'appuient sur les travaux de chercheur.e.s tels que Fiona Cameron, Kirsten Wehner, Jennifer Newell et Libby Robin, qui explorent les relations entre humains et nature, généralement abordées en anthropologie muséale (Cameron & Neilson, 2015 ; Newell et al., 2017 ; Moran, 2017). Wehner, par exemple, définit la muséologie écologique comme une manière de penser associant nature et culture afin de renouveler notre compréhension de l'interdépendance entre les mondes humains et non-humains, dans le contexte australien. C'est dans cette perspective que ce volume des *ICOFOM Study Series* espère combler une lacune et nourrir la réflexion muséale et patrimoniale pour le présent et pour l'avenir.

Dans ce numéro spécial, nous cherchons à développer des connaissances sur les liens entre les savoirs écologiques traditionnels (*Traditional Ecological Knowledge*, TEK) et la muséologie, en reconnaissant la valeur des musées et des lieux de patrimoine comme lieux de recherche permettant de mieux comprendre nos adaptations face au changement climatique à travers le temps. Plusieurs articles tentent de mieux saisir l'influence de ces savoirs traditionnels sur le monde académique et les politiques publiques dans une perspective globale. En parallèle, la transmission intergénérationnelle de ces savoirs contribue à préserver des identités et des mémoires menacées. Musées, sites patrimoniaux et centres culturels peuvent jouer un rôle essentiel en offrant des espaces de rencontre intergénérationnelle autour du patrimoine, renforçant ainsi le sentiment d'identité et d'ancrage. Dans une volonté de muséologie écologique en temps de crise climatique, nous posons donc les questions suivantes : que nous apprennent les patrimoines autochtones et les savoirs traditionnels dans les zones rurales, côtières et insulaires sur la résilience face au changement climatique, à l'érosion côtière et à la perte de biodiversité ? Comment les musées et lieux de patrimoine peuvent-ils travailler avec les biodiversités locales, les langues et les singularités territoriales pour renforcer la résilience locale ? Quels sont les défis et les opportunités qu'ouvre l'engagement dans les débats sur la durabilité depuis une perspective issue des sciences humaines environnementales, notamment via les imaginaires océaniques ? Que peut apporter la transmission intergénérationnelle des savoirs autochtones et traditionnels aux débats sur la justice climatique, notamment en ce qui concerne le rôle des jeunes ?

Les articles de ce volume ont été sélectionnés par six membres des comités scientifiques et d'organisation des colloques organisés en Nouvelle-Calédonie et en Écosse, représentant une diversité de territoires et de disciplines. Nous souhaitons que ce volume contribue significativement au champ des études sur les patrimoines et les muséologies insulaires, en venant compléter les publications de l'ICOFOM axées sur la décolonisation de la muséologie et

sur les territoires encore peu étudiés (comme les muséologies caribéennes, par exemple). Nous avons organisé les contributions de ce volume selon trois grands axes thématiques : Collectes coloniales et archives – Contester les récits ; Repenser les muséologies insulaires autochtones ; Transmission intergénérationnelle et écologies insulaires.

Collectes coloniales et archives – Contester les récits

Les collectes coloniales constituent le point de départ des premiers articles de ce volume. L'article de Briony Widdis et Emma Reisz, « Collecter l'ambiguïté : objets et postérités de l'Empire sur l'île d'Irlande », remet en question les récits relatifs aux héritages de l'Empire en Irlande (notamment en Irlande du Nord), en adoptant une combinaison originale de biographie d'objet, d'auto-ethnographie et d'histoire « non publique ». En montrant comment les objets accumulent des couches d'histoire au fil du temps, les autrices explorent le rôle de l'Empire dans les divisions irlandaises, dans un pays encore aux prémices d'un travail sur ses héritages coloniaux. Elles soulignent que la seule coproduction ne suffit pas à relever les défis de la décolonisation dans un contexte de mémoires collectives profondément ancrées, et avancent que l'auto-ethnographie peut révéler les enchevêtrements avec l'impérialisme mondial et l'exploitation coloniale. Les musées peuvent alors devenir des lieux de réflexion, d'éducation et d'échange, plutôt que de simples réceptacles d'histoires contestées.

L'article de Maria Chiara Scuderi, « De Bornéo à Leicester : enchevêtrements coloniaux dans la collection Dryad 'Handicrafts' », porte sur la circulation mondiale et la réutilisation d'objets artisanaux de l'île de Bornéo au début du XXe siècle, dans le contexte commercial et éducatif de Leicester, au Royaume-Uni. L'autrice s'appuie sur de nouvelles sources d'archives, issues de la collection d'Harry Peach, pour analyser l'usage de la photographie dans la diffusion de connaissances sur la culture matérielle de Bornéo.

Les collections et archives dispersées sont également au cœur de l'inventaire du patrimoine kanak dispersé, un corpus d'objets conservés dans des musées du monde entier et recensés dans une base de données pilotée par le Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie. Ce processus est décrit par Marion Bertin et Marianne Tissandier dans leur article « L'inventaire du patrimoine kanak dispersé : muséologie transnationale et territoires enchevêtrés ». Les autrices montrent comment cette base de données constitue un exemple de muséologie transnationale à plusieurs niveaux : elle recense les collections kanak dispersées, en diffuse les données et fonctionne en collaboration avec d'autres bases internationales. Elles insistent aussi sur son importance locale, en ce qu'elle restitue des informations sur les collections muséales et ouvre de nouveaux espaces pour les savoirs kanak.

L'article collectif de Vainui Barsinas, Jean-Daniel Tokainiua Devatine, Vaiana Giraud, Hélène Guiot, Tamara Maric, Magali Mélandri et Marine Vallée, « Pratiques collaboratives et transmission des savoirs matériels et immatériels en Polynésie française », illustre quant à lui les méthodologies collaboratives appliquées aux collections dispersées. L'étude porte sur les éventails traditionnels polynésiens conservés au musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac. Le projet *Rara'a* vise à remettre en question et à décoloniser les savoirs muséaux concernant ces collections, à décentrer les logiques de collecte et à en permettre l'accès aux descendant.e.s des créateur.ice.s. Le projet interroge ainsi la souveraineté autochtone dans le contexte des collections et des données.

Repenser les muséologies insulaires autochtones

La section suivante s'ouvre avec le texte « Apprendre des muséologies du Pacifique : patrimoine, culture et environnement dans les îles de Moana Oceania » de Conal McCarthy, qui introduit plusieurs thématiques majeures reprises ensuite dans les études de cas. En s'appuyant sur les recherches et exemples issus des muséologies autochtones et océaniennes, McCarthy met en lumière des cas en Australie et en Aotearoa Nouvelle-Zélande pour montrer que les peuples de Moana Oceania ont déjà ouvert la voie pour préserver notre patrimoine et notre planète. En dépassant le cadre des musées et des objets pour adopter une approche relationnelle incluant les pratiques traditionnelles de soin envers le « territoire », la culture et les autres, cette muséologie peut favoriser une mobilisation communautaire plus enracinée autour du climat.

Cette idée est approfondie dans « Musées et centres culturels du Pacifique : redéfinir et indigéniser les espaces muséaux à la manière du Pacifique » de Tarisi Vunidilo, qui souligne le rôle des musées dans la satisfaction des besoins communautaires selon les méthodes éducatives traditionnelles polynésiennes, pensées pour toutes les générations. Vunidilo insiste sur le fait que, dans le Pacifique, les modèles les plus efficaces ne sont pas tant ceux hérités du colonialisme occidental que ceux des centres culturels, qui soutiennent la résilience des cultures vivantes et des environnements menacés par le biais de pratiques collaboratives. Le Centre culturel du Vanuatu, par exemple, est conçu comme un espace vivant promouvant, entre autres, l'art du dessin sur sable au-delà des îles éloignées. Les communautés autochtones y interviennent non seulement comme bénéficiaires, mais aussi comme formatrices.

Dans leur article « Récits et représentations du patrimoine insulaire : naviguer à travers les expositions aïnu à Hokkaido », Nicolle Bittencourt et Yi-An Chen s'intéressent également à la représentation des cultures autochtones – ici celle du peuple aïnu sur l'île d'Hokkaido, au Japon. En analysant quatre expositions insulaires, les autrices interrogent les formes d'expression culturelle et d'*agency*. À travers une lecture critique de la muséologie et de la théorie postcoloniale, elles montrent les difficultés à faire dialoguer les institutions, y compris le musée national et le parc, avec les héritages du colonialisme interne, les luttes aïnu contemporaines et la nécessité d'une mémoire nationale plus juste et plus inclusive. Leur texte rappelle l'importance du rôle des musées dans la fabrication des récits et identités nationales, par une dialectique entre inclusion et exclusion.

L'article de Chen intitulé « Récits émancipateurs : repenser Taïwan à travers le Musée national d'histoire de Taïwan » se concentre ensuite sur l'exposition *Oceanic Taiwan* présentée dans cette institution, afin d'ouvrir un débat plus large sur l'identité nationale à la croisée du Pacifique et de la Chine continentale.

S'intéressant également à une communauté marginalisée, Leilani Wong propose dans son texte « Les musées comme action sociale : promouvoir l'équité dans les communautés marginalisées » une étude de cas de l'écomusée Te Fare Natura (« la maison de la nature ») à Moorea, en Polynésie française. Le projet illustre un parcours d'émancipation pour plus de 400 jeunes Ma'ohi, qui ont pu s'émanciper de la pauvreté et de l'exclusion favorisée par l'administration coloniale dominante grâce à la revalorisation des savoirs portant sur les écosystèmes terre-mer en contexte insulaire fragile. En promouvant des pratiques et cosmovisions traditionnelles par des modes d'apprentissage non occidentaux – notamment la transmission orale –, le musée permet à ces jeunes de se percevoir comme héritier.e.s

et protecteur.ice.s de leur environnement, amorçant ainsi un processus d'autonomisation. Appliqué au contexte polynésien, ce modèle montre de quelle manière un musée peut devenir un pont entre savoirs et communautés.

L'étude de la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (Paris, France), présentée par Cassandre Decorce dans son article « L'exposition comme émanation d'une parole : symbolique et mise en espace à la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie », illustre une tentative de mobilisation des sens dans la scénographie. L'exposition s'appuie sur des métaphores kanak telles que l'importance de la parole, de l'invisible, des routes et des passages, tout en intégrant les autres communautés vivant dans l'archipel dans le contexte de la construction identitaire et nationale calédonienne. Au-delà de l'exposition elle-même, Decorce souligne le rôle déterminant des personnes en coulisses, ici le directeur de l'institution. Être une « maison » plutôt qu'un « musée » invite à repenser les modèles : le patrimoine peut aussi jouer un rôle d'ambassadeur hors de son territoire d'origine.

Enfin, l'article intitulé « Retrouver la voix de nos objets : démarches muséales et revendications culturelles au *fenua ènata* », rédigé par Guillaume Molle, Marine Vallée, Anatauarii Tamarii, Nestor Ohu, Ranka Aunoa et Joseph Vaatete, aborde des thématiques centrales de ce volume, notamment la réappropriation des savoirs et des patrimoines par les communautés sources. À partir d'exemples issus des îles Marquises (Polynésie française), les auteur.ice.s soulignent le rôle des musées pour « maintenir les objets vivants » – c'est-à-dire porteurs de sens pour les communautés – et les garder dans l'archipel plutôt que de les exporter. Ils et elles présentent des cas de musées communautaires pensés pour et par les habitants.

À l'inverse, dans « Transmission, archipels et publics : le musée rénové de Tahiti », Marine Vallée et Tamara Maric analysent la nouvelle muséographie et les récits du Te Fare Iamanaha – Musée de Tahiti et des Îles, réouvert en mars 2023 dans la capitale administrative de la Polynésie française. Les défis de cette refonte portaient sur l'intégration d'une perspective davantage polynésienne sur les collections et l'histoire (en opposition à une vision européenne) et sur la représentation équitable des cinq archipels composant la Polynésie française. Une question clé traverse leur réflexion : pour qui les musées sont-ils créés ? Et comment peuvent-ils transmettre savoirs et langues aux communautés autant qu'aux visiteur.e.s extérieur.e.s ?

Transmission intergénérationnelle et écologies insulaires

Le développement de compétences professionnelles et la reconnexion culturelle sont au cœur de l'article « Marées du changement : jeunesse, musées et patrimoine face à l'urgence climatique » de Jamie Allan Brown et Kaye R. N. Hall. À travers l'étude de l'échange de jeunes entre la Barbade et les îles Hébrides extérieures d'Écosse dans le cadre du projet *Shared Island Stories*, les auteur.ice.s défendent le « potentiel transformateur des initiatives dirigées par la jeunesse ». Il et elle soulignent l'engagement politique croissant des jeunes et leur aisance avec les technologies numériques pour montrer comment des communautés fortement touchées par les effets du changement climatique – montée des eaux, perte de biodiversité – et liées par des héritages coloniaux et extractivistes peuvent échanger idées et pratiques pour construire des futurs plus durables. Participer à des ateliers sur les plantes traditionnelles et les savoirs écologiques dans les deux pays s'est avéré un levier important pour encourager des comportements respectueux de l'environnement.

Ce thème est exploré plus en profondeur par Hannah Reid Ford dans son article « Réactiver les savoirs environnementaux traditionnels pour renforcer la conscience des plantes » . En analysant la situation des îles Cayman, l'autrice mobilise le concept de « cécité botanique » et croise les approches archivistiques et ethnographiques. Elle établit un lien entre la perte de diversité biologique et la perte de diversité culturelle – qu'elle nomme « diversité bioculturelle » – et plaide pour une revitalisation de la conscience botanique à travers l'éducation muséale, afin de renforcer le lien à la nature et les comportements pro-environnementaux.

Ces deux contributions rejoignent un fil rouge de ce numéro spécial : le rôle des musées – en particulier des musées de petite taille, locaux, communautaires, écomusées ou micromusées – dans le soutien à la durabilité culturelle à travers une connexion vivante entre passé et présent, la préservation de la mémoire personnelle et collective et l'apprentissage intergénérationnel, notamment en lien avec les savoirs traditionnels et le changement climatique. Cette thématique est également développée par Darko Babić dans son essai « Le Musée de la construction navale en bois de Betina : petit pas pour la muséologie, grand pas pour la communauté locale », consacré à ce musée primé situé sur l'île de Betina, en Croatie. Né d'une initiative communautaire, le musée se distingue par sa durabilité locale, ses collections, son musée en plein air, son ancrage dans la vie communautaire, ainsi que par des activités connexes comme l'installation de bateaux traditionnels vivants dans le port – initiative qui valorise les savoir-faire et soutient un tourisme insulaire durable.

Le rôle de la mer comme composante vitale du patrimoine local est également central dans l'article « Héritages en strates : bâtir le futur à partir des savoirs du passé » d'Ana Katurić. L'autrice y analyse comment le Centre du corail de Croatie sur l'île de Zlarin va au-delà de l'histoire de la pêche au corail pour devenir un espace d'action climatique, de mémoire culturelle et de création patrimoniale participative. Grâce à des activités co-créatives – allant de la scénographie à la gestion équitable des ressources, en passant par des actions « zéro plastique » – le centre tisse les savoirs scientifiques et artistiques à travers les objets du patrimoine pour construire un avenir culturel et écologique au sein de la communauté.

Ces enjeux se retrouvent aussi dans l'article d'Alexandra Bounia, « Micromuséologie à Lesvos : réfléchir à de grandes idées à partir de 'petits lieux' ». Elle y présente trois musées communautaires sur l'île grecque de Lesvos, consacrés respectivement à la mémoire des réfugiées, à la collecte de résine et au folklore local. Généralement créés par des membres âgé.e.s de la communauté, ces lieux visent à préserver les souvenirs du passé, transmettre des valeurs partagées aux jeunes générations et soutenir le devenir collectif. Ils sont analysés comme des formes de patrimonialisation alternatives, émotionnelles et protectrices. L'autrice interroge : « Comment les savoirs et expertises produits dans ces petites institutions peuvent-ils introduire de nouvelles idées ou perspectives dans des débats très actuels en muséologie ? ». Elle montre que les émotions font partie intégrante des muséologies communautaires, un point qui fait écho à l'article de Widdis et Reisz ouvrant ce volume.

Nous espérons que ce double numéro donnera voix et visibilité aux multiples patrimoines et muséologies insulaires présentées ici et qu'il encouragera de futures recherches dans ce domaine.

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Introducción:

Mar de islas y poética de la relación: repensar la insularidad

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Tell Them
"[…]
tell them we are papaya golden
sunsets bleeding
into a glittering open sea
we are skies uncluttered
majestic in their sweeping land-
scape
we are the ocean
terrifying and regal in its power.
[…]
but most importantly tell them
we don't want to leave
we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands."
(Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, 2011)[11]

Desde una perspectiva europea continental, las islas han sido durante mucho tiempo consideradas como espacios separados y aislados, desconectados entre sí y de su entorno más amplio. Las historias coloniales, así como los movimientos culturales y científicos, han reforzado las fronteras entre islas, pueblos y objetos. Este número doble especial de la *ICOFOM Study Series* propone repensar esta visión tradicional de las islas, reuniendo

11 El poema más conocido de Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, *Tell Them* (2011), advierte sobre las consecuencias del aumento del nivel del mar para los atolones del Pacífico. https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com

contribuciones de todo el mundo que exploran perspectivas alternativas, especialmente desde las regiones del Pacífico y el Caribe, con relación a las islas oceánicas (es decir, aquellas formadas por coral o por erupciones volcánicas submarinas [Deleuze, 2002]). Muchas de estas contribuciones resuenan con el tipo de pensamiento insular expresado en el poema citado anteriormente de la poeta, activista, docente e intérprete de las Islas Marshall, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, que evoca una visión de interconexión entre los pueblos y el océano, así como una resistencia indígena al desplazamiento. El académico tongano-fiyiano Epeli Hau'ofa (1939–2009) ("Our sea of islands", 1994), y el poeta y pensador martiniqués Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) (*Poética de la relación*, 1996) ya habían desarrollado ideas afines sobre la conectividad marítima y la relacionalidad subterránea en contraposición a la separación; un concepto clave que se refleja en muchos de los artículos que siguen.

Los estudios insulares y sus conceptos erróneos han sido modelados por las características distintivas de las islas, en particular su condición de estar rodeadas de agua y su percepción como lugares "remotos" desde una óptica continental. Por ejemplo, el término *insular/insularidad*, derivado del latín, difiere en su uso entre el francés (*insulaire*, donde implica aislamiento físico y mental) y el inglés (donde a veces se asocia con una forma negativa de introspección). De manera similar, las ideas de delimitación asociadas a las islas pueden ser vistas negativamente si se interpretan como formas de encierro. Sin embargo, desde el punto de vista de los isleños, la riqueza de su cultura, su sentido de pertenencia y su cosmovisión (*dùtchas* en gaélico escocés), desmienten las percepciones metropolitanas de "lejanía" (Brown, 2019), y abren caminos hacia la interconectividad.

En el ámbito de los estudios de la memoria, el término *transnacional* genera discursos sobre la memoria colectiva más allá del Estado-nación (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014). Esta noción permite nuevas comprensiones sobre redes de comercio e intercambio que atraviesan fronteras nacionales, así como sobre el concepto de "lo local" dentro de imaginarios transnacionales más amplios (Bond, 2023). En palabras de De Cesari y Rigney, el transnacionalismo "reconoce la importancia de los marcos nacionales junto con el potencial de la producción cultural tanto para reforzarlos como para trascenderlos", lo cual nos invita a estudiar "trayectorias no lineales y temporalidades complejas" desde un marco más abierto (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014, pp. 19, 23). Tomando estos principios como punto de partida para una discusión sobre museos insulares y comunidades patrimoniales, el enfoque transnacional nos impulsa a preguntarnos: ¿cómo funcionan las culturas de la memoria en las islas? ¿Cómo interactúan las narrativas museológicas a escala transnacional, especialmente a lo largo de las fracturas producidas por el colonialismo, dado que "las corrientes cruzadas transnacionales también estaban en el corazón del colonialismo, la esclavitud y otras formas de explotación del capital globalizado, implicando la enredada y violenta asimetría de comunidades racializadas"? (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014, p. 24).

Como se mencionó anteriormente, autores de distintas islas han propuesto que estas son espacios de conexión a través del mar que las rodea. Muchos pueblos isleños, especialmente los del Pacífico, tienen una larga historia de viajes oceánicos multigeneracionales (Lowenthal, 2007). En su influyente artículo "Our sea of islands" (1994), Hau'ofa sostiene que los pueblos del Pacífico no vivían en "islas perdidas en un mar lejano", sino como habitantes de un "mar de islas", desafiando la visión continental dominante. Según él, "los forasteros suelen concebir las islas como espacios separados y confinados, definidos por sus fronteras (nacionales), muchas veces establecidas por dinámicas coloniales y poscoloniales, y por ello pasan por alto su conectividad, heterogeneidad y complejidad" (p. 152). Hau'ofa evoca los mitos, leyendas, tradiciones orales y cosmovisiones de los

pueblos de Oceanía, que integran el océano, el cielo y el inframundo como partes de una Oceanía que no se define por su pequeñez, como sí lo sugiere la mirada continental.

Otros océanos y mares del mundo han servido también como rutas que conectan pueblos y territorios, permitiendo la circulación de bienes tangibles e intangibles. El océano Índico, por ejemplo, ha sido durante siglos una vía comercial que conectaba imperios del África oriental con Asia (Bouchet, 2019; Nativel & Ragoanah, 2007). En el contexto del Caribe, la ruta triangular de comercio fue otro corredor marítimo que transportó no solo personas y mercancías, sino también culturas, historias, prácticas, modos de vida y memorias diversas. A través de esas rutas, bienes materiales e inmateriales se trasladaron de un lugar a otro, más allá de las fronteras nacionales. Para los pueblos esclavizados trasladados desde África occidental al Caribe, estas rutas comerciales dieron lugar a una cultura diaspórica basada en la idea del exilio y la ausencia (Chamoiseau, 2016; Chivallon, 2004; Cottias et al., 2010). Esta conexión mental transoceánica alimentó la noción del "Atlántico negro", que vincula a los pueblos africanos con sus descendientes en las islas caribeñas y en América continental (Gilroy, 1993; véanse también los autores de la *Négritude* francófona).

Las museologías insulares del Caribe tienen una fuerte presencia en este número especial, ya que la historia caribeña no puede separarse del trauma de la esclavitud transatlántica y el colonialismo en las Américas. Diversos autores caribeños han reflexionado sobre el impacto de esta historia traumática en nombre de sus poblaciones. Patrick Chamoiseau describe el exilio y sus consecuencias al crear desde la ausencia, los vacíos de memoria y los rastros mínimos: una "materia de la ausencia" (2016). Édouard Glissant, nacido en Martinica, defendió la idea de una "poética de la relación" para expresar las interrelaciones y los encuentros entre personas, objetos e historias en el Caribe, especialmente con el continente africano, de donde proceden la mayoría de los pueblos caribeños. Utilizó el concepto de *rizoma*[12] como forma de explicar cómo los pueblos del Caribe están interconectados entre sí y con otras regiones del mundo; un concepto que ha sido retomado recientemente por investigadores en museología para criticar tanto las formas de exhibición del arte como para pensar en una museología caribeña y una práctica comunitaria más allá del museo tradicional, vinculado al colonialismo y a la extracción (Keohane, 2023; McGuire, 2023).

En el marco del proyecto Shared Island Stories, la historiadora trinitense Heather Cateau ha propuesto recientemente el concepto de reunir los fragmentos de historias ocultas de las clases medias y trabajadoras entre Escocia y el Caribe, a través de un proyecto archivístico detallado llevado a cabo en ambas orillas del Atlántico (Cateau, 2024). Al igual que Hau'ofa, otros pensadores del Pacífico han redefinido la conexión entre las islas más allá de las fronteras coloniales y han defendido la idea de *Moana Oceania*.[13] Estas reflexiones desde el Pacífico, el Caribe y otras regiones han contribuido a reposicionar a los pueblos isleños en un contexto global, alentando una visión transnacional de las islas y del mundo.

Hoy en día, los patrimonios insulares no conciben al océano como una barrera ni a la tierra como una garantía de seguridad. Como exploran Foley et al. (siguiendo los trabajos de Tsing, 2015; Pugh & Chandler, 2021), los estudios insulares contemporáneos se enfocan en el poder del pensamiento insular más allá del progreso lineal y del desarrollo asociado

12 En botánica, un rizoma es un tallo subterráneo que crece horizontalmente en lugar de verticalmente, produciendo raíces en puntos estratégicos para el crecimiento de nuevas plantas.

13 *Moana* significa "océano" en las lenguas polinesias.

a la modernidad (Foley et al., 2023), enfatizando las relaciones propias de las islas y las prácticas indígenas. Al final concluyen: "Las culturas insulares y la insularidad pueden destacar tanto la movilidad y el movimiento como la profunda conexión con el lugar" (Foley et al., 2023, p. 1809).

Museologías y patrimonios insulares: ¿qué son?

En este contexto, ¿qué tienen en común los patrimonios insulares del mundo? Resulta difícil considerar los patrimonios insulares como una totalidad uniforme, dado lo diversos que son. Sin embargo, como demuestran varios autores en este número especial, los patrimonios insulares de diferentes territorios y trayectorias comparten ciertos puntos en común. De hecho, muchos de ellos han sufrido – y algunos siguen sufriendo – dispersión, desconexión, pérdida, destrucción, desinterés, ausencia de conservación y transmisión, representaciones erróneas y marginación, entre otros problemas.

Durante la colonización y la formación de los Estados-nación, muchas culturas inmateriales fueron prohibidas u olvidadas. Por ejemplo, a numerosas lenguas se les prohibió su uso o se practicaban en secreto. En las últimas décadas, sin embargo, las comunidades insulares han comenzado a defender sus identidades a través de sus culturas y patrimonios. Paralelamente, olas de "coleccionismo insular" (*island collecting*, Longair, 2024) provocaron la dispersión de los patrimonios materiales (véanse los artículos de Widdis & Reisz y de Scuderi en este volumen). Estas colecciones se formaron de diversas maneras, desde donaciones hasta saqueos violentos. A través de su historia, los objetos materiales de las islas circularon por todo el mundo y pasaron a formar parte de colecciones públicas y privadas (Melandri & Guiot, 2021).

Desde la década de 1960, los museos y las comunidades locales han trabajado conjuntamente para redefinir las relaciones de poder, las formas de representación y las narrativas (Peers & Brown, 2003). Como se muestra en este volumen, los proyectos colaborativos, las bases de datos digitales, las exposiciones y las producciones artísticas son herramientas que permiten reconectar los objetos materiales con los descendientes de quienes los crearon. La implantación de sociedades coloniales en este "confeti del imperio" también favoreció la aparición de nuevos objetos patrimoniales: curiosidades, productos comerciales, obras artísticas o decorativas inspiradas en Occidente, artes gráficas, patrimonios militares y religiosos, y restos de naufragios. El patrimonio – o el estatus – de estos objetos, como testigos culturales e históricos, sigue generando interrogantes entre las poblaciones isleñas hoy en día. Estos ejemplos ilustran la pluralidad de los patrimonios insulares, la complejidad de su historia y los desafíos que enfrentan para su valorización contemporánea. ¿Cuáles serían, entonces, las formas adecuadas de compartir estos patrimonios?

Los museos nacionales y municipales de gran escala suelen tener sus orígenes en museos coloniales del siglo diecinueve y veinte y, en consecuencia, a veces conservan narrativas aún marcadas por las historias imperiales. Además, en muchos archipiélagos su número es reducido. Por ejemplo, en el Caribe anglófono, los museos más destacados son el Museo Nacional y Galería de Arte de Puerto España, en Trinidad (fundado en 1892); la Galería Nacional de Jamaica, en Kingston (1974); y la Galería Nacional de Gran Caimán (1996). Estas instituciones, criticadas por Alissandra Cummins por su adhesión a prácticas occidentales y narrativas coloniales (Cummins, 2004), también han sido objeto de análisis desde la perspectiva de la dicotomía naturaleza/cultura en el desarrollo del Museo e Instituto Histórico de Barbados. Sin embargo, la escasez de museos nacionales se compensa

con la predominancia de museos comunitarios e iniciativas patrimoniales de base local, muchas de las cuales pueden considerarse modelos ejemplares de sostenibilidad en los modos de vida insulares (Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke, 2018; Brown et al., 2019; Brown & Caesar, 2020).

En las islas del Pacífico, los museos nacionales han sido reformados desde los años 80, al tiempo que se crearon muchos centros culturales y museos comunitarios para promover y fortalecer las culturas y patrimonios indígenas, como desarrollan Conal McCarthy y Tarisi Vunidilo en este volumen. Las prácticas asociadas a estos distintos modelos de gestión del patrimonio han confluido: los museos nacionales se han visto llamados a integrar perspectivas y saberes indígenas en su trabajo patrimonial. Este es el caso, por ejemplo, en Aotearoa (Nueva Zelanda), donde el Museo Nacional Te Papa Tongarewa se fundó como institución bicultural, con un fuerte enfoque en la cultura maorí, y donde la política Mana Taonga reconoce el valor ancestral de las colecciones para el pueblo maorí. El Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta, en Port Vila (Vanuatu), es otra institución que sitúa a las comunidades del archipiélago en el centro de su labor (Geismar, 2003). No obstante, uno de los grandes desafíos que enfrentan estos museos es la creación de narrativas nacionales que reflejen la diversidad de las sociedades poscoloniales, incluyendo a los pueblos indígenas, las oleadas migratorias del periodo colonial y la expansión capitalista (Bertin, 2020), como demuestra Cassandre Decorce en el caso de Nueva Caledonia en este volumen. El artículo de Marine Vallée, por su parte, expone las dificultades de representar una gran variedad de comunidades dentro de una narrativa nacional común, en el caso de la Polinesia Francesa, compuesta por 118 islas.

Presentación del volumen

Este número especial de la *ICOFOM Study Series* es el resultado de dos conferencias organizadas en 2023 y 2024 por el Comité Internacional de Museología (ICOFOM), en colaboración con diversas instituciones ubicadas en diferentes territorios insulares. Varios de los ensayos provienen de investigaciones realizadas en el marco del proyecto multidisciplinario *Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future* (2022–2027), que plantea una serie de interrogantes sobre las relaciones culturales entre estos archipiélagos.[14] Este proyecto fue motivado, en parte, por evidencias recientes sobre los vínculos de Escocia con la trata transatlántica de esclavos, especialmente en lo que respecta a la compra de islas a través del sistema británico de compensación por esclavitud en el Caribe, así como por un informe del *National Trust for Scotland* sobre las conexiones históricas entre sus propiedades y esta historia transatlántica (MacKinnon y Mackillop, 2020; Melville, 2021). Combinado con intereses académicos ya consolidados sobre sostenibilidad, bienestar y vida insular, ello condujo a la formación de un equipo de investigación inherentemente multidisciplinario, con participantes de campos como la historia, los estudios del patrimonio, el desarrollo sostenible, la historia del arte y los estudios de la memoria.

Las preguntas centrales de este proyecto incluyen: ¿cómo cuestionar las historias oficiales a través de archivos relevantes, revelando historias ocultas de la vida cotidiana? ¿Qué formas de agencia están implicadas en la movilidad y el desplazamiento – por ejemplo, compartir conocimientos como forma de resiliencia? Como uno de sus principales resultados, se celebraron una conferencia internacional y el 47º simposio anual de ICOFOM en la Universidad de St Andrews en junio de 2024, bajo el tema *Transnational Island Museologies* (Brown et al., 2024; *Shared Island Stories*, 2024).

14 Este proyecto de investigación fue seleccionado por el Consejo Europeo de Investigación (ERC), financiado por UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) con la referencia: EP/X023036/1, y está coordinado por la profesora Karen Brown.

Otros artículos incluidos en este volumen provienen de una conferencia internacional celebrada en Nueva Caledonia, organizada conjuntamente por ICOFOM, la Asociación de Museos y Entidades Patrimoniales de Nueva Caledonia (AMEPNC), y la Universidad de Nueva Caledonia.[15] El tema de dicha conferencia fue *Aumentar la visibilidad y el atractivo del patrimonio insular: un desafío museológico del siglo XXI*, que abordó los problemas contradictorios que enfrentan los museos y patrimonios insulares en relación con el aumento del nivel del mar, el cambio climático, y los desafíos de preservación y transmisión. Este encuentro tuvo lugar en octubre de 2023 y se dividió en dos partes: tres días de presentaciones académicas en la Universidad de Nueva Caledonia (Noumea), seguidos de una gira para conocer a profesionales del museo y el patrimonio en las tres provincias del archipiélago, y experimentar herencias tangibles e intangibles in situ.

Ambas conferencias partieron de una misma premisa: ofrecer una visión amplia de las museologías y patrimonios insulares. Quienes trabajamos en este campo reconocemos que las taxonomías creadas por disciplinas hegemónicas occidentales no reflejan con autenticidad las interconexiones profundas entre personas, objetos y entornos – como lo recuerda Conal McCarthy en su ensayo basado en la conferencia magistral que pronunció en la Universidad de St Andrews en junio de 2024.

Los artículos recibidos y seleccionados para este volumen provienen de una amplia gama de disciplinas: museología, historia del arte, historia colonial, estudios de la memoria, estudios del patrimonio y estudios ambientales. Las metodologías empleadas son, necesariamente, interdisciplinarias, transdisciplinarias y multidisciplinarias, con el fin de abordar la complejidad de las historias y patrimonios insulares transnacionales. Los textos abordan subtemas comunes como las narrativas y relaciones de poder que subyacen a los patrimonios insulares. ¿Quién cuenta las historias y quién las controla? ¿Cómo puede el patrimonio insular abrirse a relatos silenciados del imperio? Las comunidades insulares han sido marginadas tanto bajo regímenes coloniales como en el marco de los Estados-nación: desafiar las narrativas nacionales para representar mejor las identidades y patrimonios isleños sigue siendo un reto, como demuestran los ensayos de Nicole Bittencourt y Yi-An Chen sobre los pueblos indígenas ainu en Japón, y el texto de Chen sobre los legados oceánicos de Taiwán, que desafían las perspectivas continentales y sinocéntricas. Estos trabajos nos recuerdan que el patrimonio y los museos pueden ser herramientas poderosas para la construcción identitaria, pero también son instituciones de poder que generan dinámicas de inclusión y exclusión.

Transmisión del saber tradicional: ¿qué está en juego?

La transmisión del saber tradicional fue un eje clave en ambas conferencias. Los estudios de caso presentados en los artículos ilustran la variedad de formas de transmisión vinculadas al patrimonio insular. Las colecciones de objetos y las exposiciones museográficas están lejos de ser los únicos canales para transmitir estos patrimonios a las comunidades y a la sociedad en general. La transmisión intergeneracional – y en particular el papel de las nuevas generaciones – es fundamental, como lo ejemplifica el proyecto *Shared Island Stories* (véanse los artículos de Jamie Allan Brown y Kaye Hall en este volumen). Su contribución, junto con el estudio de caso de Leilani Wong sobre el ecomuseo Te Fare, ofrece una visión general de los distintos actores involucrados en la transmisión del patrimonio insular: jóvenes, ONG, gobiernos, comunidades indígenas y de origen, artistas, profesionales del patrimonio, museos e instituciones afines.

15 Las grabaciones están disponibles en línea: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpyAXibUc3w&list=PLJqRixIMtlnTz_tXddIk7kuY_14-fbmV_.

En última instancia, en ambas conferencias se presentaron diversos enfoques indígenas sobre el aprendizaje, la transmisión y la comprensión del patrimonio, incluyendo el testimonio oral y la experiencia vivida. Estas visiones indígenas permiten cuestionar el modelo de museo heredado del mundo europeo y de la Ilustración. Tanto Conal McCarthy como Tarisi Vunidilo citan el ensayo del académico de origen maorí Hirini Sidney Moko Mead (1983), sobre modelos indígenas de conservación y transmisión del patrimonio en Oceanía. Centros culturales, casas, ecomuseos, museos comunitarios, micromuseologías, entre otros, son modelos adoptados por muchas islas del mundo para ajustarse mejor a las necesidades de sus comunidades de origen (véanse, por ejemplo, los capítulos de Alexandria Bounia y Darko Babić en este volumen). De este modo, estas museologías insulares refuerzan los vínculos con las comunidades locales que participan activamente en el trabajo museístico. También colocan la experiencia y las emociones en el centro de la transmisión, incluso para visitantes externos. Muchos testimonios de culturas isleñas se encuentran actualmente dispersos en colecciones museales a nivel mundial. Proyectos colaborativos, y en ocasiones nuevas tecnologías como bases de datos digitales, se han utilizado para reconectar y promover formas innovadoras de preservar este patrimonio, respetando e involucrando a las comunidades locales. La autoridad compartida y el saber compartido son pasos clave hacia la inclusión de nuevas voces en las colecciones museales (véanse en este volumen los artículos de Barsinas et al., Bertin & Tissandier, Vunidilo).

Pero ¿qué sucede cuando la transmisión se detiene? ¿Cuáles son los riesgos que amenazan al patrimonio insular? Entre ellos se encuentran el declive de las prácticas tradicionales causado por la colonización, las misiones religiosas y la esclavitud; la crisis climática y la subida del nivel del mar; y los desastres naturales. ¿Qué puede hacerse? ¿Cuán resilientes son las islas?

Ante amenazas como el turismo no sostenible, la erosión costera y el aumento del nivel del mar, la digitalización del patrimonio insular se presenta a menudo como una solución. En un mundo globalizado pospandemia, la visibilidad del patrimonio insular ha aumentado gracias a las tecnologías digitales. Sin embargo, los proyectos de digitalización pueden reproducir la mirada turística, que tiene raíces en la administración colonial (Thompson, 2007), una problemática abordada por varios autores de este volumen, incluyendo los provenientes de las Islas Marquesas. ¿Cómo puede la museología dialogar con estas historias y con el crecimiento tecnológico, teniendo en cuenta las fracturas digitales que enfrentan algunas comunidades y la necesidad de facilitar intercambios remotos con el resto del mundo? ¿Serían preferibles otras formas de visibilidad? Además, ¿depende la visibilidad del patrimonio insular del buen funcionamiento del sector turístico? ¿Cuáles son las implicaciones económicas de este esfuerzo por aumentar la visibilidad?

Ante la emergencia climática, los medios de comunicación suelen presentar a las islas como territorios y modos de vida en peligro. A escala internacional, existe un reconocimiento creciente del valor de los saberes indígenas y tradicionales en relación con la resiliencia climática y la preservación de los ecosistemas humanos y biológicos. Sin embargo, aunque se valora cada vez más la diversidad biocultural indígena, también está desapareciendo a un ritmo alarmante. Aproximadamente una décima parte de la población mundial vive en islas (Lowenthal, 2007). Estas cubren “solo el 6,7 % de la superficie terrestre”, pero “albergan cerca del 20 % de la biodiversidad del planeta, y lamentablemente también el 50 % de las especies amenazadas y el 75 % de las extinciones conocidas desde la expansión europea global” (Fernández-Palacios et al., 2021).

Una de las principales motivaciones de este volumen es comprender mejor lo que aporta la transmisión intergeneracional del conocimiento indígena y tradicional a los debates sobre justicia climática, especialmente en lo que respecta al papel de las personas jóvenes. Este enfoque se alinea con una tendencia reciente en los estudios museológicos a involucrarse activamente en la emergencia climática. Por ejemplo, Fiona Cameron, Jennifer Newell, Robert Janes, Richard Sandell y otros han abogado por que los museos "despierten" y se comprometan con la acción climática (Cameron et al., 2012; 2015; Newell, 2017; Janes & Sandell, 2019). Al mismo tiempo, organizaciones de apoyo museológico como el ICOM y NEMO promueven activamente el papel de los museos como aliados en la consecución de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) (McGhee, 2022). Asimismo, han surgido numerosas redes de patrimonio y disciplinas afines para generar capacidades e impulsar una acción climática de impacto en distintos niveles.

Varios artículos seleccionados para este volumen abordan precisamente nuevas formas de pensar el patrimonio insular y la insularidad en relación con la crisis ecológica. Considerando no solo los conceptos del Antropoceno, sino también los mundos más-que-humanos, estos textos se basan en las reflexiones de investigadoras como Fiona Cameron, Kirsten Wehner, Jennifer Newell y Libby Robin, quienes exploran las relaciones entre las personas y la naturaleza en el contexto de los museos, una temática que tradicionalmente ha sido abordada por la antropología (Cameron & Neilson, 2015; Newell et al. [eds.], 2017; Moran, 2017). Por ejemplo, Wehner define la museología ecológica como una forma de pensamiento que combina naturaleza y cultura para desarrollar nuevas formas de entender la interdependencia entre los mundos humanos y no humanos, especialmente en el contexto australiano.

Es en este marco donde este volumen de la *ICOFOM Study Series* espera contribuir con nuevas ideas y ofrecer herramientas de reflexión para el presente y el futuro de los estudios museológicos y patrimoniales.

En este número especial, buscamos generar conocimiento sobre las relaciones entre los saberes ecológicos tradicionales (*Traditional Ecological Knowledge*, TEK) y la museología, reconociendo el valor de los museos y sitios patrimoniales como lugares de investigación que pueden ayudarnos a entender cómo nos hemos adaptado a los cambios climáticos a lo largo del tiempo. Varios artículos aquí reunidos exploran de qué manera ese conocimiento tradicional está influyendo en la academia y en las políticas públicas desde una perspectiva global. Al mismo tiempo, la transmisión intergeneracional del conocimiento tradicional ayuda a salvaguardar identidades y memorias que corren el riesgo de perderse. Los museos, sitios patrimoniales y centros culturales pueden ser puntos de referencia para este trabajo, al ofrecer espacios donde personas de distintas generaciones se relacionan con su patrimonio, fortaleciendo así el sentido de identidad y de pertenencia.

Con miras a desarrollar una museología ecológica en tiempos de crisis climática, planteamos las siguientes preguntas: ¿Qué nos enseñan los patrimonios indígenas y los saberes tradicionales en contextos rurales, costeros e insulares sobre la resiliencia frente al cambio climático, la pérdida de biodiversidad y la erosión costera? ¿Cómo pueden los museos y sitios patrimoniales trabajar con la biodiversidad local, las lenguas y los elementos singulares del territorio para fomentar la resiliencia local? ¿Cuáles son los desafíos y oportunidades de participar en los debates sobre sostenibilidad desde las humanidades ambientales, especialmente en relación con los imaginarios oceánicos? ¿Qué aporta la transmisión intergeneracional de los saberes indígenas y tradicionales a las discusiones sobre justicia climática, en particular respecto al papel de la juventud?

Los artículos incluidos en este volumen fueron seleccionados por seis integrantes de los comités científico y organizador de las conferencias celebradas en Nueva Caledonia y Escocia, representando una diversidad de territorios y disciplinas. Nuestra intención es que este número constituya una contribución sólida al campo de los estudios sobre el patrimonio y las museologías insulares, complementando la colección de publicaciones de ICOFOM enfocadas en la descolonización de la museología y en territorios poco estudiados (como la museología caribeña, por ejemplo).

En lo que sigue, los artículos han sido organizados en torno a tres grandes ejes temáticos: Coleccionismo colonial y archivo – Contestar la historia; Repensar las museologías insulares indígenas; Transmisión intergeneracional y ecologías insulares.

Coleccionismo colonial y archivo – Contestar la historia

El coleccionismo colonial constituye el punto de partida de los primeros artículos de este volumen. El texto de Briony Widdis y Emma Reisz, "Coleccionar la ambigüedad: objetos y las postvidas del imperio en la isla de Irlanda", cuestiona las narrativas en torno a los legados del imperio en Irlanda (especialmente Irlanda del Norte), mediante una combinación innovadora de biografía de objetos, autoetnografía e historia "no pública". Al mostrar cómo los objetos acumulan capas de historia a lo largo del tiempo, las autoras exploran el papel del imperio en la configuración de las divisiones internas de Irlanda, un país que apenas comienza a abordar su pasado colonial. Señalan que la coproducción por sí sola no basta para enfrentar los desafíos de la descolonización en contextos de memorias colectivas profundamente arraigadas, y proponen que la autoetnografía puede ayudar a revelar los enredos con el imperialismo global y la explotación colonial. Los museos, sugieren, pueden transformarse de ser depósitos de historias contestadas a plataformas para la reflexión, la educación y el intercambio.

El artículo de Maria Chiara Scuderi, "De Borneo a Leicester: enredos coloniales en la colección de "artesanías" de Dryan", examina la circulación global y la reutilización, en el contexto comercial y educativo de Leicester (Reino Unido), de objetos artesanales provenientes de la isla de Borneo en el siglo XX. La autora se basa en nuevas fuentes de archivo sobre la colección de Harry Peach para analizar cómo la fotografía fue utilizada para difundir y construir conocimientos sobre la cultura material de Borneo.

Las colecciones y archivos dispersos también son fundamentales en el contexto del inventario del patrimonio kanak disperso, un conjunto de objetos preservados en museos de todo el mundo y registrados en una base de datos liderada por el Museo de Nueva Caledonia. Este proceso es descrito por Marion Bertin y Marianne Tissandier en su artículo "El inventario del patrimonio kanak disperso: museología transnacional y territorios entrelazados". Las autoras demuestran cómo esta base de datos constituye un ejemplo de museología transnacional en varios niveles: registra colecciones kanak dispersas en museos, circula los datos e interactúa con otras bases de datos internacionales. También destacan su importancia local, ya que devuelve información sobre las colecciones a las comunidades y ofrece mayor espacio para el saber kanak.

El artículo de Vainui Barsinas, Jean-Daniel Tokainiua Devatine, Vaiana Giraud, Hélène Guiot, Tamara Maric, Magali Mélandri y Marine Vallée, "Prácticas colaborativas y transmisión de conocimientos materiales e inmateriales en la Polinesia Francesa", es un excelente ejemplo de metodologías colaborativas aplicadas al estudio de colecciones disper-

sas. El estudio se centra en abanicos tradicionales polinesios conservados en el Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac. El proyecto, titulado Rara'a, busca cuestionar y descolonizar los saberes museológicos sobre estas colecciones, descentralizar los enfoques de recolección y facilitar el acceso a los descendientes de quienes crearon los abanicos. Este proyecto aborda, en ese sentido, la soberanía indígena en el contexto de las colecciones y los datos.

Repensar las museologías insulares indígenas

Esta sección comienza con el artículo de Conal McCarthy, "Aprender de las museologías del Pacífico: patrimonio, cultura y medioambiente en las islas de Moana Oceania". Basándose en investigaciones y ejemplos procedentes de museologías indígenas y oceánicas, McCarthy analiza casos en Australia y Aotearoa Nueva Zelanda para demostrar que los pueblos de Moana Oceania ya han trazado caminos para proteger nuestro patrimonio y nuestro planeta. Al trascender el modelo tradicional de museo centrado en objetos y adoptar un enfoque relacional que abarca el cuidado del "territorio", la cultura y las personas, esta museología fomenta una movilización comunitaria con raíces profundas frente a la crisis climática.

Esta idea se desarrolla aún más en el artículo de Tarisi Vunidilo, "Museos y centros culturales del Pacífico: redefinir e indigenizar los espacios museales al estilo del Pacífico", donde destaca el papel de los museos en la satisfacción de las necesidades comunitarias a través de métodos educativos tradicionales polinesios pensados para todas las generaciones. Vunidilo subraya que en el Pacífico, los modelos más eficaces no son los heredados del colonialismo occidental, sino los centros culturales, que sostienen la resiliencia de culturas vivas y entornos amenazados mediante prácticas colaborativas. El Centro Cultural de Vanuatu, por ejemplo, se concibe como un espacio vivo que promueve prácticas como el arte de los dibujos sobre arena incluso fuera de las islas remotas. Las comunidades indígenas no solo se benefician de estos espacios, sino que también actúan como formadoras.

En "Narrativas y representaciones del patrimonio isleño: navegando por las exposiciones ainu en Hokkaido", Nicolle Bittencourt y Yi-An Chen también abordan la representación de las culturas indígenas, en este caso la del pueblo ainu en la isla de Hokkaido, Japón. A través del análisis de cuatro exposiciones insulares, las autoras exploran formas de expresión cultural y de agencia indígena. Con una lectura crítica de la museología desde la teoría poscolonial, examinan las dificultades que enfrentan las instituciones, incluido el museo nacional y el parque, para abordar los legados del colonialismo interno, las luchas actuales del pueblo ainu y la necesidad de una memoria nacional más inclusiva. Su texto subraya el papel que juegan los museos en la producción de relatos e identidades nacionales, ya sea mediante la inclusión o la exclusión.

El artículo de Yi-An Chen, "Narrativas emancipadoras: repensar Taiwán a través del Museo Nacional de Historia de Taiwán", se enfoca en la exposición *Taiwán Oceánico*, presentada en dicha institución, para abrir un debate más amplio sobre la identidad nacional en el cruce entre el Pacífico y China continental.

También centrado en una comunidad marginada, el artículo de Leilani Wong, "Los museos como acción social: promoviendo la equidad en comunidades marginalizadas", ofrece un estudio de caso sobre el ecomuseo Te Fare Natura ("la casa de la naturaleza") en Moorea, Polinesia Francesa. El proyecto representa un camino de empoderamiento para más de 400 jóvenes Ma'ohi que han salido de contextos de pobreza y exclusión bajo una administración

colonial dominante, mediante la recuperación de saberes sobre los ecosistemas tierra-mar en un entorno insular frágil. Al fomentar prácticas y cosmovisiones tradicionales a través de modos de aprendizaje no occidentales – especialmente la transmisión oral—, el museo permite a los jóvenes reconocerse como herederos y guardianes de su entorno, iniciando así procesos de emancipación. Aplicado al contexto polinesio, este modelo demuestra cómo un museo puede convertirse en un puente entre el conocimiento y la comunidad.

El estudio de la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (París, Francia), presentado por Cassandre Decorce en su artículo "La exposición como emanación de una palabra: simbolismo y puesta en escena en la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie", ofrece un ejemplo de movilización de los sentidos en la escenografía. La exposición se basa en metáforas kanak como la importancia de la palabra, lo invisible, los caminos y los pasos, e integra a las demás comunidades que habitan el archipiélago dentro del proceso de construcción identitaria y nacional de Nueva Caledonia. Más allá de la exposición misma, Decorce destaca el papel crucial de las personas que trabajan entre bastidores, como la directora de la institución. Ser una "casa" en lugar de un "museo" invita a repensar los modelos museales: el patrimonio puede también desempeñar un papel diplomático fuera de su territorio de origen.

Por último, el artículo "Recuperar la voz de nuestros objetos: prácticas museales y reivindicaciones culturales en el *fenua ènata*", redactado por Guillaume Molle, Marine Vallée, Anatauarii Tamarii, Nestor Ohu, Ranka Aunoa y Joseph Vaatete, aborda temas centrales del volumen, como la reapropiación del saber y del patrimonio por parte de las comunidades de origen. A partir de ejemplos de las Islas Marquesas (Polinesia Francesa), los autores destacan el papel de los museos para "mantener vivos a los objetos" – es decir, dotados de significado para las comunidades – y conservarlos en el archipiélago en lugar de exportarlos. Presentan museos comunitarios concebidos para y por los habitantes.

En contraste, el artículo de Marine Vallée y Tamara Maric, "Transmisión, archipiélagos y públicos: el museo renovado de Tahití", analiza la nueva museografía y los relatos presentados en el Te Fare Iamanaha – Museo de Tahití y sus Islas, reabierto en marzo de 2023 en la capital administrativa de la Polinesia Francesa. Los principales desafíos de esta renovación museográfica eran integrar una perspectiva más polinesia sobre las colecciones y la historia (en contraste con una visión europea) y representar de forma justa los cinco archipiélagos que componen la Polinesia Francesa. Una pregunta clave atraviesa su reflexión: ¿para quién son los museos? ¿Y cómo pueden transmitir saberes y lenguas tanto a las comunidades como a los visitantes externos?

Transmisión intergeneracional y ecologías insulares

El desarrollo de capacidades profesionales y la reconexión cultural están en el centro del artículo de Jamie Allan Brown y Kaye R. N. Hall, "Mareas de cambio: juventud, museos y patrimonio frente a la emergencia climática". A través del estudio de un intercambio juvenil entre Barbados y las islas Hébridas Exteriores de Escocia, dentro del proyecto Shared Island Stories, los autores defienden el "potencial transformador de las iniciativas dirigidas por jóvenes". Subrayan el creciente activismo político de la juventud y su familiaridad con la tecnología digital para mostrar cómo comunidades profundamente afectadas por el cambio climático – a través del aumento del nivel del mar o la pérdida de biodiversidad – y unidas por legados coloniales y extractivos pueden compartir ideas y prácticas para construir futuros más sostenibles. La participación en talleres sobre plantas tradicionales y saberes ecológicos en ambos países se presentó como una poderosa herramienta de cambio hacia comportamientos más conscientes del entorno.

Este tema es desarrollado con mayor profundidad por Hannah Reid Ford en su artículo "Reactivar saberes ambientales tradicionales para reforzar la conciencia botánica". Analizando el caso de las Islas Caimán, la autora articula un enfoque basado en archivo y etnografía para pensar en la "ceguera botánica" y en la pérdida paralela de biodiversidad y cultura – lo que denomina "diversidad biocultural"—. Propone revivir la conciencia botánica a través de programas museísticos educativos como una manera de fortalecer el vínculo con la naturaleza y promover actitudes proambientales.

Estas dos contribuciones se alinean con uno de los ejes centrales de este número: el papel de los museos – especialmente los museos pequeños, locales, comunitarios, ecomuseos o micromuseos – en el fomento de la sostenibilidad cultural mediante la conexión viva entre pasado y presente, la preservación de memorias personales y colectivas, y el aprendizaje intergeneracional en torno a los saberes tradicionales y la crisis climática. Esta cuestión es también desarrollada por Darko Babić en su ensayo "El Museo de Construcción Naval en Madera de Betina: un pequeño paso para la museología, un gran paso para la comunidad local", centrado en este museo galardonado en la isla de Betina (Croacia). Nacido de una iniciativa comunitaria, el museo se distingue por su sostenibilidad local, sus colecciones, su museo al aire libre, su arraigo comunitario y las actividades conexas, como la presencia de barcos tradicionales en el puerto. Esta iniciativa ayuda a preservar el saber hacer y a promover un turismo insular sostenible.

El rol del mar como elemento esencial del patrimonio local también es central en el artículo de Ana Katurić, "Herencias en capas: construir el futuro a partir del conocimiento del pasado". La autora analiza cómo el Centro del Coral de Croacia, en la isla de Zlarin, trasciende la historia de la pesca de coral para convertirse en un espacio de acción climática, memoria cultural y creación patrimonial participativa. A través de actividades co-creativas – que incluyen desde la escenografía hasta la gestión sostenible de recursos y políticas de "cero plásticos"—, el centro entrelaza el conocimiento científico y artístico para imaginar un futuro cultural y ecológico junto con la comunidad local.

Estas cuestiones también se encuentran en el artículo de Alexandra Bounia, "Micromuseología en Lesbos: pensar en grande desde 'lugares pequeños'". Bounia presenta tres museos comunitarios de la isla griega de Lesbos, dedicados a la memoria de los refugiados, la recolección de resina y el folclore local. Generalmente fundados por miembros mayores de la comunidad, estos museos buscan preservar recuerdos del pasado, transmitir valores compartidos a las generaciones más jóvenes y fortalecer la construcción de un futuro colectivo. Se analizan como formas alternativas, afectivas y protectoras de patrimonialización. La autora se pregunta: "¿Cómo pueden los conocimientos y competencias generados en estas pequeñas instituciones ofrecer nuevas ideas o perspectivas en debates actuales de la museología?" Bounia muestra que las emociones son parte integral de las museologías comunitarias, en sintonía con el artículo de Widdis y Reisz que abre este volumen.

Esperamos que este número doble ofrezca visibilidad y voz a los múltiples patrimonios y museologías insulares aquí presentados, y que inspire futuras investigaciones en esta área.

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Papers
Artículos
Articles

Part I:
Colonial Collecting and the Archive —Contesting Histories

Collecting ambiguity: Objects and the afterlives of empire on the island of Ireland

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Abstract

This paper considers material culture as a prism through which to understand lived experiences of colonialism and empire in Northern Ireland and suggests that examining connections to meaningful objects both inside and outside museums provides a powerful tool for considering how empire has been understood and made personal. We consider privately held possessions, symbols in the landscape and the public materiality of empire as represented in museum collections, bringing together public history and anthropology to argue that the afterlives of colonialism in Northern Ireland reveal not only the place of empire in shaping the island of Ireland's divisions but also unexpected shared experiences and narratives. Three theoretical perspectives can assist in creating new museological engagements with contested histories: object biography, autoethnography and what we call 'non-public' history.

Résumé

Collecter l'ambiguïté : Objets et héritages de l'empire sur l'île d'Irlande. Cet article considère la culture matérielle comme un prisme permettant de comprendre les expériences vécues du colonialisme et de l'empire en Irlande du Nord. Il suggère que l'examen des liens avec des objets porteurs de sens, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur des musées, constitue un outil puissant pour réfléchir à la manière dont l'empire a été compris et approprié de manière personnelle. Nous examinons les possessions privées, les symboles présents dans le paysage et la matérialité publique de l'empire telle qu'elle est représentée dans les collections muséales, en croisant histoire publique et anthropologie. Nous soutenons que les héritages du colonialisme en Irlande du Nord révèlent non seulement le rôle de l'empire dans la formation des divisions de l'île d'Irlande, mais aussi des expériences et des récits partagés inattendus. Trois perspectives théoriques peuvent contribuer à de nouveaux

engagements muséologiques avec des histoires contestées : la biographie des objets, l'autoethnographie et ce que nous appelons l'histoire « non publique ».

From one perspective, the photo below (figure 1) is a simple tourist snap. But it also hints at family entanglements with empire and at the perspectives and connections linking Northern Ireland with the wider world. Taken by an unidentified member of one of our families (Widdis), close to Cairo in about 1964, the photo shows people riding on camels beside a pyramid. Depicting the camel owners walking whilst the protagonists ride and taken from an elevated position (perhaps from another camel), this evokes ideas about white supremacy as well as Western involvement in archaeological pillage and the Grand Tour dating to the eighteenth century.



Figure 1. Slide photo taken by a member of Widdis' family, close to Cairo, c. 1964. © Briony Widdis

In this article we propose that personal memorabilia such as this provides museological routes into exploring complex and contested ideas around empire and decolonisation, and their meanings in Northern Ireland today. Until recently, research on the symbolic value to Northern Irish identities of material culture from the colonial past was limited (Widdis et al., 2025 forthcoming). In our research, we draw on the "cultural biography of things" and "object biography" approach (Joy, 2009; Kopytoff, 1986), as well as on autoethnography (Holman Jones, 2005). We also read popular narratives and public histories of empire against the grain (Moody & Small, 2009) to consider how objects associated with empire have been made sense of by institutions, communities and individuals. We attempt to draw out complexities and ambiguities around private and public objects and collecting in Northern Ireland associated with empire and to explore the potential of working with objects to move beyond simplistic narratives of identity and imperial meanings.

As Gosden and Marshall (1999) argue, objects "often have the capability of accumulating histories, so that the present significance of an object derives from the person or events to which it is connected" (p. 170). This perspective on objects is both concrete and radically destabilising. It is concrete in the sense that an object biography perspective directs attention to the materiality of an object and its unique and tangible journey through the world. This perspective, however, also rejects the possibility that an object can have a single meaning. Instead, it insists that by "accumulating histories", an object must be in a state of narrative and semantic superposition, attached to multiple stories and meanings.

This openness to multiple stories enables objects to reveal both shared and contrasting experiences and narratives of the role of empire in shaping Ireland's divisions. Although Northern Ireland is often understood simply as a divided society, binary categorisations are inadequate for understanding how the island of Ireland's increasingly diverse and complex societies perceive and relate to the past. Remaining part of the UK in 1922 when the rest of Ireland became independent, Northern Ireland has an especially complex relationship with British imperialism. Its history can be variously understood through narratives surrounding active participation in empire and of active resistance to imperialism, as well as through histories of colonialism and migration.

Rather than a traditional museum perspective that might treat visitors as passive audiences, we adopt a public history perspective to consider equally how the public participates in representing the past in Northern Ireland – both within the public sphere and also in contexts of narrative resistance that Nancy Fraser calls "counterpublics" (1990, p. 61). This broader perspective is, we suggest, essential to understanding the use of the past in Northern Ireland. We are interested also in what we term *non-public history* – the familial, private, intimate and emotional dimensions of how history is remembered, understood and experienced. This article investigates how material objects can open up a non-public history space that goes beyond the traditional discourses of the public and counterpublic spheres in Northern Ireland to encompass more personal perspectives and, ultimately, more complex and disruptive perspectives.

This work draws on our previous individual work on colonial visualities in our studies of photographs (Widdis, 2018; Reisz, 2024; Widdis, 2024) and our autoethnographic engagement with them. In our recent work, we have sought to engage collaboratively with others to investigate how visual material culture triggers memories and representations of colonialism. In so doing, we seek to amplify community voices, connecting expertise and knowledge that exists outside the cultural institution and the academy. Having revisited our own connections to these subjects, we feel that it is important to steer away from always writing in the third person, acknowledging our own subjective engagement as well as prioritising the self-expression of others who have not traditionally been heard.

The memorialisation of empire in Northern Ireland

Outside Belfast City Hall stands a statue of Frederick Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood (1826-1902), first Marquess of Dufferin and Ava and prominent colonial administrator. The statue is described by Annie Tindley as "almost comically ornate" (Tindley, 2021, p. 4). In Northern Ireland, encounters with empire remain an everyday experience, including in the form of memorials. The statue of Dufferin is among the most prominent of these given its size, location and the historical profile of its subject. The statue shows Dufferin under a stone umbrella, with Star of India and Order of St Patrick medals on his chest. At

his feet, two figures exotically personify places important to his career: one is a vision, donned in a fur cap and snowshoes, of Canada where he was governor general (1872-88), and the other, wearing a turban, is of India where he was governor general and viceroy (1884-88).

At the Irish seat of the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava – Clandeboye Estate near Bangor, County Down – is a further family monument, Helen's Tower, commissioned by Frederick Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood in tribute to his mother, Helen Selina Sheridan (1807-1867) (see HB23/06/009, 1975). Originally captioned "Gamekeeper's Tower" in Burn's drawings, Helen's Tower blends Romantic styles with the materials of empire, in Harold Nicolson's words "mingling the living savour of an Irish bothy with the dead scent of closed rooms, of Victorian hardwood, of camphor and of decaying brocades" (quoted in Howley, 1993, p. 56). In Thiepval, France, is a close replica of Helen's Tower. This Ulster Tower, built on land given to the Government of Northern Ireland by the French in 1921, is near the front lines where thousands of men of the 36th Ulster Division, many of whom had trained at Clandeboye in the shadow of Helen's Tower, lost their lives in a tragic charge on 1 July 1916 (Moore, 2016, p. 110). The Ulster Tower, therefore, powerfully evokes memories of the Somme, especially in Protestant areas where this is reflected in street murals (see figure 2). A symbolic line of descent can be traced through these monuments, linking them as polysemic motifs, both of sacrifices to British imperialism and in a world war, and of identity in present-day Northern Ireland.

Irish republican movements have long-standing links with other anticolonial struggles globally (Silvestri, 2009), and these too are memorialised in the built environment of Northern Ireland. In the late 20th century, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) developed links with movements in places like Zimbabwe and South Africa, and brought arms into Ireland through connections with Libya (English, 2004, pp. 187–222). Those links are also reflected on the streets of Belfast in the form of murals that Neil Jarman (1988) calls "one of the most dynamic media for symbolic expression in the north of Ireland" (Jarman, 1998). Especially since the war in Gaza that began in 2023, Palestinian freedom has been a resonant theme for mural-painters; and the Palestinian flag appears widely in both urban and rural locations. The republican movement has also supported many less familiar anti-colonial causes, as exemplified in murals at Divis Street on the "peace wall" that divides Catholic from Protestant areas (Extramural Activity, 2017).

As well as drawing symbolic links between the one and the many, public memorials have the capacity to reach across geographical boundaries and to broaden viewers' focus from local to less local concerns. For Dominic Bryan, "cultural transmission, as part of group identities, takes place within a very localized and negotiated context ... but also in a much broader field whereby historical narratives are central to legitimizing political positions" (Bryan, 2022, p. 64). Monuments in the Northern Ireland landscape are undergoing a process of transition, and their meanings – given that this transition is postcolonial as well as cultural – are subject to ongoing debates that risk disrupting authorised heritage discourse (Smith, 2006) about shared traditions constructed through integrationist approaches taken during the peace process (McGrattan et al., 2024).



Figure 2. Mural showing the Ulster Tower at Thiepval in connection with the Battle of the Somme in 1916, at Donegall Road, Belfast, in October 2024. Image credit: Briony Widdis.

Museum decolonisation in Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland

In the museum sector in Northern Ireland, there has been a particular emphasis on developing decolonial practice since 2020 (National Museums NI, 2024; Widdis et al., 2025 forthcoming) and the Irish Museums Association has recently formed a decolonisation working group. For the UK Museums Association, "decolonising practice challenges legacies of oppression and calls for an honest and accurate reappraisal of colonial history" (MA, 2021). This is a particularly complex task in Ireland and Northern Ireland, where museums have in the past been reluctant to present narratives of the island's contested histories (Crooke, 2008). At present, there is no agreed definition of what "decolonisation" might mean in a heritage context on the island of Ireland, and, indeed, the universal relevance of the term itself is disputed (Brulon Soares & Witcomb, 2022).

The bordered separation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, together with the high degree of cross-fertilisation between the cultures of Ireland and those of Great Britain, make the island a useful source of case studies for how "museum decolonisation" might be interpreted in post-partition states. As alluded to above, there is a long historiographical tradition showing that, at the turn of the 20th century, Ireland's postcolonial identities continued to be moulded by lived experiences and inherited memories connected with its former roles within the British Empire and, later, British Commonwealth. At the same time, Ireland's presents have been shaped by social and political conflicts connected with successive occupations and settlements since the 12th century (Howe, 2000; Mitchell, 2000; Kenny, 2004; Smyth, 2006; Jeffery, 2009; Miller, 2014; O'Leary, 2019; McVeigh & Rolston, 2021). The fact that Ireland was not only a colony, but was also central to 'making' the British Empire, has recently been confirmed beyond all reasonable contradiction by Jane Ohlmeyer (2023).

Deeply politicised debates surrounding the colonial past within Ireland ensured that, until recently, decolonial actions in the museum and heritage sectors on either side of the border were sporadic and were driven by isolated responses to their ethical obligations (ICOM, 2017; Museums Association, 2016) and legal frameworks (see Bradley, 2024) rather than forming part of a cohesive movement. Since 2020, however, powerful external influences including Black Lives Matter, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign and debates on UK government museum policies (GOV.UK, 2023; Museums Association, 2021) have accelerated interest in the question of what it means to be a decolonial museum on the island of Ireland. Especially in Northern Ireland where, although a devolved matter, state-produced museum policy is strongly influenced by that of the UK (MA, 2022), this interest has led to sector professionals learning from precedents and guidance produced in Great Britain, including the National Trust's 2020 report on its properties' links with enslavement (Huxtable et al., 2020), the UK Museums Association's decolonising principles (MA, 2021; Widdis, 2021) and repatriation guidelines from Arts Council England (ACE, 2023).

Across Ireland, the growing momentum around decolonisation has also been influenced by increasing public understanding of and discourse on the complexities of Irish roles in colonialism, which in turn have been influenced not only by broader scholarship and public attention on race relations and social justice but also by collaborations between state, grant-aiding, educational and cultural institutions (Community Relations Council, 2017; Department of Foreign Affairs, n.d.; Horne et al., 2021) as well as university-driven research such as the Trinity College Dublin Colonial Legacies project (Trinity College

Dublin, n.d.). These have illuminated discussions on the material expression of Ireland's contributions to British imperialism in the form of collections. There is increasing research, too, on Ireland's complicity in systems of colonial exploitation and enslavement (O'Kane & O'Neill, 2023).

Academic, museum and public history conferences as well as their published outputs (McBride & Nic Dháibhéid, 2020; Nic Dháibhéid et al., 2021; West Cork History Festival, 2020; Widdis et al., 2025 forthcoming) have provided space for critical reflection on colonialism's impacts and afterlives. Public awareness has also been elevated by high profile stories of realised and potential repatriations, such as the return of cranial fragments from Trinity to Inishbofin (Hennessy & Numen, 2023; Hussein et al., 2022; TCD, n.d.), of human remains from National Museums NI to Hawai'i (Meredith, 2022), of stolen bronzes from the National Museum of Ireland to Benin (Holmes, 2021), and by the establishment by the Government of Ireland of a Restitution and Repatriation Advisory Committee (Heritage Council, n.d.). At the same time, museums have increasingly sought to mainstream Global Majority voices and open pathways for self-representation by more recent immigrants (Allen, 2023; Morakinyo, 2021; National Museums NI, 2024; O'Brien, 2024; Stoneman et al., 2021; White Hamilton, 2024; Widdis, 2022; Widdis et al., 2022; Wright, 2024).

Together, these factors are providing critical momentum moving the museum sector across the island of Ireland toward more meaningful contributions to national and cross-border conversations about the colonial past and are building on more inclusive discourse on the nature of Irish and Northern Irish identities in the 21st century (see for example Mackin, 2005; Scroope, 2022; Siung, 2011, 2024; Siung & Sunderland Bowe, 2021).

Creative engagement and co-production

Given the immediately political context for this work, it is not surprising that museum activities are still taking place in an environment of caution, especially in Northern Ireland (see for example Crowdy, 2021). At the Ulster Museum in Belfast, Global Majority voices are present primarily in the *Inclusive Global Histories* exhibition focusing on ethnographic collections and are less visible in other exhibitions despite their dynamic and long-standing presence in Northern Ireland. National Museums NI has recently taken steps to address this by introducing "inclusive global histories" label tagging in display cases throughout the building, exploring the complexities of identity simultaneously within three different research frameworks: Northern Ireland politics now, histories of collecting and imperialism in the past. National Museums NI's inclusive global histories approach, now extended to other museums, focuses on providing creative engagement opportunities to communities to collaboratively explore the meanings of objects (e.g., National Museums NI, 2024; Wright, 2024).

Co-production, understood as creating "museum spaces where people can come, interact and touch as well as contribute to and shape exhibitions and collections" (Graham, 2016) has been a valuable methodology for museums seeking to integrate contributor voices more deeply into their practice. Writing on young people's responses to an exhibition on racial diversity, Kaja Hannedatter Sontum shows that co-production involves negotiation between participants, and between participants and the institution, making room for competing beliefs and sometimes needing the museum to acknowledge participants' resistance to organisational objectives. While museums can provide space for conversa-

tions surrounding, and raise questions about, racialised classifications, visitors blend their understanding of curatorial messages with their previous experiences of societal categorisations in the learning that they take away from the museum (Sontum, 2019).

Internationally, co-production has become an important method for museums seeking to decolonise. As Helen Graham (2012)limit-attitude has noted, it can be used by museums to help balance adherence to governmental cultural policies with meaningful community engagement and so to press against traditional hegemonic frameworks. Co-production, therefore, supports museums in negotiating their roles in society, including within the context of state narratives. However, within Northern Ireland, few museums have used explicit co-production in their decolonising work, perhaps because of that disruptive potential. Moreover, as Dominique Bouchard (2024) has argued, the use of co-production to support museum decolonisation is fraught with ethical complexities. A collaboration between an institution and contributors whose voices that institution has traditionally excluded is inherently unequal. Contributors may be asked to focus on potentially traumatising subject matter while assisting an institution's reckoning with its own history and positionality, reinforcing the power imbalance that museum decolonisation and co-production both seek to redress.

Co-production around museum decolonisation that is based on meaningful partnership is likely to lead away from the museum's organisational preoccupations and back to those of the contributors, requiring contributors' own identities and histories to be centred as much – or more than – those of the museum and its collections. What happens, though, when a museum wants to ask an individual to produce knowledge about their own identity? Co-production alone does not answer the challenge of how to empower one person to explore their own worldview in a way that can be shared with others while also remaining individual and undiluted.

Autoethnography and museology

To respond to this, Widdis in 2021 developed a method of object-based engagement intended to support this process of reflection. To return to Gosden and Marshall's idea of objects as "accumulating histories", we consider now how, in Northern Ireland, material culture can be used to recall people and events of the colonial past. An object-biographical approach that investigates the histories of objects as they have passed through disparate hands is essential to reconstitute and, therefore, to understand the stories of objects and how they came to be removed from their makers and places of origin. An object biography approach also provides an understanding of how people, including makers and collectors, have interacted with objects throughout their lifecycle, creating layers of meaning that may be added to through the objects' interactions with institutions, communities and individuals (Larson et al., 2007; Pitt Rivers Museum, n.d.). We are furthermore superimposing two other anthropological insights onto this object-biographical approach: firstly, the understanding that material culture can become symbolic of identities and, secondly, the method of participant autoethnography that we have developed specifically for examining perspectives on colonialism and empire.

Autoethnography presents one possible approach to engaging with this ethical imperative, enabling communities to direct their own narratives by blending autobiography and autoethnography to place personal experiences in cultural context (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography "makes the personal political" (Holman Jones, 2005, pp. 763-791), allow-

ing individuals to situate their own experiences within broader critical frameworks and interrogate collective memory. It privileges the voice of the participant, amplifying their perspective, although it can potentially obscure broader historical realities (Chang, 2016; Wall, 2008). It is recognised for its integrity and transparency (Holman Jones, 2005), and therefore, as with writing in the first person in other genres, can be used to build patchworks of understanding, placing lived experiences – including those that have been marginalised – side by side to understand how these have been entangled with global imperialism and colonial exploitation (Boon, 2019; Hartman, 2021). This approach underpinned Widdis's doctoral research (2020) in which she used autoethnography to reflect on inherited "colonial objects", bridging individual experience and institutional perspectives.

Participant autoethnography was then used by Widdis and Reisz in the Museums, Empire and Northern Irish Identities (MENII) project (2021) to examine how people in Northern Ireland remember colonialism and empire, how they relate to these as historical themes and how these themes connect with Northern Irish identities; and to test the uses of the method for examining these themes in ways that address division on the island of Ireland. A semi-structured question schedule was used in participant interviews asking about personal experiences and feelings toward colonialism, the British Empire, migration and identity; about lifetime experiences of British Empire symbols, their locations and personal or familial connections to colonies; about perspectives on Ireland's and Northern Ireland's colonial statuses, both in the past and present, and for their reactions to and reflections on these contexts; and about artefacts that people associate with colonialism, both in museums and in their private lives.

Since 2023, Reisz and Widdis have been building on this research through the MENII Memories, MENII Voices (MMMV) public engagement project, developing and sharing best practices to explore how communities in Northern Ireland and Ireland experience, remember and feel connected to heritage and histories associated with colonialism and the British Empire. This work is rooted in close partnership with the intercultural arts charity ArtsEkta and with the Irish Museums Association, as well as support from an advisory group of community and museum sector experts. In MMMV, through autoethnographic interviews, workshops and creative arts, we invited community participants to share their reflections on their identities, experiences and the colonial past as they understand it, both in Ireland and globally. Drawing on the experience from MENII, we anticipated that the autoethnographic process might prompt participants to reflect on their histories and on Northern Ireland's histories in personal and unique ways.

We understand the space that the participants occupied as non-public history, sited at one remove from the established narratives of public and counterpublic histories in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, memory is often entangled with familiar understandings of history to form "collective memories [which] provide interpretations and representations of the past that are recognised as legitimate by the group" (McAuley, 2017, p. 97). The autoethnographic method encourages participants to reflect afresh on both memory and public history to generate unique personal understandings of the past. The resulting materials were gathered in a website at http://mmmv.org and in an exhibition at Belfast Central Library in the summer of 2024, which is expected to tour in 2025.

The MENII and MMMV research added new layers of meaning to our understanding of the material culture of empire, using objects to discuss diverse perspectives on colonialism, revealing that some respondents found the subject to be troubling and even trauma-

tising while others had positive feelings about it. Most discussed with ease the question of whether Ireland was a colony and were interested both in how Ireland's role in the empire is refracted by museum collections and in expressing their own views on colonialism and imperialism. Through these conversations, it emerged that artefacts considered by curators to be of global importance may not be those with which people living locally initially feel the most affinity.

People identified museums as pivotal for the re-contextualisation of items collected through the forces of colonialism. Museums were seen as having potential to transform from repositories of contested histories into platforms for reflection, education and cross-cultural exchange. They called for critical re-examinations of these artefacts, and of state-authorised histories, to address the legacies of colonialism. They emphasised the need for transparent and nuanced interpretations that engage with multiple perspectives on the colonial past and acknowledge the limits of museums' knowledge. Others spoke about their concern for the items' first owners and were strongly motivated to find out more about the circumstances under which they had been collected. The research suggested that the museums should develop collaborative projects with originating communities around the world to progress understanding of items' significance and explore the items' futures.

Artefacts, both tangible and intangible, emerged as central to participants' accounts, reflecting the multifaceted capabilities of objects for use in challenging colonial narratives and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Participants highlighted how their geopolitical displacement had motivated their protection of photographs and other symbolic objects, and how migratory experiences had given rise to reconceptualisations of self and to relationship building as a means of building support networks in Northern Ireland. Personal objects – such as a harp made in prison, an embroidered bag, books and atlases, musical instruments and family photos – were highlighted as emotional and cultural anchors that, being heritable, link experiences across generations. People used these artefacts to talk about their family histories and to explain ruptures in their identities brought about by migration and bereavement. They described how these objects had helped to navigate their evolving sense of self.

The backdrop of Northern Ireland's political and cultural divisions was inevitably evident in many participants' stories. People linked memories of the Troubles, marked by fear and disruption, with colonialism. Individuals from both nationalist and republican, unionist and loyalist backgrounds talked about the legacies of empire, as well as the dual nature of Ireland's relationships with it. Participants frequently discussed the persistence of colonialism's structures in postcolonial Ireland. Parallels were drawn between Ireland and other postcolonial contexts, and people spoke of colonialism's ongoing influence in their lives, shaping their own and their kins' identities as well as broader economies and societies in which they had been raised.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the contested and resonant context within which empire is understood in Northern Ireland, and the deep entanglement of that understanding with material culture. We have also examined the challenges entailed for museums engaging with these themes. We offer, therefore, a suggestion that rather than pursuing an illusory neutrality, museums should instead explore the intimate space that we term the non-public sphere, prompting a more personal engagement with this emotive and challenging ma-

terial. By centring the mutability of object meanings across the course of an object's "biography", material culture can open a space in which competing perspectives can co-exist.

Participant autoethnography has provided us with a crucial method for engaging with the colonial past in Northern Ireland. Firstly, it fosters open and respectful sharing of memories while dissolving hierarchies between participants and researchers. Secondly, using participant autoethnography to focus on possessions offers an effective way to explore the connections between memory, identity and history. Although participants engage differently with personal items compared with museum objects, both approaches enrich understanding of these interactions.

Thirdly, addressing colonial legacies can be divisive, but it is vital for academic methodologies to confront historical divisions. Participant autoethnography foregrounds individual experiences, providing an ethical lens for reflecting on the past. It also facilitates mutual investment in research among communities, cultural institutions and academia, laying the groundwork for sustained relationships and policy impact. This project, therefore, offers a collaborative model for decolonising heritage and promoting inclusivity, empowering public history to address past injustices, avoid imposing authorised narratives and contribute to more equitable futures.

From our research, we have learned that even today many people in Northern Ireland are not comfortable talking about the British Empire. Nonetheless, many have family possessions that link memory with colonial and imperial experiences. Foregrounding individual lives is a means of ethical reflection, and autoethnographic framings can draw out shared narratives across identities and political perspectives, particularly in relation to histories of migration and travel. Academic methodologies must acknowledge these historical divisions and work across them – not with them, against them or around them. In our research, we have been motivated by our wish to acknowledge emotions as part of taking care, and by the duty we feel to read against the grain and reflect in an antiracist way. We have depended on developing meaningful collaborations. And we have been reminded of the value of looking again in the attic.

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From Borneo to Leicester: Colonial entanglements in the Dryad 'Handicrafts' Collection

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Abstract

This article explores the global circulation and educational reuse of Bornean crafts within the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection in Leicester, assembled by Harry Peach in the early 20th century. It highlights Peach's collaboration with colonial administrator Charles Hose, whose objects and photographs from Sarawak and Borneo significantly shaped the collection. Photography served as a vital medium to access, document, and disseminate Bornean material culture, linking colonial collecting to local British craft education. Through patterns, pedagogical uses, and cross-cultural exchanges, the article reveals how imperial networks, visual culture, and local pedagogies converged in the making of a hybrid educational collection.

Keywords: colonial collecting, craft education, photography, Borneo, material culture

Resumé

Collecter Bornéo : Circulation et postérités dans la collection 'Handicrafts' de Dryad. Cet article examine la circulation mondiale et la réutilisation éducative des objets artisanaux de Bornéo dans la collection Dryad 'Handicrafts' à Leicester, constituée par Harry Peach au début du XXe siècle. Il met en lumière la collaboration entre Peach et l'administrateur colonial Charles Hose, dont les objets et photographies de Sarawak et Bornéo ont fortement influencé la collection. La photographie fut un médium essentiel pour accéder à la culture matérielle de Bornéo, la documenter et la diffuser, reliant les pratiques de collecte coloniale à l'enseignement artisanal britannique. L'article révèle comment réseaux impériaux, culture visuelle et pédagogies locales ont convergé dans cette collection hybride.

Mots-clés : collecte coloniale, éducation artisanale, photographie, Bornéo, culture matérielle

This article examines the circulation history of crafts from the island of Borneo, South-east Asia, to the city of Leicester, England, along with the histories of collecting to offer an original perspective on how collecting strategies were connected to craft-practice education and photography in early 20th century Britain. Focusing on the connectedness between Harry Peach (1874-1936), collector of the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection now at Leicester Museums and Gallery, and Charles Hose (1863-1929), colonial administrator in Sarawak, north-west Borneo, between 1884 and 1907, this research tracks the journey of objects and interprets their use to foster craft-practice education in a local context. By foregrounding questions of circulation, I place the mobilisation history of photographs and objects within the broader framework of imperial collecting methods for craft-practice education. In so doing, the research contributes to reconstructing the substantial network of relationships of Charles Hose, adding Harry Peach among his contacts, and the local-authority Leicester Museums and Gallery to the British institutions where Hose's large collection of crafts and natural history from Borneo is now dispersed. The Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection, assembled by Peach between 1918 and 1936, is global in scope and remarkably diverse in its craftsmanship, encompassing basketry, textiles, woodwork, leatherwork and beadwork. Objects came from British, French and Belgian colonies in Africa, South-East Asia, the Pacific and Indian Ocean islands and from non-imperial contexts in central and eastern Europe and the Americas. Despite its worldwide aspect, the collection was gathered by a person who was based in Leicester but whose network of articulated global and imperial connections was significant. Through object- and archival-based methodologies, this article illuminates the ways in which the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection reveals linkages to the colonial context of Borneo.

The formulation of the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection

The Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection was assembled with the dual scope of fostering craft-practice education while facilitating the flourishment of a local business for selling craft materials. In 1918, Peach inaugurated the 'Handicrafts' wing of the Dryad showroom in 42 St Nicholas Street, Leicester, next to the existing Furniture section, to sell cheap craft material to schools. Previous research on Peach has provided valuable insights into the ideological, social and cultural contexts in which the collection was formed. As scholarship stands, Pat Kirkham has examined Peach's role and networks in the formation of the Design and Industries Association (DIA) in 1915 (Kirkham, 1986). Through a biographical approach, Kirkham uncovered the intellectual connections between Peach, William Richard Lethaby – a key advocate for revitalising William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement – and Benjamin Fletcher – the headmaster of Leicester School of Arts and, later, Birmingham Central School of Arts and Crafts. Most recently, Amy Palmer (2021) has included Peach as one of the pioneers of craft-practice education and has noted a tension between Peach's willingness to encourage arts and crafts in the school curriculum and the monetary return to him as a vendor of craft materials. The author considered the input of the Dryad 'Handicrafts' business in pursuing the ambitious goal of school reform by supplying craft materials. With a focus on crafts as elements of child-centred education, Palmer (2021) emphasised the role of Dryad 'Handicrafts' in shaping the approach towards craft-practice of the Board of Education through the provision of materials to schools, which were limited until 1914. In addition to this, the success of the Dryad firm would foster the growth of other craft businesses in the country, increasing from four in 1918 to 22 in 1930 (Palmer, 2021). However, such academic work has not accessed the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection at Leicester Museums and Gallery's storage, and this has limited the ability to fully contextualise the company's commercial and educational contributions within a broader framework that includes the

global circulation of objects and the role played by the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection in this ambitious educational project.

In connection with the opening of Dryad 'Handicrafts', Peach began collecting crafts from around the world, aiming to present the objects on display in the showroom through temporary exhibitions and provide samples of good design to the local community of students from the School of Arts, teachers and craft amateurs. Considering the objects on display as inspirational sources for their decorative patterns and artistic techniques, visitors to Dryad 'Handicrafts' would purchase the materials to reproduce similar objects and develop creativity. Intended as a place of pride for the local context, in 1928 the Dryad showroom was defined as a "museum", comprising "examples of native work from all over the world, including some of the most remote and little known peoples, and this collection is often consulted and examined by teachers and students of these crafts, who find in it a fruitful source of ideas and inspiration" (*Leicester Daily Mercury*, 21 January 1928). Teachers were encouraged to undertake object-lessons on the educational model of contemporary museums, primarily the South Kensington Museum, and the objects on display were intended to inspire the creation of crafts in Britain. In this context, Dryad 'Handicrafts' was dedicated to the mission of activating human creativity among British people who *adopted* and *adapted* design elements into products to be made in Britain. Such use of the collection positions the Dryad 'Handicrafts' objects as promoters of a process of hybridisation fostered by the encounter of a dominant culture and non-Western European cultures. In so doing, the collection and related *use* aimed at questioning a sharp division between the notions of "Indigenous" and "traditional" in design. Instead, it showed how the objects were utilised to challenge the dominant Western European-based craft education and to re-position design education in early 20th century Britain. Within the dynamic framework of hybridity theory, the Dryad objects on display facilitated cross-cultural interactions and shaped a complex process of intertwining and reinterpretation of design, where the objects produced in-between spaces represented the result of the encounter (Bhabha, 1994). The coexistence of business and educational intentions transformed the Dryad 'Handicrafts' showroom into a hybrid space itself, devoted to the economic flourishing of a private institution linked to the promotion of knowledge in craft-practice education.

Peach's eclectic and abundant approach to collecting must be understood as a response of an amateur to the fear that mechanisation would lead to the extinction of manual craftwork. Peach sought to preserve craft tradition by bringing material samples to Leicester, thus safeguarding the legacy of world craft and their artistic techniques while suggesting inspirational motifs to reproduce in British design. From Peach's perspective, the motivation to assemble the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection can be interpreted as an effort to revive the Arts and Crafts movement during the interwar period, a time when its influence was in decline. Within such configuration, this research tracks the movement of the objects from Borneo to Leicester for an educational *rationale*.

Charles Hose's scattered collection from Borneo

In 1925, Peach developed a connection with an established collector in colonial Britain, Charles Hose. Photographs played a pivotal role in delineating the collectors' relationship, and by facilitating the exchange of objects, they significantly influenced the formation of the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection. Notably, certain items from Hose found their way into the Dryad collection through a photographic initiative wherein Dryad produced images for a publication written by Hose and titled *Natural Man: A Record from Borneo*

(1926), and Peach selected specific objects to be collected by consulting the two illustrated volumes of *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo* (1912), still authored by Hose. In *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, in fact, photographs of several items guided Peach's choices for collecting through visual references. Photographs shaped the relationship between Peach and Hose as collectors and determined the subsequent incorporation of objects into the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection.

Charles Hose was a colonial official and ethnologist resident in Sarawak between 1884 and 1907 under the second Rajah Sir Charles Brooke.[1] Despite departing from his studies at Cambridge to assume the role of colonial administrator, his connection with the university deepened as a portion of his Sarawak collection found its way into the Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Subsequently, various objects from Hose's extensive collection were spread to museums worldwide, dispersing Sarawak's heritage and prompting the need for fresh academic studies to piece together its narrative. With an object-focussed approach, Valerie Mashman (2021) has examined the journey of a Kenyah shield from Sarawak to the Ethnological Museum Anima Mundi in the Vatican City, emphasising the conditions prompting its presentation alongside an analysis of how the act of presentation can be interpreted as an effort towards peace-making. Also, Mashman's (2020) analysis of overseas Sarawak collections sheds light on Hose's engagement with local communities. It challenges the prevailing narrative that attributes the central role in the establishment of the Sarawak state to colonial administrator Hose, highlighting instead the crucial role of local chiefs, and particularly Tama Bulan, whose cultural contributions not only prevented conflicts but also forged alliances. Matthew Schauer analysed the collecting expedition in Sarawak conducted by the University of Cambridge's anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon with the support of Hose between 1898 and 1909, underlining the imperial power imbalance within the collecting practices for the emerging Sarawak Museum. The paradigm of degenerating savagery was at the core of a colonial project that justified the research trips and bolstered the museum's institutional prestige (Schauer, 2023). Notably, in the heyday of the emerging science of anthropology, museum institutions were actively contributing to the evolving understanding of the new science by engaging in collecting efforts.

The University of Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, for instance, owes much of its foundation to the work of field collectors such as Christian missionaries and government anthropologists who were imperial agents conducting anthropological research through the analysis and acquisition of material cultures and by taking photographs. These agents followed the guidelines of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* for their collecting strategies. The efforts of such mediators embedded in colonial endeavours shaped global collections, and these individuals played a pivotal role in assembling and defining the Museum's extensive holdings (Herle & Carreau, 2013). Although Peach's collecting activities were rooted in a broadly educational and commercial context rather than an institutional museum framework, it is significant to recognise these activities as part of a network of relationships akin to those underpinning nationally institutionalised projects. Importantly, a private and largely immobile individual like Peach collaborated with the same type of field collectors involved in gathering objects for museum institutions focused on anthropology to expand their collections in the early 20th century, as the linkage with Hose demonstrates. Not a field collector himself, Peach adapted his collecting strategies and practices to what

1 Sarawak is an historic region situated in northwest Borneo, which is now part of Malaysia. It was founded as an independent state in 1841 with the English former military officer of the East India company James Brooke as Rajah of Sarawak. Sarawak was recognised as an independent state by the United States (1850), and later by Great Britain (1864).

was already in circulation within the country, and he can be considered within a group of people who seldom travelled beyond Europe and built their collections primarily through European trading in ethnography, in environments rich with "a vast pool of non-European exotic artifacts" available at reasonable prices (King, 2009, p. 8).

In the British context, though some objects went to Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, in 1905 the British Museum purchased most of the Hose collection, which is exceptionally diverse. Although focussed on crafts, it encompassed a wide array of items, ranging from patterned baskets, clothes with decorative motifs, body ornaments, wooden figures, tattooing needles and stamps and charms. Such avid collecting prompts speculation about Hose's collecting strategies, steeped in a profound interest in local anthropology. Additionally, remnants of Hose's original collection can be discovered at the Horniman Museum, the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum and the World Museum Liverpool, which acquired a significant portion from Norwich Castle Museum in the 1950s. Among these movements, Leicester Museums and Gallery received a small portion of Hose's objects through the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection, the details of which this article endeavours to elucidate for the first time. Despite the extensive dispersal of his ethnography and natural history collections, it is plausible that more Hose's objects reside in other museums across the United Kingdom, and further research is required to track these mobilisations in material cultural history. Thus, the Leicester collection serves as a modest yet vital component in reconstructing a more comprehensive narrative on the connection between Britain and Borneo through Hose's network.

Connecting, collecting and educating through photographs of Borneo

Hose not only collected ethnographic and natural history artefacts during his mandate in Sarawak, he also engaged in a prolific photographic endeavour and authored numerous books. However, he left a more extensive record of himself than what has been published about him as a collector to date, with the exception of Jennifer Morris's work on the Brooke state (Morris, 2019).

It is conceivable that Hose and Peach first encountered each other in the preparation of the Sarawak Pavilion during the 1924 Wembley Empire Exhibition.[2] On this occasion, Peach acquired a distinctive pair of large blankets adorned with local motifs from Sarawak, and Hose helped prepare the pavilion for the event (Durrans, 1926). The intricate patterns, termed 'dog motifs', adorning the entirety of the fabric resonate with a recurring theme in the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection, particularly evident in the Sarawak artefacts, as we will see. After their encounter at Wembley, Peach and Hose embarked on a correspondence that ultimately led to the exchange of cultural artefacts from Sarawak and Borneo, which by 1926 had become integral to the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection. An intriguing development was Hose's keen interest in partnering with Peach to utilise his collection for educational purposes, leveraging photography to facilitate its dissemination. Hose's extensive experimentation with ethnographic photography during his Borneo travels, notably showcased in his 1912 publication *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, served as a foundation. In this book, the photographs aimed to vividly portray Sarawakian and Bornean life and culture, featuring captivating portraits of local people involved in making various crafts, scenes of hunting and meticulously rendered depictions of architectures and natural landscapes.[3]

2 On the 1924 British Empire exhibition see also Knight, D. R. & Sabey, A. D. (1984). *The lion roars* at Wembley: British Empire exhibition, 60th anniversary, 1924-1925. Barnard & Westwood.

3 For photographs taken by Charles Hose see also Cambridge University Library Special Collections, GBR/0115/RCS/Y3035A: Charles Hose ad Shelford Robert Walter Campbell, 1884-03 – 1900, descriptive

Peach mentioned this book in conversation with Benjamin Fletcher, headmaster of the City of Birmingham Central School of Arts and Crafts, recommending it as an excellent resource for gaining insights into Sarawak and Bornean people and "to read all about them and their crafts" (DWL Peach-Fletcher, 18 April 1925). Peach and Fletcher shared interests in craft-practice education, and objects from the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection were sent to circulate freely outside of the showroom to enter schools. The City of Birmingham Central School of Arts and Crafts have had a privileged position for the mobility of the collection, as objects in wood and leather as well as more fragile decorated Easter eggs in the batik technique were often loaned to Fletcher.[4] In the letter regarding Bornean crafts, Peach shared intriguing aspects of the collection and discussed the potential collaboration with Hose, highlighting their mutual interest in promoting craft education:

> when at Purley this week borrowed from Doctor Hose a caseful of Sarawak work, basket work, weaving, carved work, etc. I am going to photograph them. I dare say he would lend them to your school for a month or so if you wish. He is very anxious that his things should be made of use. (DWL, Peach-Fletcher, 18 April 1925)

Peach suggested Hose's willingness to participate as a donor in a craft education endeavour, which Peach and Fletcher had initiated with the schools of art in Leicester and Birmingham with the mobilisation of global crafts to enhance local education, and objects from Borneo loaned by Hose would be on display at Leicester's School of Arts in 1925 (DWL, 1925). In April 1925, in fact, Peach visited Hose at his residence in Purley to examine the collection and talk about the possibility of transporting certain items to Leicester to be photographed. Peach was enthusiastic about the collection, describing himself as confident that the objects would be "well appreciated down in this part of the World", and demonstrating his readiness to incorporate Leicester into the broader ethnographic initiative intended to extend cultural knowledge across Britain through the dispersal of the Sarawak collection to multiple museums (DWL, Peach-Hose, 17 April 1925). It is plausible to assume that these photographs were used to illustrate the book *Natural Man: A Record from Borneo*, published in 1926.[5] In fact, this book is adorned with vivid photographs depicting scenes of life in Borneo alongside illustrations highlighting various cultural artefacts in a static position.

In anticipation of the 1926 publication, Hose suggested a preliminary sketch envisioning a photographic representation of Borneo's decorative arts, inviting Peach to refine the composition with his expertise (see Figure 1). The sketch demonstrates an eagerness to showcase a diverse array of objects in a static composition, ranging from masks to baskets, two-tone shields, hats and a jacket.

The approach of using sketches to communicate ideas resonates with contemporary practices of colonial officials, missionaries and traders who were encouraged to utilise illustrations to explore and convey the realities of diverse cultures, attempting to define method-

album of the country and people of Sarawak

4 For instance, as far as the decorated eggs, which came from the Tatra Mountain district in Czechoslovakia, Peach briefly presented an idea of conservation for these particularly fragile items: "I had thought of having one or two put in little glass boxes, as unfortunately people break them handling them. Have had some smashed already; they pick them up as though they were bricks" (DWL Peach-Fletcher, 17 April 1926).

5 The first indication of a potential collaboration appears in DWL, PR1/COR/Hose: correspondence Peach-Hose, 5 January 1925. Here, Hose invited Peach to Purley to discuss "the matter of designs illustrative of native arts better".

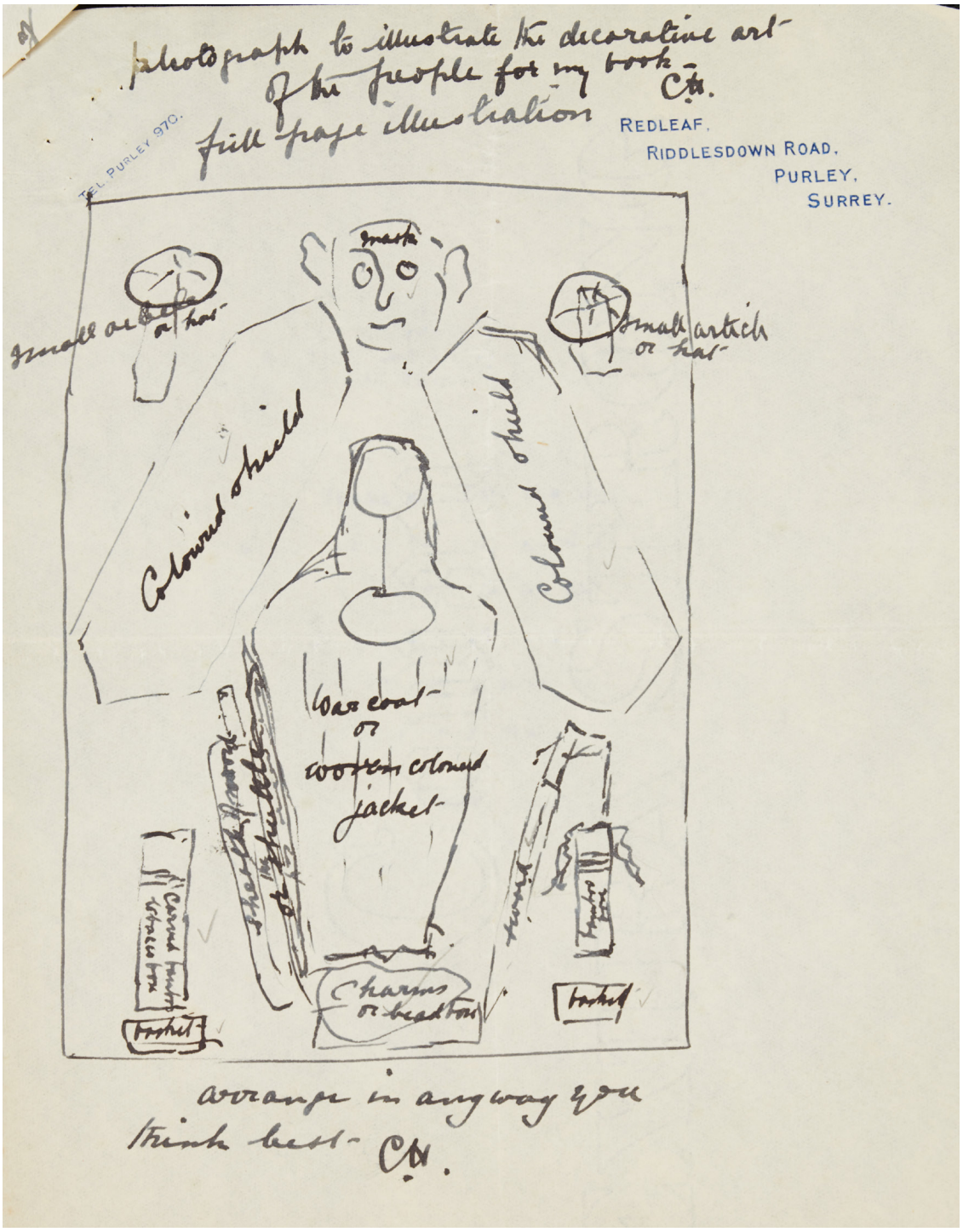


Figure 1. Drawing made by Charles Hose to illustrate the composition for a photography requested to Dryad. © Archives and Special Collections of David Wilson Library (DWL), University of Leicester, PR1/COR/Hose: correspondence Peach-Hose, 8 May 1925.

ologies for the emerging science of anthropology from the end of the 19th century (Urry, 1972). Catherine Nichols (2021) has underscored how drawings as illustrative media have long been used to convey scientific knowledge. Nichols argued that the medium of sketches was preferred by Henry Balfour, curator of the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, to illustrate objects described in the letters because of their sense of immediacy and to underline what was relevant in the objects, such as ceramics with a special shape or a decoration. Haidy Geismar has defined "alternative histories of ideas" as the methodology that focuses

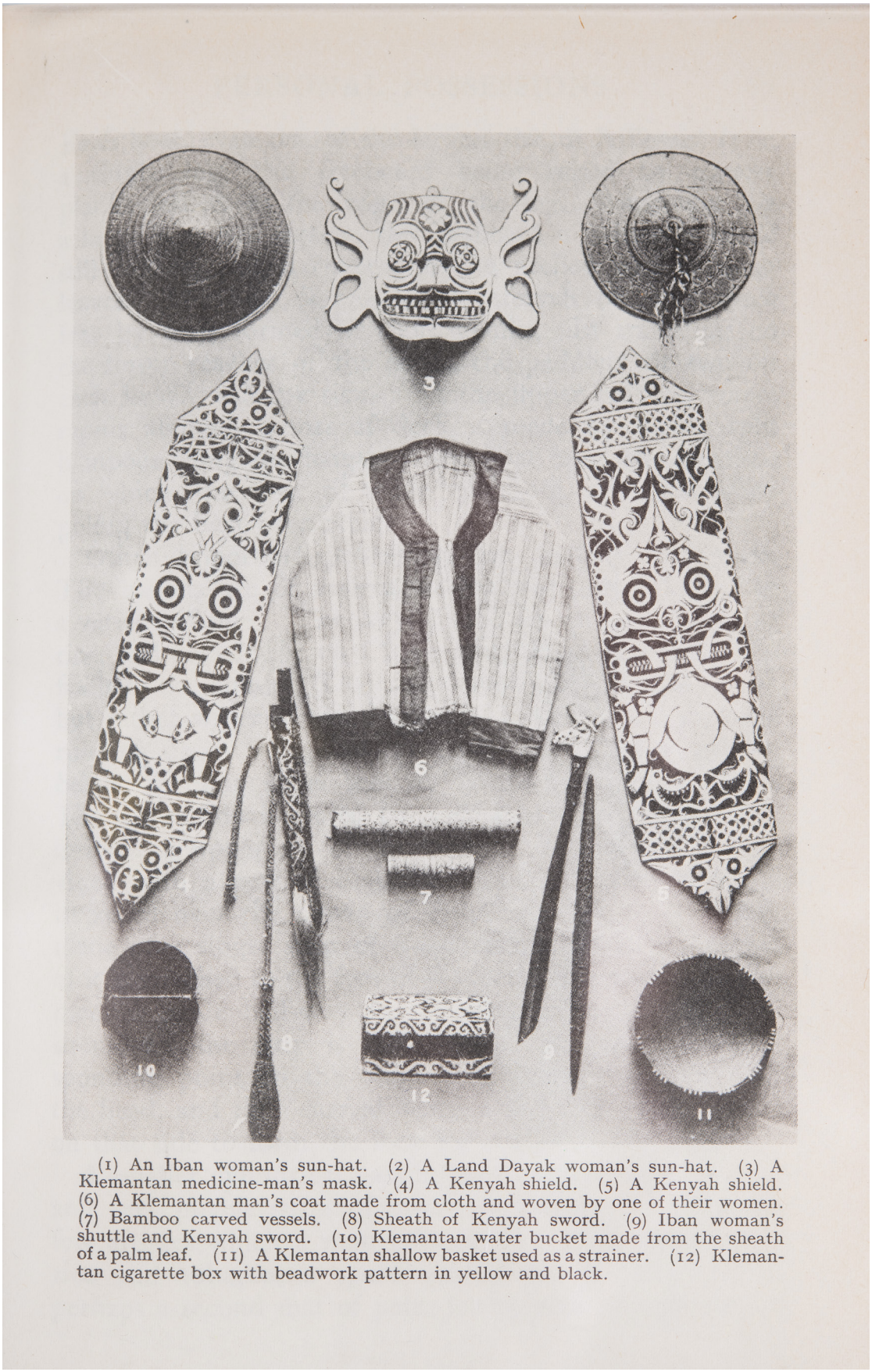
on analysing sketches otherwise considered unpolished raw material for anthropology and historical research (2014, p. 103). The methodology of using drawings as an ethnographic practice is still in use, and Jasamin Kashanipour has coined the term 'gradual gaze' to define the way to think attentively involving the medium of drawing to pursue not arts-based research but rather an anthropological discourse. Kashanipour suggested that the act of drawing fosters a process of "slowing down the gaze", where drawing *is* the process itself to establish connectedness between the fieldworker, the object of study and the environment. Promoting a process of learning while unlearning, drawing becomes "a means of disrupting conventional ways of knowing the world" (Kashanipour, 2021, p. 83).

In the case of the Hose's drawing, this was used to envisage a precise idea for a photograph. In fact, the drawing's meticulously symmetrical composition, designed to present the objects from an aerial perspective, is faithfully reproduced as a photograph in *Natural Man. A Record from Borneo*, exactly as Hose had envisioned (see Figure 2). The final illustration highlights an interest in decorative motifs, notably showcased in the Kenyah shields flanking the sides, the intricately carved wooden objects and the geometric-patterned conical hats positioned at the top.

While the credit for the image remains absent in the book, the remarkable match between the idea embedded in the sketch and the final result of the photograph strongly suggests Dryad as the likely source for the final photograph's attribution. This accreditation is confirmed by Hose, who praised the photograph as "excellent" and requested that Peach complete the work for "another photograph of other articles which I should very much like to have in my book also" (DWL, Peach-Hose, 18 May 1925. Among these photographs, one finds depictions of utensils like spoons and rice dishes, detailed patterns adorning cloths and various women's hats. Hose even envisioned a more innovative educational application for these images, suggesting their adaptation into lantern slides for use in "a paper to be read in Leicester" (DWL, Peach-Hose, 8 May 1925).

Supporting the hypothesis of the exchange of artefacts within this photographic context, the basket labelled as number 11 in the lower right-hand corner of the photograph and identified as "a Klementan shallow basket used as a strainer", bears a striking resemblance in design to an object found in the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection. Similarly, the intricately patterned carved wooden shuttle depicted as number 9 next to a sword in the photograph seems also present in the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection, representing an example of a weaving apparatus with carved decorative designs, an element of significant interest for Peach's collecting strategies.

In his analysis of the Hose's publication *Natural Man: A Record from Borneo*, Brian Durrans suggested that the author aimed to engage not only anthropological experts but also a wider audience generally fascinated by "tribal cultures and their implications for interpreting the human condition" (Durrans, 1926, p. XII). The polyhedric nature of Peach, amateur collector aiming at developing institutional connections, reflected the broader audience interested in Hose's publication. The exchange of cultural artefacts and shared enthusiasm for photography contributed significantly to the acquisition of knowledge about Sarawak and Borneo in Leicester and the extension of Dryad's 'Handicrafts' collection. In her extensive studies on the anthropology of photography, Elizabeth Edwards investigated the work of photographs as objects, with a focus on the potential of their materiality, and stressed the role of photographs as "active constituents of social networks" (2012, p. 230). When it comes to Peach and Hose's circle, while facilitating knowledge,



(1) An Iban woman's sun-hat. (2) A Land Dayak woman's sun-hat. (3) A Klemantan medicine-man's mask. (4) A Kenyah shield. (5) A Kenyah shield. (6) A Klemantan man's coat made from cloth and woven by one of their women. (7) Bamboo carved vessels. (8) Sheath of Kenyah sword. (9) Iban woman's shuttle and Kenyah sword. (10) Klemantan water bucket made from the sheath of a palm leaf. (11) A Klemantan shallow basket used as a strainer. (12) Klemantan cigarette box with beadwork pattern in yellow and black.

Figure 2. Photography of a composition taken by Dryad of Bornean articles. © C. Hose, 1926. *Natural Man: A Record from Borneo*. Oxford University Press.

the mobility of photographs allowed building relationships between constituents around the interest in material culture objects, and through the exchange of objects in Leicester, we discern Hose's inclination towards reaching a broader audience through the circulation of artefacts in practice-based educational spaces. This inclination aligns him with a network of individuals, including Peach, who were invested in the democratic dimension of craft-based education. The connection between Peach and Hose reveals their willingness to make material culture objects *useful* and available for circulation to foster education.

In addition to such photography projects, Peach's request to Hose for a comprehensive list of Borneo objects to purchase underscores the nature of his collecting strategies. The concise list of items loaned by Hose to Leicester for photography mirrors the thematic breadth of the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection, providing insight into Peach's specific interests in Sarawakian and Bornean artefacts and their educational potential. Peach chose these items after consulting the photographs and drawings featured in the publication *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo*, where the dissemination of photographs emerges as a pivotal practice in the selection process for the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection. Peach's direct contact with Hose's collection at Purley, along with the books Hose wrote and illustrated with photographs, provided him with the better understanding of the cultural realities of Borneo within the impossibility of undertaking fieldwork. This allowed Peach to compile an exceptionally long and detailed list of objects, which reveals the anthropological knowledge derived from the photographs and Peach's willingness in obtaining specific items. The list includes:

1. A collection of rice sticks for stirring, showing the variety of simple wood carving.
2. One or two oblong eating plates with carvings at the end.
3. A collection of baskets showing the patterns possible, two or three of each. I think you call them Kanowit baskets.
4. Some Iban seat mats and seed baskets illustrating pattern, possibly with names of patterns.
5. A stone hammer.
6. ? ironwood box carved.
7. A collection of stamps for tattooing patterns. These would be most interesting to have and I wondered whether there are any at the British Museum.
8. A few simple carved spoons, which I believe they use.
9. Is it possible to get any spindles for spinning cotton?
10. A web dyed one colour and tied up with leaves for the next dyeing, together with the shed sticks and other parts comprising the primitive loom.
11. A few cloths illustrating different patterns.
12. A collection of things illustrating the use of the bamboo and pattern on same, never mind how humble.
13. Do they make any use of horn, especially for utensils of any sort?
14. I forgot to ask if they had anything in the way of shadow shows like the Javanese where they cut out figures in outline in horn or stiff leather and work them with sticks. (DWL, Peach-Hose, 20 January 1926)

From Peach's list of desired objects, specific interests in various categories of objects can be identified within a broader interest for decorative patterns and functional objects for craft-making. Although not all items from this list were included in the final collection, the letter provides invaluable insights into Peach's collecting strategies, which reflect his broader ambition for global crafts. It appears that Peach aimed to assemble an archive of material culture objects that exemplified outstanding artisanry in everyday items, from

baskets to cooking utensils and textile apparatuses. This interest emerges from a general attention to objects of different mediums, ranging from horn to wood, bamboo, vegetable fibres, textiles and iron. What comes to light most strikingly, however, is Peach's manifestation of a desire to gather a survey of decorative patterns from Sarawak and Borneo on objects such as baskets, seat mats or carved bamboo as well as on samples dedicated to tattooing patterns.

In such fascination for patterns, Peach likely showed a particular interest in tattooing tools because these samples were intrinsically linked to the art of decorating the body with ornamented patterns. A substantial part of Hose's book is dedicated to the practice of tattoo making among various groups in Borneo, including those who were called the Keyan, Kenyah, Muruts, Klementans and Sea Dayaks. This section of *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo* is accompanied by drawings and photographs showcasing the designs, and it is noted that "a great variety of patterns are used, and they are applied to many different parts of the body" (Hose, 1912, p. 244). These designs, which depict the animal and natural world – such as the dog design – are variations of patterns already found in baskets, cloths and bamboo surfaces, and it is possible that Peach sought tattoo stamps for the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection due to his interest in these patterns. However, Peach had been unable to collect any, unlike other anthropology museums that had already shown interest in this aspect of ethnography, and in 1905 the British Museum received a collection of tattooing stamps and models for tattooing equipment from Hose. Hose also donated other examples of pattern blocks to the University of Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Additionally, the University of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum has a rich collection of tattoo equipment and patterns received from Hose in 1907 and tattoo pattern blocks from Sarawak collected by Charles Brooke and Rajah of Sarawak and donated in 1923. A number of patterned baskets made their way into the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection, including two Kanowit baskets in rattan and rush with patterns created by the intricate interweaving of plant materials and their colourful dyeing (see Figure 3). The typical broad square base and circular top shape of these storage baskets often houses colourful geometric patterns, although examples of baskets in undyed natural fibres can also be found.[6] Baskets and objects made of plant fibres from Borneo were often decorated with motifs adopted from natural elements, and when they were in large size, their surfaces offered the creative possibility of being tools for self-expression.

6 The British Museum held a collection of Kanowit baskets, and one of them is created by natural fibre only, without the dyeing. Accession Number: 1905, 478.



Figure 3. Kanowit basket with geometric patterns, natural and dyed in black and red, Sarawak. © Leicester Museums & Gallery. Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection. Accession number: 49/S/71 B146.

Other objects from Sarawak in vegetable fibres with patterns include another basket that presents decorative motifs in black and red dyes similar to tattoo decorations, some conical hats, a bamboo dart-case that can be categorised under the request of "a collection of things illustrating the use of bamboo and pattern on the same", as asked for in Peach's letter, while it appears also as "a collection of rice sticks for stirring, showing the variety of simple wood carving". The journey of the Sarawakian and Bornean objects from Hose's collection to Peach's collection, therefore, was possible because Peach got to know the objects through consulting their photographs in Hose's publication. In the absence of anthropologic fieldwork, the circulation of photographs in books served as the most effective resource for enhancing knowledge of the material culture that would be incorporated into the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection.

Conclusion

This article has elucidated photography as a means by which Peach accessed objects for collecting and craft-practice education, as the circulation of photographs represented a way to develop a network for collecting and, subsequently, to foster education. In the connection between Peach and Hose, photography played a dual role, consistently positioning Peach actively in front of the photographic medium for his research on Bornean material culture. On one hand, the photographic project Dryad undertook with objects from Hose's collection contributed to the publication *Natural Man: A Record from Borneo* and so spread knowledge about material culture history through print photography to wider contexts. Concurrently, Peach used the photographs featured in *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo* to select objects for the Dryad 'Handicrafts' collection, enabling him to familia-

rise himself with Bornean culture through Hose's illustrated volumes. Objects manifested themselves through photography and became visible and obtainable through this medium, serving the ongoing commitment of Peach to disseminate knowledge through the circulation of Bornean objects in the Leicester context. Whether produced or observed with analytical interest, photographs played a role in transferring some of Borneo's objects from Hose's collection to Peach's. Significantly, the interest in decorative patterns emerges as a common thread between the objects requested and obtained by Peach. These items offered an ideal opportunity to compile a selection of design motifs aimed at inspiring the creativity of students at the local School of Arts in Leicester. The connection between Peach and Hose highlighted a shared interest in colonial collecting, with photography serving as a resource to enhance and propagate knowledge about Bornean material culture. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions on the material reinterpretations of colonial collections and their roles in shaping pedagogical practices and visual imaginaries in imperial contexts, and the significant linkage between colonial collecting and the local use of these objects became evident through the integration of Bornean artifacts into Leicester's educational context.

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L'Inventaire du Patrimoine Kanak Dispersé : Muséologie transnationale et territoires enchevêtrés

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Résumé

Depuis 1979, l'Inventaire du Patrimoine Kanak Dispersé (IPKD) recense les objets kanak conservés dans les musées du monde entier. Constitué comme base de données, l'IPKD reflète une démarche collaborative transnationale entre la Nouvelle-Calédonie et l'Europe, combinant muséologie, histoire coloniale et revendication culturelle. L'article explore les enjeux historiques, politiques et techniques de cet inventaire, sa portée auprès des communautés kanak et les défis liés à sa pérennité. Il démontre comment l'IPKD relie objets, musées et personnes, ouvrant des perspectives décoloniales et transnationales dans la gestion du patrimoine culturel autochtone.

Mots-clés : patrimoine dispersé, Kanak, muséologie transnationale, base de données, décolonisation

Abstract

The Inventory of Dispersed Kanak Heritage: Transnational museology and entangled territories.. Since 1979, the Inventory of Dispersed Kanak Heritage (IPKD) has catalogued Kanak objects held in museums worldwide. Now a comprehensive database, the IPKD represents a transnational collaboration between New Caledonia and Europe, interweaving museology, colonial history, and cultural reclamation. This article explores the historical, political, and technical dimensions of the project, its significance to Kanak communities, and the challenges facing its sustainability. The IPKD illustrates how dispersed heritage connects objects, institutions, and people across geographies, offering a model for decolonial and transnational approaches to Indigenous cultural heritage stewardship.

Keywords: dispersed heritage, Kanak, transnational museology, database, decolonization

Depuis 1979, un inventaire du patrimoine kanak dispersé (IPKD) est entrepris dans le but de recenser les objets kanak, originaires de Nouvelle-Calédonie, conservés dans des musées à travers le monde. Aujourd'hui, l'IPKD est une base de données, progressivement accessible en ligne, qui réunit plus de 5 457 fiches d'objets dispersés dans 115 musées[1]. Cette base de données a aussi pour but de réunir des ressources et de la documentation sur les collections kanak.

Cet article propose d'examiner l'IPKD et sa base de données comme cas d'étude de muséologie insulaire transnationale. Sa rédaction a quatre mains, entre la Nouvelle-Calédonie et la France hexagonale, illustre cette approche collaborative. Marianne Tissandier a participé à l'entreprise d'inventaire et assure la gestion de la base de données IPKD ; Marion Bertin effectue des recherches sur l'histoire de cet inventaire (Bertin, 2020 ; Bertin, 2024). Depuis plusieurs années, nous collaborons à ce sujet (Bertin et Tissandier, 2019 ; Bertin et Tissandier, 2024). Notre propos s'appuie donc à la fois sur une participation active au processus de l'IPKD et sur la consultation de collections et d'archives conservées en Nouvelle-Calédonie, en France hexagonale, en Suisse et au Royaume-Uni. Nos deux points de vue participent à une réflexion muséologique sur la portée historique et contemporaine de cet inventaire, ainsi que les défis qui entourent sa création et sa gestion.

À travers l'exemple de l'IPKD, nous souhaitons aborder la question des espaces enchevêtrés en étudiant de quelle manière cet inventaire réunit différents espaces à des échelles multiples : d'une part, à l'échelle internationale et, d'autre part, en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Ainsi, nous détaillerons le processus international de constitution de cet inventaire et de la documentation qui l'accompagne. D'abord, nous reviendrons sur quelques grandes étapes du projet d'inventaire depuis 1979. Puis, nous présenterons ce qu'est concrètement l'IPKD aujourd'hui et de quelle manière cet inventaire connecte et enchevêtre des espaces à l'échelle mondiale. Enfin, nous analyserons ces enchevêtrements à une échelle locale, en abordant ceux propres au territoire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie afin de mieux comprendre les relations nouées entre les communautés kanak et cet inventaire. Finalement, ce cas d'étude permettra d'éclairer les enjeux et les défis entourant les projets d'inventaires de collections dispersées, dans une perspective de muséologie transnationale plus globale.

Un processus au long cours pour un inventaire international

La Nouvelle-Calédonie est un archipel situé dans l'océan Pacifique Sud, habité par des populations austronésiennes, le peuple kanak. À partir de la fin du XVIII[e] siècle, commerçants et navigateurs venus d'Europe, d'Amérique et d'Asie traversent régulièrement l'archipel, entrant en contact avec le peuple kanak et acquérant leurs productions matérielles, d'abord sans grande documentation associée, leurs séjours étant généralement brefs. Le 23 septembre 1853, la France prend possession de la Nouvelle-Calédonie dans un contexte de rivalité avec le Royaume-Uni ; l'archipel devient à la fois une colonie libre et une colonie pénale, à compter de 1864 (Merle, 2020). Entre 1887 et 1946, le Code de l'indigénat est en application dans l'archipel et ségrégue les populations kanak. Des spoliations massives de terres kanak adviennent également à cette époque. L'administration coloniale interdit certaines pratiques culturelles kanak, dont le port d'armes (les massues et casse-tête), et dévalorise de manière générale les cultures autochtones. L'histoire

1 En comptant les lots, cela correspond à plus de 5 950 pièces. Ce dénombrement n'inclut ni les collections du musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac à Paris (France), qui comptent 3 204 objets et œuvres iconographiques, ni la collection du musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa qui se porte quant à elle à 2 253 objets auxquels on peut ajouter des œuvres iconographiques.

des collectes et des collections kanak est à mettre en lien avec la constitution massive de collections dites ethnographiques et de l'ouverture de musées dédiés, en Europe en particulier. Comme le souligne Roger Boulay (1990), plusieurs marchands particulièrement actifs entre 1875 et 1905 ont largement contribué à l'enrichissement des collections des musées européens, parmi lesquelles le Weltmuseum de Vienne (Autriche), l'Ethnologische Museum de Berlin (Allemagne), le musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro à Paris (dont les collections sont aujourd'hui conservées au musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac [MQB-JC]) ou le muséum d'histoire naturelle de Toulouse. Parallèlement, des expéditions scientifiques au début du XX^{e} siècle ont donné lieu à d'importantes collectes. L'une des plus notables est celle des naturalistes suisses Jean Roux (1876-1939) et Fritz Sarasin (1859-1942), qui rassemblèrent plusieurs milliers d'objets formant le cœur de la collection kanak du Museum der Kulturen de Bâle (Suisse), la deuxième collection d'objets kanak conservée hors de Nouvelle-Calédonie, après celle du MQB-JC. Parallèlement, une collection muséale est constituée en Nouvelle-Calédonie : le musée colonial, devenu le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie, ouvre ses portes en 1905. Il conserve l'une des plus importantes collections d'objets kanak au monde, dont de nombreuses sculptures architecturales qui prenaient place sur les grandes cases kanak.

L'initiative d'un inventaire du patrimoine kanak dispersé naît dans les années 1970, en lien avec le mouvement d'affirmation culturelle kanak en Nouvelle-Calédonie, après des siècles de dévalorisation et d'interdiction par le pouvoir colonial français en place. Le festival Mélanésia 2000, organisé à proximité de Nouméa en 1975, en est une étape fondatrice (Graille, 2016). Ce festival est l'occasion de dresser un état des lieux des différentes pratiques culturelles des communautés kanak du territoire et de les réaffirmer. Comme le décrit Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1936-1989), qui dirige le comité d'orientation du festival :

> L'idée première était de faire un inventaire de ce qui existait, à travers cet inventaire, de prendre conscience du patrimoine culturel du peuple mélanésien et ainsi d'essayer de redonner confiance aux gens, par rapport à la situation d'aliénation liée à la colonisation. (Tjibaou, 1996, p. 35)

Dans la dynamique du festival, débute un travail d'inventaire des savoirs kanak sur le territoire calédonien. La littérature orale et les techniques de fabrication d'objets (sculpture sur bois et vanneries notamment) sont particulièrement concernées. C'est dans ce contexte que Jean-Marie Tjibaou charge Roger Boulay (1943-2024) de la mission d'effectuer un inventaire des objets kanak conservés dans des musées en France hexagonale et en Europe, en vue de constituer une documentation iconographique à l'usage des sculpteur·rice·s et des artisan·e·s kanak[2]. Cette mission débute en 1979, alors que Roger Boulay est animateur et formateur dans des associations d'éducation populaire, avant de devenir chargé de mission au musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie à Paris (France) quelques années plus tard. Pour effectuer ce travail, Roger Boulay se rend directement dans les musées qui conservent des collections kanak pour voir, manipuler, photographier et inventorier les objets. Seul à accomplir ces missions, il bénéficie de l'aide des responsables de collections kanak dans les musées visités. Les missions d'inventaire se concentrent alors sur la France hexagonale ainsi que l'Europe occidentale, pour des raisons logistiques. Parmi les premières collections inventoriées figurent le musée municipal d'Angoulême et le musée Lafaille de La Rochelle[3] (France), le Museum für Volkerkunde de Bâle[4] et le musée

2 Ce dont témoignent les archives données par Roger Boulay au MQB-JC (58AP/1).

3 Aujourd'hui le muséum d'histoire naturelle de La Rochelle.

4 Aujourd'hui le Museum der Kulturen de Bâle.

d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel (Suisse), le Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum de Cologne (Allemagne, autrefois République fédérale d'Allemagne) ou encore l'Ethnologische Museum à Berlin[5] (Allemagne, autrefois République démocratique allemande). Ce premier travail de repérage est compilé sous la forme de fiches papier, déposées à Nouméa. Il reçoit le soutien de la Direction des musées nationaux, au ministère de la Culture, ainsi que de l'Office scientifique culturel et technique canaque [sic] créé en 1982 et sis à Nouméa. En 1985, Emmanuel Kasarhérou prend la direction du musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa. Il poursuit alors le travail d'inventaire entamé, notamment dans les musées océaniens au cours de missions effectuées sous l'égide du musée nouméen et conduit à l'organisation de l'exposition *De Jade et de nacre* (1990) (Boulay, 1990 et 1993 ; Kasarhérou, 2005). Marianne Tissandier rejoint le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie en 1997, d'abord en tant qu'assistante de conservation puis en tant que conservatrice-restauratrice. Elle prolonge à son tour le travail d'inventaire lors de missions qu'elle accomplit pour le musée dans des institutions en Australie et en Aotearoa-Nouvelle-Zélande[6].

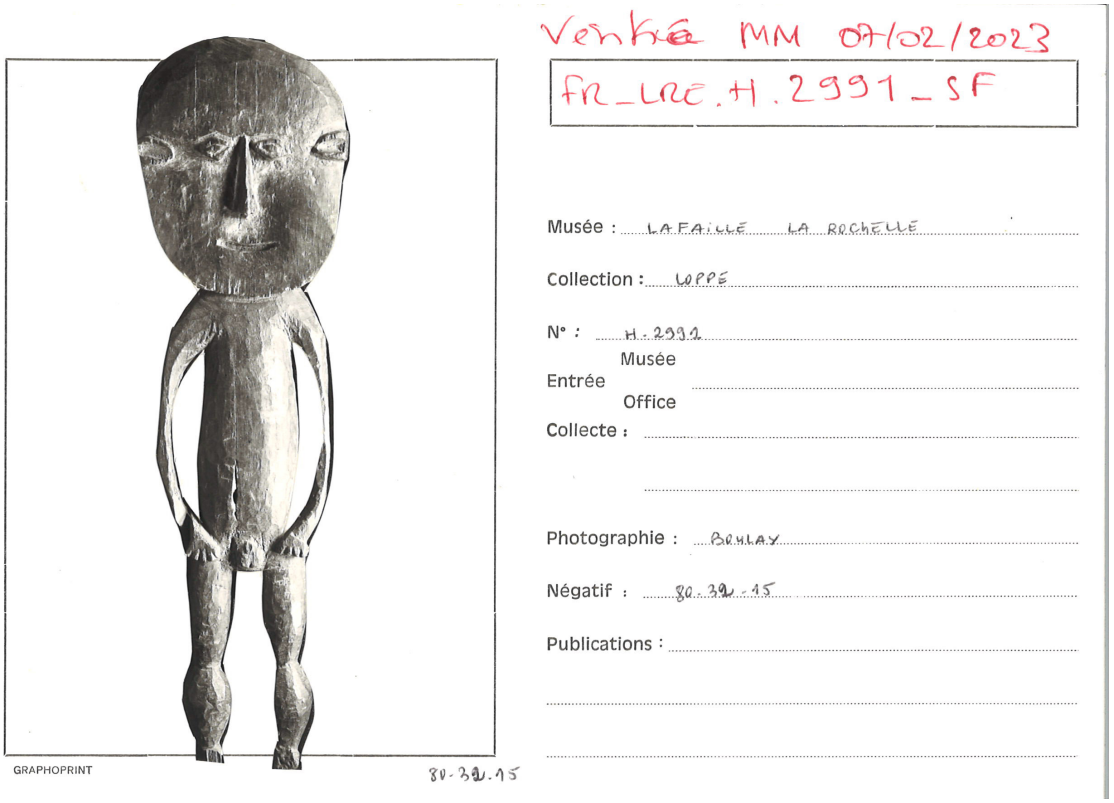


Illustration 1 : Exemple d'une fiche d'inventaire rédigée par Roger Boulay, conservée © les archives du musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie.

Au-delà des musées, cette entreprise bénéficie de soutiens politiques de la part du gouvernement français et de la collectivité de Nouvelle-Calédonie. En effet, cet inventaire s'inscrit pleinement au sein de la politique de décolonisation institutionnelle et de rééquilibrage culturel et social de la Nouvelle-Calédonie en faveur du peuple kanak. La valorisation des cultures kanak est essentielle dans ce processus. C'est en ce sens qu'est créée l'Agence de développement de la culture kanak (ADCK) en 1989, aux termes des accords

5 Aujourd'hui le Humboldt Forum, qui conserve les collections dites extra-européennes municipales de la ville de Berlin.

6 Musées à Sydney, Melbourne, Adélaïde, Auckland et Wellington

de Matignon-Oudinot signés entre l'État et des représentants des principaux partis politiques calédoniens. L'ADCK a pour but de conserver et de valoriser les cultures kanak, en particulier par le biais de son siège social, le centre culturel Tjibaou qui est inauguré en mai 1998. L'ADCK intègre une équipe de collecteur·rice·s du patrimoine immatériel kanak chargée de recueillir et de rassembler les savoirs kanak. Cette équipe collabore régulièrement avec celle du musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie en charge de l'IPKD, dans une démarche alignée sur les missions du musée, qui repose sur un travail étroit avec les communautés locales (Tissandier & Daver, 2023). Dans cette perspective, l'IPKD est à replacer dans un contexte culturel plus général ainsi qu'une réflexion sur les liens entre les institutions patrimoniales et les communautés du territoire, kanak et non-kanak.

En 1998, le texte de l'accord de Nouméa, qui prolonge les accords de Matignon-Oudinot, inclut un paragraphe consacré aux « objets culturels kanak[7] » (République française, 1998). En 2002, l'accord particulier sur le développement culturel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie précise deux missions concernant ces objets culturels : la première est de réaliser un inventaire des objets kanak dispersés, tandis que la seconde est de mettre en dépôt certains d'entre eux dans des musées en Nouvelle-Calédonie (Ministère de l'Outre-mer et gouvernement de Nouvelle-Calédonie, 2002). Au sein des institutions étatiques calédoniennes administratives et culturelles, plusieurs personnalités kanak contribuent à la poursuite du projet d'inventaire. C'est le cas dès la création de l'Office scientifique culturel et technique canaque [sic], une institution née sous l'impulsion de Jean-Marie Tjibaou et de Jacques Iékawé (1946-1992), haut-fonctionnaire kanak et militant au sein de l'Union calédonienne, parti indépendantiste. En tant que membre du gouvernement de Nouvelle-Calédonie en charge de la culture, Déwé Gorodey (1949-2022) soutient l'inscription des « objets culturels kanak » au sein de l'accord de Nouméa et la signature d'un texte portant exclusivement sur le développement culturel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie[8]. Actuellement, au sein de l'administration calédonienne, de nombreux postes clés liés à la culture sont occupés par des femmes et des hommes kanak, qui sont généralement sensibles à la mise en place de projets visant à enrichir l'inventaire du patrimoine kanak dispersé.

Entre 2011 et 2025, la réalisation de l'inventaire est rendue possible grâce à la mise en place d'une mission dédiée par le gouvernement de Nouvelle-Calédonie, qui en assure le financement[9]. La mission de l'IPKD comprend une équipe permanente de plusieurs membres (Roger Boulay, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, Etienne Bertrand et Renée Binosi), ainsi que des stagiaires calédonien·ne·s, qui sillonnent les musées d'Europe conservant des collections kanak. À cette période, les musées de France, d'Italie, du Vatican, de Suisse et d'Allemagne sont visités pendant des missions allant d'une journée à une semaine. Déjà inventoriés, des musées comme le Musée d'art et d'histoire Vivenel de Compiègne (France) ou le Melbourne Museum (Australie), sont à nouveau visités afin d'affiner les connaissances : certains artefacts kanaks sont ainsi identifiés parmi des collections jusqu'alors rangées sous la catégorie large et peu précise de « mélanésien ». Les moyens alloués ne permettent de visiter que les collections avec le plus grand nombre d'objets. Pour les plus petites collections, la mission IPKD procède par correspondance avec les

7 Ce texte prolonge les accords de Matignon-Oudinot signés en 1988 dans la perspective d'une décolonisation de la Nouvelle-Calédonie et d'un rééquilibrage social, culturel et économique en faveur de la population kanak. La culture kanak est alors établie comme socle commun dans la fondation d'une société calédonienne.

8 Comme en témoignent les courriers conservés par Roger Boulay et consultables dans les archives dont il a fait don au MQB-JC (58AP).

9 Le financement est de 64 millions de francs pacifiques, soit 536 320 euros pour la période de 2011 à 2015.

musées les conservant. Des locaux sont mis à disposition de la mission de l'IPKD par la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Paris où les équipes reportent les données récoltées en musées dans des fiches-objets informatiques. Toutes les recherches préalables sont ainsi complétées et enrichies, puis transférées sur un tableur Excel en vue de leur versement sur la base de données Micromusée, utilisée par le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie et choisie pour cette même raison pour héberger l'ensemble de l'IPKD. Le choix des stagiaires parmi différents établissements calédoniens (musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie, Département Recherche et Patrimoine de l'ADCK, Direction de la culture de la Province Nord) et des étudiant·e·s calédonien·ne·s en Hexagone montre l'ambition de cet inventaire à l'échelle de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. La formation professionnelle et l'échange de savoirs, muséaux et kanak, sont centraux dans le processus de documentation des collections kanak. Le bilan moral et financier de la mission (2013) indique comme objectifs pour les professionnel·le·s calédonien·ne·s :

> il s'agit non seulement de les familiariser avec la base documentaire en cours de constitution qu'ils auront un jour à utiliser ou à faire vivre, mais aussi leur permettre de rencontrer les responsables scientifiques des collections kanak en France et en Europe, dans l'espoir que ces contacts puissent nourrir des projets communs futurs. (Inventaire du Patrimoine Kanak Dispersé, 2013)

À la même époque, cette aspiration fait écho aux recherches entreprises depuis les années 1980 par de nombreux musées européens sur leurs collections océaniennes, dans le but de mieux retracer et documenter leur histoire (Mélandri & Guiot, 2021). De nombreux projets collaboratifs, impliquant musées, universités et communautés d'origine, voient le jour depuis cette décennie. L'une de ces initiatives est le Melanesian Art Project, conduit entre 2005 et 2010 par Goldsmiths, Cambridge University et le British Museum (Royaume-Uni), grâce à un financement accordé par le Arts and Humanities Research Council du Royaume-Uni. Ce projet se focalise sur les collections originaires des îles de Mélanésie conservées par le British Museum (Adams, 2011), ce qui inclut donc les collections kanak de l'institution. En 2008, le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie est invité à participer et à travailler sur ces collections kanak et à en recueillir l'inventaire, qui sera ajouté par la suite à la base IPKD. La création de ce réseau aura des répercussions par la suite et facilitera le don de 102 objets kanak au musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie par la famille Hadfield en 2009, sur lequel nous reviendrons.

La réalisation de l'inventaire s'étale sur une temporalité longue de plus de quatre décennies, depuis 1979 jusqu'à nos jours. Cette durée s'explique par le nombre important d'objets kanak : d'après le bilan établi par Roger Boulay et Emmanuel Kasarhérou à l'issue de la mission gouvernementale de l'IPKD, 20 000 objets kanak seraient conservés dans 225 musées (2015). Parmi cette estimation, 16 000 d'entre eux ont été étudiés dans 162 musées à travers le monde. Ce chiffre peut être mis en perspective avec d'autres corpus d'objets culturels conservés hors de leur territoire d'origine, dans un contexte global de captations à des fins muséologiques, scientifiques ou impérialistes. DigitalBenin[10] recense 5 288 objets historiques originaires du palais de Benin-city, dans le royaume de Benin (actuel Nigéria), pillé et incendié par l'armée britannique en 1897. Le projet de recherche « Atlas de l'absence. Le patrimoine culturel du Cameroun en Allemagne » a permis de comptabiliser plus de 40 000 objets originaires de l'actuel territoire du Cameroun conservés dans les seuls musées allemands (Assilkinga, 2023). En 2016, la Polynésie française a lancé un programme d'inventaire des objets polynésiens conservés dans les musées métropolitains,

10 https://digitalbenin.org/catalogue?page=1&seed=1ikld-hhyyn-tq3sv-3bona

suivant l'exemple de l'IPKD en Nouvelle-Calédonie. À ce jour, 53 institutions ont été recensées, abritant 1 330 objets, et bien que les principales collections aient été inventoriées (à l'exception du MQB-JC).

La répartition mondiale des collections kanak est un autre enjeu : si 118 musées conservant des objets kanak sont actuellement localisés en France hexagonale, des institutions préservant le patrimoine kanak dispersé sont situées sur quatre continents : en Europe, en Amérique du Nord, en Océanie et probablement en Asie. La répartition mondiale des collections s'explique par l'histoire coloniale qui lie la France et la Nouvelle-Calédonie, ainsi que par l'histoire scientifique et muséologique.

L'IPKD prend aujourd'hui pour forme concrète une base de données informatique sur le logiciel de gestion des collections muséales Micromusée. En décembre 2024, la base Micromusée du musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie comprenait 5 457 fiches d'objets kanak extérieurs à sa collection, situés dans 116 musées provenant de 17 pays différents – sur les 136 musées identifiés dans le monde. À l'appui des recherches précédentes, la constitution de cette de base de données et surtout sa mise en ligne demeure un travail chronophage qui implique repérage des objets, échanges physiques ou par mail avec les musées les conservant, puis éventuelle re-saisie des fiches-objets lorsque les systèmes informatiques ne sont pas compatibles. Depuis la fin de la mission de l'IPKD en 2015 et le transfert officiel de la base de données au musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie, cette dernière repose uniquement sur la petite équipe de l'institution qui doit composer avec d'autres projets d'envergure, dont le déménagement des collections dans des réserves externalisées en 2019 et la rénovation générale du musée, débutée l'année suivante. En 2023 et 2024, pour la première fois, une personne a été dédiée au projet IPKD, permettant de se concentrer sur son récolement et son enrichissement. Cependant, faute de moyens, le contrat de cet agent, Edmond Saume, n'a pas été renouvelé en 2025, laissant de nouveau l'alimentation et le développement de la base de données à la charge du département des collections du musée, déjà mobilisé sur d'autres projets majeurs.



Illustration 2 : Carte représentant la répartition mondiale des collections incluses dans l'IPKD, présentée dans l'exposition Carnets kanak. Voyage en inventaire de Roger Boulay au MQB-JC (octobre 2022-mars 2023). Photographie © Marion Bertin.

Collections et savoirs transnationaux

L'IPKD est un « inventaire raisonné » et non pas un inventaire exhaustif qui rassemblerait les quelque 20 000 objets kanak estimés dans les collections des musées du monde. Les critères de sélection s'attachent à prioriser « les objets les plus intéressants, en fonction de leur provenance, leur histoire, les circonstances de leur collecte, leur valeur esthétique ou leur état de conservation » (Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie, s.d.). Ces critères discriminent tout particulièrement les armes, très nombreuses dans les collections kanak en raison de l'histoire militaire et coloniale de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, du goût pour de tels objets au XIXe et dans la première moitié du XX^{e} siècle, ainsi que leur disponibilité.

Comme nous l'avons précédemment indiqué, le transfert des premières fiches sous formats papier vers un format numérique s'est opéré partiellement lors de la mission du gouvernement de Nouvelle-Calédonie entre 2011 et 2015. À ces fiches se sont ajoutées celles des objets nouvellement étudiés, au fur et à mesure des missions effectuées par l'équipe de l'IPKD. Dans le détail, chaque fiche inclut la désignation de l'objet, sa localisation muséale présente, sa région d'origine en Nouvelle-Calédonie, les matériaux qui le constituent, ses dimensions, une datation, ainsi que les collecteur·rice·s ou collectionneur·rice·s lui étant liés. Ce dernier aspect a fait l'objet de grande attention lors des missions, dans une démarche d'histoire des collections. Un important travail sur les archives des musées visités et d'autres fonds fut mené en même temps que l'inventaire permettant, lorsque cela était possible, d'inclure dans les fiches des dates de collectes, des périodes de fabrication ou même des témoignages écrits des collecteur·rice·s. Une ou plusieurs photographies, voire parfois des documents d'archives, complètent ces données textuelles. S'y ajoutent également quelques croquis à l'aquarelle réalisés par Roger Boulay dans le but de documenter des détails techniques d'objets, ou bien dans une visée comparative en rassemblant plusieurs objets.

En 2015, la base de données constituée fut transférée au musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie qui en assure depuis la gestion, en la personne de Marianne Tissandier. Cette dernière est également chargée de la base de données d'inventaire des collections du musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie, hébergée sur le même logiciel Micromusée, reliant virtuellement les deux types de collections. Depuis novembre 2022, la base de données de l'IPKD est progressivement mise en ligne afin d'être accessible au plus grand nombre à l'international. La mise en ligne intervient musée par musée car il est nécessaire de reprendre contact avec chacun d'eux pour obtenir l'autorisation de publier les informations et les photographies dont ils sont les dépositaires ainsi que de vérifier éventuellement les éléments rassemblés.

Si la majorité des fiches papier fut indexée pendant la mission IPKD, certaines restent encore à ajouter à la base de données d'inventaire. En 2023 et 2024, Edmond Saume a mené un travail essentiel de création de fiches-objets, afin de rendre accessibles numériquement celles rédigées par Roger Boulay sur papier qui restaient encore inaccessibles. Cette mission est intervenue en parallèle du travail régulier de complément des fiches existantes mené en interne au musée. Ce récolement montre la nécessité de vérifier les informations rassemblées dans les années 1980 lors des premières missions de Roger Boulay. En effet, des changements de numérotation, de désignation ou de provenance furent notés ou des photographies numériques plus récentes furent trouvées, en particulier sur les bases publiées des musées. Les recherches ou les récolements dans les musées conservant des collections kanak conduisent également à l'ajout de nouveaux numéros aux objets kanak connus. La base actuelle est ainsi la synthèse des missions successives effectuées au fil des années. Toutes les informations ajoutées numériquement indiquent la date et le nom de

la personne ayant apporté des ajouts ou des modifications, ce qui permet d'historiciser et d'humaniser les données souvent rendues atemporelles et anonymes dans de telles bases de données numériques (Beltrame, 2015 ; von Oswald, 2022).

En complément des fiches-objets, l'IPKD rassemble des savoirs sur les collections kanak dispersées. Une rubrique en ligne est consacrée à la bibliographie et aux articles de presse traitant du patrimoine kanak dispersé, permettant de rendre honneur aux recherches internationales faites par Roger Boulay, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, ou lors de recherches plus récentes s'appuyant sur l'IPKD (Cerruti, 2023 ; Gallarini, 2023 ; Green, 2023). L'IPKD a vocation également à intervenir comme une ressource de référence, en particulier pour les noms des objets. La renomination des objets des collections dites ethnographiques fait en effet partie des axes de réflexion menés par de nombreux musées au cours des dernières années dans le but de rompre avec certaines terminologies héritières de l'époque coloniale (Beltrame, 2015 ; Bodenstein et al., 2024 ; Brizon, 2023 ; von Oswald, 2022). Le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie fait évoluer certaines désignations d'objets kanak sur sa base de données, qui sert de base à celle de l'IPKD. Un exemple notoire est une typologie d'objets autrefois appelés « hache ostensoir » : ce nom, donné par les Européens du fait de sa similarité avec l'ostensoir catholique, illustre pleinement le « processus d'appropriation globalisée » (Brizon, 2023, p. 114), tant matériel qu'immatériel, opéré par la collecte d'objets. La désignation « hache ostensoir » est à présent remplacée par « hache ou casse-tête de cérémonie (« ostensoir ») »[11] dans les inventaires et les bases de données.

Le travail de l'IPKD étend considérablement le nombre d'objets kanak connus dans le monde. En réunissant des corpus d'objets d'une même typologie, il ouvre de nouvelles perspectives de recherches sur l'histoire de l'art et de la culture matérielle kanak. Les corpus identifiés et dénombrés permettent de mesurer la rareté ou l'exceptionnalité de certains objets (Lagarde, 2024). À titre d'exemple, il est devenu apparent que les colliers de perles en néphrite, des objets de prestige et d'échanges dans le monde kanak, comprennent la plupart du temps moins de 150 perles ; les colliers en comptant davantage sont ainsi exceptionnels, comme en témoigne l'un d'eux originaire de l'aire coutumière Paicî-Cèmuhî de Nouvelle-Calédonie et conservé au musée de Hienghène (ill. 3).

Roger Boulay a tout particulièrement travaillé sur les sculptures réalisées dans le contexte des grandes cases, lieux de pouvoir des chefs kanak progressivement disparus au cours de la période coloniale (Boulay, 1986 ; Boulay, 2021). Son travail s'appuie sur des corpus étendus par le travail de l'IPKD, qui se chiffrent à 737 objets aujourd'hui. A la lumière de ces corpus, son hypothèse est le partage d'un motif commun à l'ensemble du territoire, le nœud de l'interdit, soumis à des variantes régionales.

Par l'extension des corpus d'objets connus, certains qui semblaient autrefois similaires sont plus précisément discernés les uns des autres. Différents types de lances, ayant des fonctions spécifiques pour la guerre ou des cérémonies, sont mieux distingués. La consultation et la manipulation de ces lances dans les musées suggèrent que certaines lances dites de guerre servaient autrefois pour des cérémonies et ont perdu les poils de roussette et les plaquettes en bois qui participaient à les identifier.

11 Un exemplaire de cet objet, conservé au musée cantonal d'archéologie et d'histoire à Lausanne (Suisse), a quant à lui reçu un nouveau nom unique et spécifique, « Nââkwéta » en langue xârâcùù, grâce au travail collaboratif mené entre Claire Brizon, responsable des collections océaniennes du musée, et Denis Pourawa, poète kanak. Pour Denis Pourawa : « Ce mot Nââkwéta a été choisi en référence à la baie de Koutio Kouéta, qui dans la mémoire orale est le lieu de départ d'un objet prestigieux dont l'histoire a été transmise par une parole coutumière clanique » (Brizon, 2023, p. 113).



Illustration 3 : Collier de perles de jade - iti hê mecio - caawe, tribu Tiouandé, aire coutumière Paicî-Cèmuhî de Nouvelle-Calédonie, conservé © le musée de Hienghène, inv. MHI 89.1.15.

Aujourd'hui, l'IPKD et le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie sont devenus des références internationales pour la documentation des collections kanak. Les différentes précisions mentionnées s'opèrent à l'échelle des musées du monde, qui contactent le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie pour son expertise établie et reconnue. Les précisions et compléments d'informations ont également et surtout cours à l'appui des recherches menées auprès des communautés kanak de Nouvelle-Calédonie, premières bénéficiaires de l'IPKD.

Un inventaire au service du peuple kanak et de la Nouvelle-Calédonie

Comme indiqué dès notre introduction, l'IPKD visait tout particulièrement les communautés kanak comme récipiendaires du savoir recueilli. Pour Jean-Marie Tjibaou, cette initiative avait tout d'abord pour but de redonner confiance au peuple kanak culturellement parlant, dans une période encore très largement marquée par les stigmates de la

colonisation et par le racisme (Leblic, 2003 ; Tjibaou, 1996). Dès les premières missions menées par Roger Boulay, les données recueillies furent déposées en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Plusieurs publications (Boulay, 1982 ; Boulay, 1984) voient le jour dans les années 1980 grâce au soutien de l'Office culturel scientifique et technique canaque ; elles sont gratuitement distribuées dans les écoles et les chefferies kanak. Ces publications incluent de larges planches illustrées d'objets du patrimoine kanak dispersé, en particulier des appliques et des flèches faîtières issues de grandes cases. De manière concomitante, des petits festivals organisés de manière régionale poursuivent la dynamique culturelle initiée par Mélanésia 2000. Des cases sont reconstruites à ces occasions dans plusieurs villages dont Sarraméa, Poindimié et Hienghène sur la Grande Terre (Roger Boulay : communication personnelle, entretien en date du 11 décembre 2023). De telles constructions sont favorables à une transmission intergénérationnelle des savoirs de construction. De plus, plusieurs sculpteurs kanak s'emparent de l'aspect formel des sculptures d'appliques pour en faire un motif sculpté autonome et déconnecté de fonctions architecturales : c'est le cas d'artistes comme Gilbert Kaoua ou Marc Déha, dont les œuvres font partie des collections publiques du Fonds d'Art Contemporain Kanak et Océanien (FACKO) préservé par l'ADCK à Nouméa. Les artistes contemporains demeurent particulièrement demandeur·se·s d'informations, notamment en ce qui concerne les techniques de fabrication anciennes pour la sculpture sur bois, la sparterie et la vannerie.

Outre les artistes, les collecteur·rice·s du patrimoine kanak au sein de l'ADCK sont particulièrement intéressé·e·s par les résultats de l'IPKD. Les inventaires du patrimoine dispersé et du patrimoine immatériel kanak dans l'archipel sont lancés de manière concomitante à la fin des années 1970. Ces recherches se poursuivent ensuite de manière parallèle. En 2012 et en 2013, lors de la mission gouvernementale IPKD, Roger Boulay et Emmanuel Kasarhérou présentent l'état d'avancement desrecherches en Nouvelle-Calédonie, en particulier auprès des équipes de collecte orale et immatérielle de l'ADCK. Ces séances de travail permettent de confronter les données rassemblées par l'IPKD avec celles de la tradition orale détenue par les Anciens, personnalités gardiennes des savoirs dans le monde kanak. Les discussions portèrent alors sur les techniques et les matériaux mis en œuvre pour les objets vus par les membres de la mission en Europe, notamment les massues et les monnaies d'échanges, dans la perspective de pouvoir en reproduire certains d'entre eux en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Ainsi qu'il était souhaité initialement, la base de données IPKD demeure une façon de ramener virtuellement les objets inventoriés et les savoirs qui leur sont associés en Nouvelle-Calédonie, en rendant disponibles les informations à toutes les tribus et clans locaux, bien que les informations de collectes ne soient en général pas suffisamment précises pour déterminer une tribu d'origine. L'expression « retour virtuel » n'est pas employée par les membres de la mission IPKD au moment de sa tenue. Même si l'idée d'une mise en ligne faisait partie des souhaits à long terme, les objectifs au moment de l'inventaire étaient avant tout de rencontrer les conservateur·rice·s pour assembler un plus grand corpus d'objets et faciliter la tenue d'expositions dans le futur. A cette époque, la volonté principale des membres était de collaborer et de se présenter sur un pied d'égalité avec les musées hors du territoire de Nouvelle-Calédonie, plutôt que d'adopter une posture revendicative face à la dispersion de leur patrimoine. Aucune demande de restitution n'intervint et ce sont uniquement des demandes d'informations qui furent formulées, dans le souci de nouer des liens de confiance entre institutions et leurs équipes.

Dans cette perspective, un autre usage de l'IPKD depuis ses débuts concerne les musées de Nouvelle-Calédonie. Les premières recherches de Roger Boulay dans les musées hexagonaux et européens sont à l'origine de l'organisation de l'exposition *De Jade et de nacre* au musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie en 1990. La sélection d'objets pour cette exposition s'appuie en effet sur les inventaires nouvellement constitués. L'IPKD est à nouveau mobilisé par les équipes de l'ADCK dans le cadre de la préfiguration de l'ouverture du centre culturel Tjibaou en 1998 : une salle y est spécifiquement dédiée aux retours de certains objets du patrimoine kanak dispersé, qui sont mis en dépôt par des musées hexagonaux, allemands, suisses et australiens pour des durées allant de trois à sept ans entre 1998 et 2013 (Bertin, 2020 ; Bertin, 2024 ; Del Rio & Kasarhérou, 2006). En 2002, la relation entre inventaire et retours d'objets kanak sur le territoire calédonien est officiellement et politiquement actée dans l'Accord particulier sur le développement culturel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. Les résultats de la mission IPKD donnent lieu à une grande exposition, *Kanak, l'art est une parole*, qui se tient au MQB-JC (octobre 2013-janvier 2014) puis au centre culturel Tjibaou (mars-mai 2014). L'IPKD sert encore aujourd'hui à la sélection d'objets que le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie souhaite voir mis en dépôt pour sa réouverture, prévue en 2026. Enfin, les relations nouées par le biais de la recherche sur les collections kanak mondiales sont à l'origine du don en 2009 de 102 objets collectés aux îles Loyautés entre 1878 et 1920 par le couple de missionnaires Emma et James Hadfield par certain·e·s de leurs descendant·e·s[12]. Cette collection est aujourd'hui dispersée dans plusieurs musées au Royaume-Uni, dont le British Museum à Londres et les National Galleries of Scotland à Edinburgh. Outre sa réunion virtuelle par le biais de la base de données IPKD, elle fut à nouveau réunie physiquement en Nouvelle-Calédonie lors d'une exposition intitulée *James et Emma Hadfield, héritage d'une mission, îles Loyauté, 1878-1920*, présentée au musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa (septembre 2013-février 2014).

Plusieurs directions de recherches se poursuivent en Nouvelle-Calédonie à l'appui de la base de données de l'IPKD. Dans un temps futur, des recherches sur les noms vernaculaires des objets (débutées sur la base en ligne du musée[13]) sont prévues. Néanmoins, de telles recherches sont délicates à établir avec certitude, compte tenu des 28 langues kanak parlées en Nouvelle-Calédonie, de l'absence générale de renseignement de localisation précise lors de la collecte des objets et du fait qu'ils pouvaient souvent être échangés entre différentes régions au préalable de leur collecte.

Conclusion

Ainsi, l'IPKD témoigne d'un enchevêtrement de différents espaces sous plusieurs aspects. Cette démarche connecte la Nouvelle-Calédonie, territoire d'origine des objets kanak et lieu physique de gestion de l'IPKD, et les musées qui conservent ces objets dispersés par le monde. L'IPKD relie virtuellement les musées conservant le patrimoine kanak dispersé et le musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie. De plus, il relie les objets eux-mêmes : la base de données permet de réunir à nouveau des fonds d'objets, acquis dans une région similaire ou par une même personnalité mais aujourd'hui dispersés. L'accès à cette base rend possible des recherches sur les collections kanak à l'échelle mondiale : c'est le cas par exemple des recherches de Carolina Gallarini (2023). Ces recherches permettront ultérieurement de mieux dater certains objets, améliorant ainsi par ricochet la compréhension globale des échanges de ces pièces et des matériaux qui les constituent. Enfin, la mise en ligne progres-

12 Voir le don en ligne : https://museenouvellecaledonie-collections.gouv.nc/fr/collections/collection-hadfield?p=1

13 https://museenouvellecaledonie-collections.gouv.nc/fr/collections/objets-kanak?

sive de la base de données étend encore les espaces mobilisés par le fait des consultations numériques à travers le monde.

Ainsi, l'IPKD témoigne d'une mise en relation des objets et des personnes qui les rencontrent, dans une perspective relationnelle (Beltrame, 2015 ; Godsen & Larson, 2008). « Ces histoires de patrimoine sont avant tout des histoires d'hommes, ce sont des histoires de rencontres et de relations qui se font de manière assez. … Parfois au hasard », rappelait Emmanuel Kasarhérou dans une conférence (2023). Des histoires de femmes ajouterons-nous, à l'image de notre collaboration. L'inventaire des objets kanak conservés dans les musées du monde entier constitue un exploit rare, incarnant quatre décennies d'efforts dévoués, humains et financiers. La compilation d'un tel inventaire témoigne d'un engagement à préserver, honorer et rapatrier le patrimoine culturel, même si sa valorisation sur place est faible[14] et la base encore peu connue. L'IPKD est disponible uniquement en français pour l'instant ; la question de sa traduction pour les chercheur·se·s internationaux·ales se pose actuellement, sachant que les ressources humaines allouées à son amélioration sont limitées. Cette potentielle traduction marquerait l'ouverture d'une nouvelle étape pour l'IPKD dans son inscription internationale.

Parmi les difficultés actuelles rencontrées pour la gestion de l'IPKD, on note le temps nécessaire à la constitution de l'inventaire, un processus déjà long, auquel s'ajoute le défi majeur de garantir des financements et un soutien politique stable. Ainsi la pérennité de l'IPKD et de sa base de données en ligne, assuré pour l'instant par le Gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, reste fragile dans un contexte budgétaire tendu, conséquence des tensions politiques de 2024. L'avenir à long terme de ce type de bases patrimoniales reste ainsi une question ouverte, à l'exemple d'initiatives voisines, DigitalBenin et SAWA, dont les financements et la pérennité sont constamment soumis à question. La durabilité de telles ambitions, soumis à des appels à projets sur un temps déterminé, mériterait d'être véritablement interrogée afin de pleinement mettre en œuvre une muséologie transnationale et décoloniale.

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14 La valorisation est presque uniquement faite via les réseaux sociaux du musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie

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Pratique collaborative, transmission des savoirs matériels et immatériels en Polynésie française

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Résumé

Si les techniques de tressage d'éventails anciens de Polynésie française ne sont plus mises en œuvre aujourd'hui, les musées conservent un certain nombre d'exemplaires de ces objets. En mettant en place, au sein de Te Fare Iamanaha–Musée de Tahiti et des Îles, une recherche collaborative et pluridisciplinaire au service de la reconstitution de ces techniques, le projet Rara'a a notamment révélé les enjeux fondamentaux de la transmission des savoir-faire, à l'épreuve du passé et de questionnements contemporains. Les musées apparaissent ainsi comme des espaces propices au dialogue entre art, science et société.

Mots-clés : transmission, vannerie, patrimoine, collaboration, décolonisation

Abstract

Collaborative practice, material and immaterial knowledge transmission in French Polynesia. Although the techniques for weaving traditional fans from French Polynesia are no longer practiced today, museums preserve a number of these objects. By establishing a collaborative and multidisciplinary research initiative within Te Fare Iamanaha – Museum of Tahiti and the Islands to reconstruct these techniques, the Rara'a project has highlighted key issues surrounding the transmission of traditional knowledge, tested against both historical context and contemporary concerns. Museums thus emerge as spaces conducive to dialogue between art, science, and society.

Keywords: transmission, basketry, heritage, collaboration, decolonisation

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À partir du 18e siècle, les productions matérielles des insulaires d'Océanie ont connu une histoire complexe et mouvementée, depuis leur collecte jusqu'à leur dispersion vers les institutions culturelles d'Occident. La trajectoire de ces productions déploie une multiplicité de récits, dont le point commun reste celui d'une culture matérielle soustraite aux groupes qui les produisirent, et dont la valorisation au sein de leurs nouveaux environnements culturels ou muséaux fut parfois émaillée de méprises, de détournements ou d'appropriations.

Au sein des communautés qui façonnèrent ce patrimoine, cette histoire s'est en partie accompagnée d'une dilution des connaissances, d'une mise en sommeil, voire d'une disparition des savoirs et des pratiques liés à ces patrimoines, les trois siècles de relations avec les mondes occidentaux ou asiatiques ayant entraîné des mutations majeures dans les organisations sociales océaniennes.

Dans ce contexte, les musées ont développé des démarches collaboratives en réponse aux demandes des communautés autochtones. Ces positions ont constitué l'une des réponses aux demandes des leaders politiques et culturels océaniens, exprimées dès les années 1980, afin de mieux connaître les collections constituées en dehors de leurs territoires de création et leurs parcours. Elles résultent également des réflexions anthropologiques, menées dans les années 1980-1990, questionnant les processus de mutations des régimes de valeurs incorporés dans ces objets par les différentes actions humaines (Kopytoff, 1986 ; Gell,

1998). Elles participent d'une dynamique mondiale de renouvellement des relations entre musées et communautés autochtones.

Ces étapes, parmi d'autres, ont ainsi préparé les démarches de restitutions et les programmes de recherche en provenances actuelles (Guiot & Mélandri, 2021).

Cette exigence éthique de travailler de manière collaborative et inclusive à la compréhension des patrimoines insulaires océaniens, définis comme un patrimoine partagé, fait son chemin. Ce patrimoine dispersé entre sa population, sa terre d'origine et ses « musées d'adoption » (Del Rio & Kasarhérou, 2006, p.54) s'envisage ici comme le cœur d'une recherche collaborative dont la démarche vise à produire un savoir également partagé.

Aujourd'hui, en France comme en Europe, le développement de projets s'appuyant sur des collections muséales et une méthodologie collaborative ne cesse de croître. Ce phénomène comble un retard manifeste par rapport à des institutions d'Amérique du Nord, d'Australie ou de Aotearoa Nouvelle-Zélande (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999), actives dans ce domaine depuis les années 1990. Dans leur ensemble, ces projets visent à décoloniser les savoirs, décentrer les réflexions du prisme occidental et à mettre les objets à disposition des descendant·e·s des communautés qui les ont produites. Dans la continuité de ces recherches de partage de savoir, fut initié au musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (MQB-JC) un projet autour des vanneries de Polynésie française (PF), dans une perspective de restitution et de valorisation des patrimoines insulaires. Il s'agissait dans un premier temps de participer à une meilleure connaissance de certaines pièces dont la technique de tressage restait méconnue pour les conservateurs comme pour les populations concernées. Intitulé depuis 2022 *Rara'a. Tresser en Polynésie française*, et étendu à la principale institution muséale de PF, *Te Fare Iamanaha* – Musée de Tahiti et des Îles (TFI-MTI), ce projet a pu se développer dans une démarche collaborative, en s'appuyant sur le partage de collections, sur la conjugaison de savoirs et savoir-faire autochtones, d'analyses scientifiques des objets et l'association de regards pluriels.

Avec cette approche collaborative centrale, le projet assure la transmission d'un patrimoine tant matériel qu'immatériel, faisant renaître des savoirs botaniques et des techniques de tressage à partir de l'observation attentive d'objets vieux de deux siècles, conservés dans les musées et disparus au sein des communautés elles-mêmes.

Le projet *Rara'a* répond ainsi aux questionnements de « Transmission » proposés par le colloque ICOFOM d'octobre 2023 en Nouvelle-Calédonie, en partenariat avec l'Association des musées et établissements patrimoniaux de Nouvelle-Calédonie : Quelles formes peut prendre la transmission intergénérationnelle au sein de l'institution muséale ? Quelle peut-être l'implication des acteur·rice·s du patrimoine et celle des publics ?

À propos des patrimoines océaniens et du rôle actuel des musées, J-D Tokainiua Devatine, conseiller d'éducation artistique et référent pédagogique du Centre des Métiers d'Art (CMA) de PF, apporte une première forme de réponse. Il insiste sur la nécessité de l'étude des collections muséales et souligne la capacité de ces objets à pouvoir synthétiser et témoigner de savoir-faire techniques et visions esthétiques, de rapports au monde (qu'ils soient sociaux, religieux ou métaphysiques), de diffusions, d'échange et permettent même de suggérer des hybridation et mutations. Loin d'être tournée seulement vers le passé :

> L'interrogation des œuvres des musées sous le prisme des savoir-faire et de leur

> histoire technique en complément de l'histoire factuelle des acquisitions des collections est un levier remarquable, qui suscite un regain d'intérêt auprès des jeunes et inscrit dans les consciences une fonction nouvelle des établissements muséaux.[1]

Dans cette continuité, le projet *Rara'a* se positionne également sur les enjeux des savoirs locaux (accessibilité des données, partagées, ouvertes, réutilisables dans le respect du droit d'auteur sur les savoirs traditionnels et les expressions culturelles traditionnelles) et la manière dont il est possible de les intégrer dans les pratiques décisionnelles pour un avenir durable.

Bien que située en Polynésie française, un contexte où le concept de décolonisation trouve nécessairement une lecture alternative (Gagné & Salaün, 2010), cette expérimentation entendait éprouver une méthodologie permettant de redonner « voix » aux objets conservés au musée par les expertes en vannerie issues de différentes îles de l'archipel et mobilisées dans le projet. Il s'agissait en cela de contribuer aux réflexions en cours sur les modalités de réappropriation et de souveraineté autochtone – que l'on peut connaître en Nouvelle-Calédonie également (Puel & Van Geert, 2021) – ainsi que sur le rôle d'un musée territorial comme *Te Fare Iamanaha* dans ce processus (Nyssen, 2024). Nous proposons d'exposer ici cette démarche, sa méthodologie et les premiers résultats du projet *Rara'a*, tresser en Polynésie française.

La genèse du projet : un constat au cœur du musée

En 2016-2017, les équipes curatoriales et de conservation-restauration du MQB-JC menèrent une analyse historique (provenance des œuvres, état de l'art des sources) et scientifique de huit éventails *tāhii* des îles Marquises–*Te Henua Ènata*. Cette étude faisait suite à un constat exprimé à plusieurs reprises par des délégations polynésiennes, reçues après l'ouverture du musée en 2006 : certaines techniques anciennes de tressage, associées à des objets de prestige, sont aujourd'hui éteintes dans plusieurs archipels. Parmi ces objets, les éventail *tāhii* se distinguaient par une iconographie européenne abondante qui témoignait de leur importance dans la culture matérielle marquisienne ancienne où ils étaient associés aux personnes de haut rang (Ivory, 1990 ; Lavondès, 1995 et 2016). Leur production, empreinte d'un savoir-faire remarquable et spécifique à leur archipel, alliait mondes féminin (tressage) et masculin (sculpture).

La colonisation dans l'archipel (1838-1842) provoqua des transformations profondes de la société, un dramatique phénomène de dépeuplement (Rallu, 1991 ; Sand, 2024), une perte des savoirs et une suspension de la transmission. L'arrêt de la production des *tāhii* fut manifeste dès le début du 20e siècle. Durant les années 1970, une forme de reconquête culturelle se déploie dans les îles de Polynésie française, mais se focalise aux Marquises sur la sculpture et le *tapa* (étoffe d'écorce battue), au détriment du tressage. Ce constat de la « perte », ou de ce « sommeil », dont l'expérience de *Rara'a* montrèrent ensuite qu'il n'était pas irrémédiable ni définitif, marqua le point de départ de l'étude ciblée sur les vanneries des îles Marquises. De même, les multiples hypothèses sur la nature des fibres utilisées, formulées par les voyageurs et ethnographes ayant eu accès à ces objets, nourrissaient le besoin d'analyses scientifiques plus poussées. Ces constats motivèrent les prémices des recherches sur ces tressages spécifiques, menées par Christophe Moulhérat, alors chargé des analyses au sein du pôle conservation-restauration du MQB-JC, Magali Mélandri, responsable des collections Océanie du MQB-JC, et Céline Kerfant,

1 Intervention colloque ICOFOM 2023, Nouméa.

archéo-botaniste, à l'aide d'outils numériques d'imagerie – tomographie aux rayons X, stéréo-microscopie optique sous caméra et microscopie numérique 3D Hirox®. Cet outillage permettait d'observer ces pièces sans méthodologie invasive, d'explorer leur structure interne, de contribuer à qualifier la nature des fibres et de constituer ainsi une documentation visuelle précise à même d'être confrontée aux expertises techniques contemporaines en PF. Ces premières images révélaient déjà la finesse de préparation des fibres végétales de la famille des *Pandanaceae*, ou encore des ébauches de gestes (Kerfant, Mélandri & Moulhérat, 2019). Cette étape permit également de définir un vocabulaire commun de description technique de la structure de l'éventail, réemployable dans la suite du projet afin d'enregistrer leurs équivalents en langues vernaculaires polynésiennes.

En 2020-2021, vint le temps d'un premier partage *in situ* avec les communautés. Une convention de dépôt à long terme, signée par les trois chercheurs impliqués dans l'étude de 2016-2017 et la Direction de la Culture et du Patrimoine (DCP) de PF visait à la diffusion



Illustration 1 : Observation du tressage d'un panier de l'île de Rapa (TFI-MTI), mars 2023. Photo par Hélène Guiot, © Te Fare Iamanaha–musée de Tahiti et des îles.

des dossiers documentaires produit auprès de onze institutions culturelles et scientifiques, à Tahiti et aux îles Marquises (musées, CMA de PF, Université de PF-UPF, bibliothèques, fédérations culturelles locales). Ce partage constituait une réappropriation du matériau scientifique auprès des institutions de recherche, de valorisation et de médiation des patrimoines de PF. Cette relation d'institution à institution, entre France hexagonale et collectivité d'outre-mer ne pouvait cependant qu'être une étape, ouvrant sur des perspectives de collaboration locale.

Le projet *Rara'a*, tresser des collaborations en Polynésie française

Les vanneries sont des artefacts qui conservent, dans leur matérialité, toutes les techniques de leur mise en œuvre (Jolie & Mc Brinn, 2010), lesquelles ne sont pas reproductibles par une machine (Bunn, 2016). Ces deux caractères font des vanneries et des vannier·ère·s les dépositaires de technologies végétales anciennes (Respicio, 2000).

Aussi, les premières découvertes conduisent en 2022-2023 à la mise en œuvre d'une dynamique articulant différents acteurs qui agissent localement pour les savoirs et la transmission.

Le projet prend alors le nom de « *Rara'a*, tresser en Polynésie française. Partage d'expériences et analyses des collections de vanneries de *Te Fare Iamanaha* ». Porté par TFI-MTI, il reçoit une subvention de Archipel.eu ainsi que du Haut-Commissariat de la PF et s'établit avec les soutiens du MQB-JC (prêt du microscope 3D Hirox®), du Service de l'artisanat traditionnel et du CMA de PF qui contribuent à la structuration du projet de recherche et qui se concrétise par la mise en place d'un atelier collaboratif en mars 2023.

Rara'a, une recherche pluridisciplinaire et culturellement multi-située

Le choix du terme *rara'a* (« tresser » en *reo* -langue- Tahiti) reflète l'ancrage polynésien du projet. Le projet envisage ainsi les vanneries dans leur profondeur de temps et dans la pluralité des populations de PF, afin de co-construire une recherche qui articule le savoir des expertes polynésiennes, les données muséographiques, historiques, anthropologiques et botaniques, et celles des sciences du patrimoine.
Dans le cadre de l'atelier collaboratif de mars 2023, le groupe de travail réunissait :

- l'équipe de conservation du *Te Fare Iamanaha* : Tamara Maric, conservatrice, Marine Vallée, assistante de conservation et la directrice du musée, Miriama Bono ;
- quatre vannières expertes : Vainui Barsinas, installée dans l'île de Rapa (îles Australes), spécialisée dans le travail du roseau des montagnes *ā'eho* ; Emerita Taputu, originaire de Rurutu (îles Australes), ancienne enseignante au CMA et experte dans le travail du pandanus *pae'ore* ; Tevahine Teariki, originaire de Nukutavake (Tuāmotu) et spécialisée dans le travail de la palme de cocotier *nī'au* ; Iaera Tefaafana originaire de Rimatara (îles Australes) et experte dans le travail du *pae'ore ;*
- deux étudiantes en Diplôme National MA de parcours Fibres et textiles, héritages polynésiens : processus innovant et éco-responsable (CMA de PF) : Hinerupe Lehot et Océane Tamati Wong, et le référent pédagogique du CMA, J-D Tokainiua Devatine ;
- Hélène Guiot, ethno-archéologue, spécialiste des patrimoines polynésiens ;
- Céline Kerfant, archéobotaniste ;
- Magali Mélandri, responsable de l'unité patrimoniale Océanie – Insulinde au MQB-JC.

Des vannières expertes représentant la diversité des savoir-faire insulaires ont été associées au projet.

Méthodologies

L'atelier combinait donc l'observation au microscope 3D Hirox® de vanneries de Polynésie centrale et orientale issues des collections de TFI-MTI, à des expérimentations de tressage d'après les hypothèses techniques émises par l'observation. Dans ce contexte, les vannières ont accepté de mobiliser leurs savoir-faire afin de redonner vie à des techniques passées qui n'étaient pas nécessairement liées à leur identité d'origine.



Illustration 2. Observation au microscope 3D Hirox® des détails du tressage de l'éventail inv. 78.03.44 (TFI-MTI), février 2023. Photo par Hélène Guiot. © Te Fare Iamanaha–musée de Tahiti et des îles.

S'inscrivant dans une démarche de partage des données, le projet *Rara'a* a dès le départ, souhaité appliquer les principes FAIR (Facile à trouver, Accessible, Interopérable, Réutilisable) et CARE (avantage Collectif, Autorité en matière de contrôle, Responsabilité, Éthique) pour la gestion et l'intendance des données scientifiques. Les principes FAIR, au cœur de la science ouverte, visent à faciliter la découverte des données, leur accessibilité durable (libre, gratuite et sécurisée), leur combinaison (par l'emploi de langage partagé par tous) et leur réutilisation, impliquant de fournir des informations sur les conditions de leur exploitation (voir par exemple Wilkinson et al., 2016). Les principes CARE, en complément aux principes FAIR, concernent spécifiquement la gouvernance des données autochtones (mis en place pour la première fois par GIDA, 2019), afin que les populations concernées puissent en tirer un avantage (croissance, innovation inclusive, résultats équitables, gouvernance des données, maximiser l'usage futur, etc.).

Lors des trois semaines d'atelier, l'observation s'est concentrée sur les collections d'éventails du TFI-MTI, ainsi que sur un panier et un soutien-gorge de costume de danse de l'île de Rapa (îles Australes). Ces deux derniers objets, confectionnés en fibre de *kiekie* (*Freycine-*

tia impavida) ont servi de corpus de comparaison pour les *tāhii* éventails marquisiens, en constituant des exemples intéressants d'usage de fibres similaires, illustrant toutefois des tailles de brins et des périodes différentes. Ensuite, la recherche s'est focalisée sur deux éventails *tāhiri*, provenant de l'ancienne collection James Hooper, acquise par le musée en 1978[2]. Associés aux îles de la Société dans les inventaires du musée, ces deux éventails seraient originaires des îles Cook (Polynésie centrale), mais vraisemblablement collectés aux îles de la Société, comme cela avait cours au 18e siècle, où ces archipels entretenaient depuis longtemps des liens dynamiques (Te Rangi Hiroa, 1944).

Leur technique d'assemblage complexe a nécessité plusieurs allers-retours de phases d'observation des objets, à l'œil nu et avec l'Hirox®, ainsi que des phases d'expérimentation initiées par les vannières soucieuses d'allier étude et pratique pour mieux appréhender la compréhension technique de ces objets patrimoniaux.

Acteurs locaux

Pour TFI-MTI, *Rara'a* incarnait l'une de ses missions fondamentales en tant qu'institution muséale principale de PF et matérialisait l'importance de l'aspect vivant et inclusif au cœur de son nouveau projet scientifique et culturel (Bono et al., 2022 ; Nyssen, 2024)[3]. La préparation de cette nouvelle phase du projet a coïncidé avec l'installation des collections dans la nouvelle salle d'exposition permanente, et le début du volet *in situ* s'est articulé avec sa réouverture début mars 2023. Ainsi, certains objets associés aux pratiques de tressage de fibres étaient tout nouvellement exposés, tandis que le reste du corpus des collections du TFI-MTI comprenait plus de 200 références (exception faite des costumes de danse *'ori Tahiti*).

Deux autres acteurs institutionnels locaux ont contribué à structurer et installer le projet à Tahiti.

Le Service de l'artisanat traditionnel, créé en 1984, est guidé par plusieurs missions dont le sens a évolué depuis sa naissance. Parmi elles, il s'agit notamment de structurer, professionnaliser et promouvoir le secteur, et d'accompagner son développement économique et social. S'il s'est concentré à ses origines sur l'accompagnement financier des projets des artisans traditionnels, il intervient beaucoup plus sur le terrain aujourd'hui, notamment pour faire face à des enjeux plus larges de préservation et de diffusion des savoirs et savoir-faire traditionnels. En effet, jadis présent dans presque toutes ses pratiques et dans tous les archipels, l'artisanat traditionnel est aujourd'hui fortement restreint par différentes réalités. Les enjeux et logiques économiques finissent paradoxalement par avoir un impact sur les créations et sur la transmission des savoir-faire et imposent de faire évoluer les regards et de préserver ce qui peut l'être.

Le CMA est un établissement de formation créé en 1980 à Pape'ete, à l'initiative de Henri Bouvier, ancien élève de l'école Boulle, qui prit souche à Tahiti (Rémy & Rémy, 1997). L'établissement, à travers un parcours de formation allant du Certificat polynésien des Métiers d'art au Diplôme national des métiers d'art et du design, valant grade Licence, dont les partenaires sont le Lycée Samuel Ra'apoto (LSR) et l'UPF, a pour mission la formation théorique et pratique d'artistes et d'artisans hautement qualifiés dans les disciplines artistiques traditionnelles et modernes, la recherche et le perfectionnement des techniques artisanales. Sa philosophie originelle est également de permettre à des adolescents

2 N° inv. 78.03.43 et .44.

3 « Les missions », TFI-MTI https://www.museetahiti.pf/le-musee-de-tahiti-et-des-iles/, page consultée le 22/11/2024.

parfois en situation d'échec et de décrochage scolaire de trouver une voie de réussite dans les métiers d'art polynésien que sont, entre autres, la sculpture sur bois, la gravure sur nacre, la vannerie, le tressage et le dessin. Bouvier (1982) déclara à propos de la création du CMA que son « but principal [était] de doubler l'action de formation artisanale par le sauvetage social d'une partie des enfants dont la scolarité se [terminait] à 14 ou 15 ans ».

L'établissement permet aussi à des adultes en reconversion économique, ou longtemps marginalisés scolairement, de suivre une formation et d'être reconnus pour leur talent créatif et de conceptualisation.

Les principes de l'enseignement sont de régénérer les patrimoines polynésiens en les faisant évoluer, via l'acquisition de techniques de représentation variées, la connaissance de l'histoire, la compréhension de la société actuelle et l'apport des nouvelles technologies. Il s'agit de laisser des traces de la vitalité des cultures polynésiennes, de les diffuser et de les faire perdurer dans le temps : enrichir les patrimoines culturels océaniens est une manière de contribuer à l'œuvre ancestrale et d'honorer les ancêtres.

Une variété d'approches pédagogiques (cours magistraux, ateliers pratiques, projets collaboratifs, *workshops* et partenariats institutionnels nationaux et internationaux) encourage les étudiants à explorer les processus de fabrication tant traditionnels que ceux ancrés dans des territoires différents, et interrogent l'impact de leur production sur les écosystèmes insulaires.

La synergie transversale mise en place dans le cadre du projet *Rara'a*, entre praticien·ne·s, chercheur·e·s, institutions culturelles et structures de formation et de professionnalisation, n'avait pas jusqu'ici était expérimentée dans le cadre de projets culturels à Tahiti. C'est donc d'abord la construction d'un collectif de travail qui a présidé au déroulement de ce *workshop* à Tahiti, ciment indispensable au développement d'un tel projet.

Des résultats pluriels, centrés sur une problématique de transmission

Redécouvrir et transmettre

La (re)découverte de matières utilisées pour certaines œuvres des collections du TFI-MTI a ouvert de nouveaux horizons et contribue à sortir d'une tendance selon laquelle ce qui se fait aujourd'hui est la « seule » tradition transmise par les ancêtres et admise, empêchant de s'interroger sur les pratiques anciennes réelles et de s'autoriser à questionner, interpréter et réinventer la création. Ainsi, des pratiques pourtant récentes se perdent, à l'image du *kiekie*, appelé « osier » à Rapa. Comme le note Vainui Barsinas :

> C'est la racine aérienne qui est utilisée. Je connaissais déjà cette fibre ; elle était utilisée pour la confection d'un panier de Rapa exposé au musée, et des costumes de danse que ma sœur avait portés en 1992 pour le Heiva [concours de danse traditionnelle].

La confrontation aux techniques anciennes dont la mise en sommeil se confond parfois avec un oubli ou une perte irrémédiable, a permis aux spécialistes de repenser la nécessité de transmettre afin d'éviter l'effritement des savoir-faire. Cette dynamique relationnelle entre deux communautés, l'une praticienne et l'autre muséale, a nourri une forme d'agentivité des collectifs au service de la connaissance et sa transmission croisée.

Les étudiantes Océane Wong et Hinerupe Lehot ont pu travailler avec des intervenant·e·s de nombreuses disciplines et dans un cadre à la fois de formation universitaire et de recherche artisanale, muséale, ethnographique et botanique sur les matériaux, les savoirs et les techniques représente un tremplin professionnel pour les jeunes s'intéressant aux patrimoines océaniens.

Transmettre au-delà des spécialités

Le projet *Rara'a* s'est constitué autour d'une approche fondamentale, celle du partage de savoir-faire et d'expérience. Les trois spécialistes identifiées par le Service de l'artisanat traditionnel ont ainsi apporté leur expertise technique et culturelle, au travers de leurs identités culturelles distinctes, de leurs parcours et de leurs spécialités.

Barsinas a relevé l'intérêt de ces spécialités croisées qui ont permis à chacune d'apporter ses connaissances relatives à sa matière de prédilection. Comme elle le souligne, ce projet collaboratif a mis en valeur l'expertise de chacune, facilitant la compréhension des techniques mises en œuvre pour le tressage des œuvres qui leur étaient présentées. Elle explique :

> Le plus difficile a été de trouver la base du tressage : il a fallu de nombreux essais sur les deux premières semaines du projet. Pour cela, nous avons dû souvent revenir à l'Hirox pour observer l'objet, défaire les tressages puis recommencer à tresser à partir du début.

Cette méthodologie du croisement des savoirs entre en disruption avec les pratiques en place dans les archipels de PF. En effet, la représentation de ces archipels s'exprime au travers d'objets, qui symbolisent à eux seuls une dynamique forte de leur spécialisation. Probablement impulsée dans le cadre d'une organisation administrative déconcentrée, cette vision a été accentuée par les pratiques touristiques. Une cartographie économique menée en 2022 par le Service de l'artisanat traditionnel montre clairement cette répartition des savoir-faire très marquée : 50% des vannier·ère·s sont concentré·e·s aux Australes et 72% des sculpteurs-graveurs aux Marquises. Ainsi, en lien avec une approche économique devenue prégnante dans le secteur, de nombreux savoir-faire se sont perdus au profit d'une spécialisation permettant de répondre aux attentes des acheteurs, impactant à terme la diversité des pratiques.

Cette spécialisation génère par ailleurs un fort sentiment de propriété des savoir-faire, en contradiction avec un non moins fort sentiment de n'être qu'un maillon face à des enseignements qui n'appartiennent pas à l'individu mais au collectif. Des consultations du secteur menées fin 2024 ont montré la réticence des artisans des Australes à enseigner aux artisans des Tuamotu la préparation du *pae'ore*, tandis que le récent renouveau de la pratique du *tapa* à Tahiti inquiète certains préparateurs de *tapa* des Marquises, qui considèrent ce savoir-faire lié à leur identité.

Cette même réticence a pourtant permis de mener une réflexion spécifique dans le cadre du projet *Rara'a*, dont les protocoles de travail et de gestion des données collectées ont été présentés aux comités culturels des Australes pour validation préalable à la participation des expertes de cet archipel. Cette étape s'est révélée essentielle : quelles méthodologies adopter pour enregistrer, archiver et valoriser les données d'une recherche qui se doit de tenir compte des impératifs de l'ensemble des collectifs ? Quelle gouvernance des données autochtones dans le cadre d'un projet impliquant une telle diversité d'interlocuteurs et dont certaines finalités visent à valoriser auprès des publics des musées les pratiques expertes de vannerie en PF ?

Transmettre grâce à des approches croisées

Cette situation s'exprime conjointement aux problématiques de la transmission des savoir-faire, notamment en raison de la réserve des jeunes générations à s'impliquer dans ces métiers perçus comme manquant d'attractivité. En effet, la génération des grands-parents a favorisé les parcours scolaires en incitant leurs enfants à étudier pour accéder à un métier et à un avenir plus facile que le leur. Or, le principe de la transmission des savoir-faire traditionnels est souvent intra familial. Les artisans se sont alors trouvés sans successeurs, avec un désintérêt de leurs proches, aggravé par des pénuries récurrentes de matières premières.

Le projet *Rara'a* a donné toute sa mesure dans ce contexte, en permettant de rechercher des savoir-faire disparus, mais surtout en soulignant, pour les artisans traditionnels participant, la nécessité – pour ne pas dire l'urgence – de mettre leur expertise en commun et transmettre leur savoir-faire afin que leurs créations ne se retrouvent un jour dans des musées sans que personne ne puisse retrouver le fil de leur histoire.

La PF est probablement à l'aube d'un tournant dans ses modes de transmission des savoir-faire traditionnels, tournant opéré dans d'autres pays du Pacifique il y a une vingtaine d'années[4] : face au risque de perte des savoir-faire, les artisans traditionnels ont accepté de transmettre aux jeunes qui souhaitaient s'engager dans ces métiers, indépendamment d'un lien familial. Les artisans traditionnels de PF seront peut-être amenés à faire ces choix, mais en attendant divers projets de formation sont mis en œuvre pour préserver ce qui peut l'être, maintenir une diversité des pratiques et lutter contre la spécialisation en cours. Ces projets permettent également de rappeler le lien avec l'environnement et de remettre en valeur des plantes oubliées ou en voie de disparition, qui sont pourtant nécessaires à la pratique de l'artisanat.

On constate par ailleurs à quel point la pratique de l'artisanat en lien avec les logiques commerciales et quotidiennes est devenue solitaire. Les projets transversaux acquièrent ainsi une importance redoublée : ils mettent en relation les artisans traditionnels, permettent de revenir à une approche plus collective, enrichissante, tournée vers la culture. Chacune des expertes vannières du projet *Rara'a* a ainsi apprécié sa participation qui a permis techniquement de découvrir en détail les savoir-faire anciens dans la réalisation des éventails de Polynésie centrale et orientale, tout en revenant à une pratique collaborative, et de réinscrire celle-ci dans une tradition millénaire, du sacré, présent dans les collections du musée jusque dans les créations contemporaines.

Musée et visibilité du patrimoine polynésien : enjeux et pratiques à déployer

Le projet *Rara'a* s'inscrit dans une démarche de productions artistiques et techniques adossée à un projet de recherche ancré dans un musée du Pacifique. En tant qu'institution muséale, la conservation matérielle demeure l'un des aspects centraux des activités du musée : l'équipe s'est ainsi interrogée sur la conservation des différents éléments matérialisant les étapes techniques explorées dans cette tentative de réappropriation du tressage des éventails.

Comment définir ces critères de sélection pour le développement du projet et pour une représentativité juste tant sur le plan documentaire que vis-à-vis des participants? La con

4 Communication personnelle Hanalei Marques Marzan à Vaiana Giraud, 2024.

servation d'une documentation digitale, effectuée à partir d'une sélection pertinente de certains échantillons physiques, marqueurs des étapes clés du projet de recherche, doit-elle être privilégiée ? Ces questions renvoient également aux sujets du stockage des données tant numériques que matérielles, et au rôle de la numérisation documentaire comme outil d'allègement de ces aspects techniques et de diffusion facilitée. Ces processus de sélection, s'ils doivent s'opérer selon les préconisations des praticiennes vannières et être documentés pour eux-mêmes, n'oblitèrent pas la question de la diffusion future de ces éléments. La gouvernance des données produites par les vannières lors de l'atelier *Rara'a* doit rester « entre leurs mains », quitte à entrer en contradiction avec les injonctions d'ouverture des données défendues par les institutions de recherche et les musées (De Largy Healy & Heintz, 2024).

L'initiative d'un tel projet interroge également le statut de l'artiste quant aux résultats finaux qui pourraient être remis au musée au terme de l'expérience : s'agit-il de commandes artistiques à acquérir et doivent-elles être inventoriées par le musée ?

Par ailleurs, ce projet permet de mettre en lumière une question importante relative au respect de la propriété intellectuelle des savoirs et savoir-faire des vannières et implique de définir plus finement le contexte juridique et financier de leur intervention. Cette prise en compte juridique – interrogeant les sujets cruciaux de la gouvernance des données autochtones, de la propriété intellectuelle, voire de brevets dédiés à certaines techniques spécifiques – faciliterait le sujet de la diffusion ou non des « données » réunies lors de cet atelier. La définition d'un tel cadre, en complément des principes FAIR et CARE, serait une réponse à la forme de tension qui s'opère aujourd'hui entre le fait de rendre plus attractifs les patrimoines insulaires tout en garantissant un accès restreint à certains savoirs réservés aux communautés concernées.

S'agissant du projet *Rara'a*, et afin de respecter notamment les restrictions des associations culturelles, les essais techniques réalisés par les vannières, les échantillons et préparations des matériaux sont pour le moment conservés au sein du TFI-MTI sans diffusion externe, tout comme les enregistrements détaillés (photos, vidéos, documents écrits) produits durant le *workshop*.

Enfin, il convient également de s'interroger sur l'ouverture de ce projet à un corpus plus étendu des collections en fibres végétales du TFI-MTI, l'inclusion plus larges d'expert·e·s et de communautés, ainsi qu'à d'autres formes que l'étude croisée de techniques et savoir-faire nourries de l'histoire des trajectoires et provenances des collections patrimoniales dispersées.

En octobre 2023, par exemple, la modélisation d'un dispositif collaboratif d'étude des collections du musée s'est poursuivie, avec l'accueil d'une équipe de conservateurs du Museum of New Zealand–*Te Papa Tongarewa* de Wellington (*Te Papa*), accompagnée d'une délégation de onze artistes océaniennes de plusieurs régions du Pacifique, spécialistes de la pratique du *tapa* (Mallon, 2023). L'objectif de cette rencontre, sous la direction artistique du Dr Pauline Reynolds, était d'échanger autour de la pratique, des étapes préliminaires aux techniques de battage et de décor. Il s'agissait aussi de rassembler ces artistes autour de l'un des recueils d'échantillons de *tapa* rassemblés par Alexander Shaw, collectés durant les trois voyages de James Cook dans le Pacifique au 18e siècle, acquis en 2021 par Te Papa et exposé dans la salle temporaire du TFI-MTI pendant les neuf jours du projet. Certains échantillons, acquis aux îles de la Société, revenaient pour la première fois dans l'archipel.

Étaient également conviées l'artiste Hinatea Colombani (du centre culturel Arioi), les spécialistes des traditions orales et notamment du tapa marquisien Sarah Vaki et Tutana Tetuanui-Peters, ainsi que des agents des traditions orales de la DCP. En parallèle, une visite au CMA a également été programmée et des ateliers de confection ont été menés pour les étudiants du centre, ainsi que du DN-Made du LSR.

Chaque artiste expert était ainsi invité à répondre au recueil d'échantillons en réalisant six pièces évoquant passé, présent et futur assemblés dans deux ballots distincts, remis à chacune des institutions partenaires. Du 14 octobre au 4 décembre 2024, une exposition de ces réalisations a été organisée à la galerie Adam (Wellington) et intitulée « Vaiei Tupuna »[5]. Les commentaires des visiteurs louaient la beauté, l'informativité, et le lien entre histoire et communautés de cet événement[6]. Les productions remises au TFI-MTI seront incluses dans un projet curatorial à venir.

Conclusion

Moteur de réappropriation de collections patrimoniales, savoir-faire et techniques par les acteurs contemporains de la création artistique, le projet *Rara'a* a permis de reconsidérer et renouer les liens culturels établis de longue date entre les populations d'archipels distincts. La transversalité à l'œuvre lors de cet atelier a permis de relativiser les particularismes locaux affirmés par les institutions de valorisation culturelle et touristique depuis le milieu des années 1970, attribuant à chaque archipel de PF des savoirs techniques quasi-exclusifs. Le musée est devenu un lieu à investir par les experts et les étudiants issus des cultures ayant produit ces artéfacts. Ainsi, ceux du CMA, s'y essayent par la reproduction de pièces anciennes, avec succès.

Le développement d'une recherche collaborative et multi-située a permis de co-construire une méthode de travail ainsi que des connaissances, qui ont pour finalité d'être conservées durablement, d'être accessibles et d'être utilisées comme supports de nouvelles dynamiques muséologiques davantage plurielles (Bergeron & Rivet, 2021). Les savoirs acquis sur ces patrimoines océaniens conservés dans les musées offrent une visibilité renouvelée de ces derniers : ils permettent de réactiver leurs circulations, de manifester leur caractère agissant et leur capacité à tisser des liens[7] dans un contexte local ayant ses spécificités, ses paradoxes parfois. Ces dimensions comptent parmi les missions centrales d'un musée du 21e siècle, en tant que lieu d'action collectif, avec et pour la société.

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6 Merci à Sophie Thorn de nous avoir partagé le contenu du livre d'or de la galerie.

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Part II:
Rethinking Indigenous Island Museologies

Learning from Pacific museologies: Heritage, culture and environment in the islands of Moana Oceania

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Abstract

In the South Pacific, galleries, libraries, archives, museums and heritage organisations have been transformed over the last 30 years in response to the new museology, Indigenous rights and the community demand for inclusion. The Indigenous Polynesian sense of continuity and connectedness challenges the western idea that people and things, nature and culture, past and present are separate. Rather, people are situated within a continuum of time and space and in intimate relations with the natural world. How do these distinct ways of seeing, being and doing in the islands of the South Pacific reshape museums and cultural heritage management, particularly regarding the climate crises that threaten the very existence of Indigenous culture?

Résumé

S'inspirer des muséologies du Pacifique : Patrimoine, culture et environnement dans les îles de Moana Océanie. Dans le Pacifique Sud, les galeries, bibliothèques, archives, musées et organisations patrimoniales ont été transformés au cours des trente dernières années sous l'influence de la nouvelle muséologie, des droits des peuples autochtones et de la demande communautaire d'inclusion. Le sens polynésien autochtone de la continuité et de l'interconnexion remet en question l'idée occidentale selon laquelle les personnes et les objets, la nature et la culture, le passé et le présent sont séparés. Au contraire, les individus sont situés dans un continuum de temps et d'espace, en relation intime avec le monde naturel. Comment ces manières distinctes de voir, d'être et d'agir dans les îles du Pacifique Sud transforment-elles les musées et la gestion du patrimoine culturel, en particulier face aux crises climatiques qui menacent l'existence même des cultures autochtones ?

We sweat and cry salt water
So we know the ocean is really in our blood
Teresia Teaiwa

European visions of the South Pacific (Smith, 1987) have represented this vast region as idyllic and calm, but in reality it is far from peaceful and beset by many complex problems, not least the climate crises. The Pacific Ocean, or Moana Oceania, far from being a vast empty space as conceived by outside travellers during the colonial period, is seen by the peoples of the Pacific Islands themselves as a living web that has always connected people, objects and social relations (Thomas, 1997). To Tongan intellectual Epeli Hauʻofa, it is a "sea of islands" (Hauʻofa, 2008). The Polynesian sense of connectedness, for example the Māori concept of whakapapa, genealogy or relatedness, stands in contrast to the western belief in the separation of people and things, nature and culture, past and present (Taonui, 2011). Rather, people see themselves situated within a continuum of time and space and in intimate relations with the natural world.

How might these distinct ways of seeing, being and doing in the islands of the South Pacific reshape museums and cultural heritage management? What kind of future museum may emerge from debates about Indigenous knowledge, a natural environment threatened by climate change and the need for inter-generational transmission? This article reports on current work in galleries, libraries, archives, museums and heritage organisation across Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) and the Pacific, especially those projects that, in engaging in issues such as decolonisation of collections and curatorial practice, revitalisation of arts and culture, and community-led climate action, are transforming museology and generating new models of museums and museum practice. It argues that from these experiments a new Indigenous museology is emerging – integrated, holistic and relational – which offers salient lessons for a divided world beset by polarisation, disconnection and environmental collapse.

Island thinking: People, land, sea, time and space

Pacific people, according to Hauʻofa, "were connected rather than separated by the sea. Far from being sea-locked peoples marooned on coral or volcanic tips of land, islanders formed an oceanic community based on voyaging" (1998, p.152). Hauʻofa put it like this:

> There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power. When you focus this way you stress the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships. … Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. (Hauʻofa, 1994, pp. 201, 208)

Like Hauʻofa, in the poem that opens this article Teresia Teaiwa sees the ocean *in* us, a very different view of the world to the bifurcated Cartesian sense of nature and culture. Samoan head of state Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taʻisi Efi, faced with the prospect of islands inundated by sea rise, declares that to combat change, we need to think like a fish (Tamasese Taʻisi Efi, 2018). This notion of islandness, and the inter-relationship rather

than the separation of people and the world around them, is a form of cosmo-diversity (akin to biodiversity), which, argues Anne Salmond, enables "experiments across worlds" that can open up fertile future pathways (Salmond, 2017). Indigenous concepts can aid in this task. "Whakapapa [genealogy, relatedness]," writes Salmond, "a way of being based on complex networks that encompass all forms of life, interlinked and co-emergent, might assist in exploring relational ways of understanding the interactions between people and the land, other life forms, waterways and the ocean" (Salmond, 2017, p. 3).

An example is wā, the spiral of space/time seen in Māori carving, a swirling emergent force that "might help in devising non-linear, recursive ways of investigating the dynamic interactions among different life forms (including people)" (Salmond, 2017, p. 3). According to Māori epistemology, humans walk backwards into the future, facing the past that is before us, not behind us (Rameka, 2017). Similarly, the Polynesian philosophy of tā/vā configures space/time as relational, dynamic and emergent (Lagi-Maama, 2025; Ka'ili, 2017). Māori scholar Jamie Metzger, building on the work of Tapsell, Royal and others, argues that mauri is the key customary concept underlying material culture, intangible and cultural heritage and the natural environment. Mauri is the vital essence or "cosmological energy" flowing through all things which has found its way into heritage and environmental management and museum curatorship in Aotearoa, as we will see below with examples of kaitiakitanga (guardianship/stewardship) (Metzger, 2022, p. ii; Metzger, 2026). Inspired by these concepts from Moana Oceania, this article considers the new and adapted forms that the museum might take in future. It asks: How have galleries, libraries, archives, museums and heritage management in the South Pacific been re-shaped by local, Indigenous models?

Pacific models of heritage: A brief survey

From the 1970s, Indigenous ideas about/on/in museums emerged from the Pacific region, drawn from long-standing cultural practices and, in many cases, prefiguring and fuelling what came to be known later as the Anglophone version of the new museology (Kreps, 2003; Stanley, 2004; McCarthy, 2023; Brulon Soares, 2023). Distinct from the European *nouvelle muséologie*, social museology in Latin America and related movements such as eco-museums, the new museology in English-speaking countries focused on social inclusion, visitor experience, and the poetics and politics of representation and display (Vergo, 1989) – the why rather than the how of museum practice. This shift to external engagement and social relations, rather than the old internal preoccupation with research and collections, was anticipated by a number of initiatives in Oceania, which sparked the major innovations of the 1980s and 1990s in the region (Mead 1993; McCarthy, 2015).[1]

For example, in 1983 Hirini Moko Mead, professor of Māori Studies at Victoria University in Wellington and curator of the ground-breaking exhibition *Te Maori*, published an article on Indigenous models of museums in Oceania. He argued that to simply accept western models meant that Pacific peoples would lose control over their culture (Mead, 1983). Local "museum-like structures" (p. 98) analogous to museums should be explored, such as the Māori meeting house (wharenui) or the Solomon Island kustom house, with the key difference that these facilities operate as community centres not storehouses, and

1 See for example: Jack Condous, Janferie Howlett, and John Skull, eds. 1978. Arts in cultural diversity: A selection of papers presented at the 23rd World Congress of the International Society for Education though Art, Adelaide, South Australia, 12-19 August 1978. Artarmon NSW: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; Nga taonga o te motu: Treasures of the nation. 1985. Wellington: Project Development Team for the National Museum of New Zealand, Department of Internal Affairs.

worked via oral transmission of living culture not written records, and the maintenance of cultural traditions not the preservation of objects.

Through his experience of *Te Maori,* which toured the US and NZ 1984-7, Mead developed this model further. This development influenced the sweeping changes in the museum sector in the 1980s and 1990s (Mead, 1985, 1993), including the Mataatua Declaration in 1993, a staunch statement of Indigenous property rights.[2] The ultimate expression of his aspirations for a tribal culture centre was *Mataatua* in Whakatāne, a wharenui repatriated from the Otago Museum which was the centre of Ngāti Awa heritage revival. Arapata Hakiwai (2014), currently Kaihautū at Te Papa, has researched a host of projects driven by and for independent tribal social and economic development. He asks what museums can do for tribes, not the other way around. In the last 15 years, since the publication of my book *Museums and Māori* (2011), there have been dramatic advancements, such as new cultural centres, repatriation and taonga databases, driven by the settlement of claims to the Waitangi Tribunal over breaches of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi that guaranteed self determination (Butts, 2007; McCarthy, 2019).

Elsewhere in the Pacific, similar initiatives could be seen in this period (Stanley, 2007; Simpson, 1996). They provide further examples of experimentation with museological practice, refocusing museum work on people rather than things (or reconceptualising things *as* people), and realigning collections, exhibitions and programmes with community needs, desires and uses. Taken together they each contribute further evidence of my argument about emergent alternative native/tribal museologies. Christina Kreps, for example, has documented fascinating developments in Indonesia that demonstrate Indigenous models of museums, curation and concepts of cultural heritage preservation (Kreps, 2003; 2008). The pioneering scholar of what she calls an "appropriate museology", Kreps argues that the cross-cultural curation and heritage management she has observed constitutes emerging paradigms for museological practice. In Vanuatu, the extraordinary cultural workers programme extends beyond the walls of the museum and archive to maintain living arts and crafts in communities (Bolton, 2003). Here and elsewhere GLAMs take the form of cultural centres with the emphasis on community engagement rather than collection preservation, partly because there are very few artefacts left in the region, thanks to colonisation, as well as the humid tropical climate that makes collection care very difficult (de Villiers, 2021). Exemplary work in community-led conservation is currently happening in Samoa, where Auckland-based consultancy Lagi-Maama (namely Toluma'anave Barbara Makuati-Afitu and Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai), have been working with makers and knowledge holders in villages alongside Fijian-Indian conservator Nirmala Balram. Focusing on living cultural practices such as lalaga (weaving) and siapo (bark cloth/tapa), they document and preserve this tangible and intangible heritage and facilitate engagement with the Museum of Samoa (Makuati-Afitu & Uafā Māhina-Tuai, 2025).

In Tonga and other South Pacific Islands, intangible cultural heritage is the focus of collecting, care and display (Māhina-Tuai, 2006). Today, these low-lying island groups are threatened by sea rise, leading some to embrace digital technology as a way of preserving the past in the present for the future. The Virtual Pacific Museum provides a platform for digitised heritage as well as online access to museum collections outside the region and Tuvalu, which may disappear under the waves in 25 years, is trying to capture and preserve its cultural heritage in Digital Tuvalu.[3] We can see that, although Pacific museology

2 https://ngaaho.maori.nz/cms/resources/mataatua.pdf

3 https://natlib.govt.nz/about-us/collaborative-projects/pacific-virtual-museum and https://www.tuvalu.tv/

is framed by its own traditional concepts and values, it borrows freely from the west and enthusiastically takes up new and emerging technologies to achieve its aims.

Across the Tasman sea in Australia, meanwhile, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been working inside and outside the heritage sector, adapting museums to make them more responsive to Indigenous values and culture while setting up their own independent structures, called "keeping places" (Griffin & Paroissien, 2011; Specht & MacLulich, 2000; Simpson, 2007). Under liberal governments in the 1970s, and at intermittent times since, museums have set out to engage with key Indigenous issues as part of a wider political process of "reconciliation"; including the repatriation of human remains, the setting up of keeping places, the hiring of Aboriginal staff and appointments to boards, and the sensitive handling of secret and sacred material in museum collections. However, there have been setbacks in recent years, particularly under conservative governments and the failure of the referendum to create a Voice to Parliament (MacGuire, 2023).[4]

Nevertheless, strong policy statements successfully articulated Aboriginal ways of thinking about heritage, galleries and museums as well as important contemporary issues such as repatriation, with the reports *Previous Possessions, New Obligations* (1993), and *Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities* (2005) spelling out what museums should do.[5] In terms of exhibition practice, most state museums have updated their displays of Aboriginal material culture so as to be more in line with current thinking, a process which necessitated more or less community consultation and input, although the results are rather mixed (Young, Whitelaw, & Beier-de Haan, 2015).[6] Probably the leading example of an Aboriginal exhibit within a mainstream museum is the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the Melbourne Museum, which actively incorporates local Koori values and perspectives.[7]

One institution which has made changes over the last few years is the South Australian Museum in Adelaide, where Head of Anthropology John Carty hired their first Aboriginal curator and re-oriented core practices in an attempt to engage with local communities and acknowledge Indigenous perspectives on their culture (Daley, 2016, 2017). For Carty, this was not simply about melding museum and Aboriginal practices but trying to learn from a completely different world view. It was "revelatory" for white museum professionals to realise that Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander people around Australia have "really strong pre-existing models for heritage management", he pointed out. While the western concept of a museum brings objects together in a protected environment like a building, in Indigenous culture "[t]he museum is the landscape, the Country where sacred objects are kept… the challenge is to take the bricks and mortar approach to museums, and the distinctly Australian sense of Country, and find a common language" (Carty, 2015).

4 For a historical survey, see: Museums Galleries Australia. (2017). "Indigenous roadmap project: Literature review." https://www.amaga-indigenous.org.au/_files/ugd/68e58f_2b510a56ec2a419daee268329c2e1cd8.pdf

5 For critical commentary on the first report, see T. Sullivan, L. Kelly & P. Gordon. (2003). Museums and Indigenous people in Australia: A review of Previous Possessions, New Obligations. Curator: The Museum Journal 46, 208–27.

6 When museums did explore colonial violence and race relations they received harsh criticism and censure. See D. McIntyre & K. Wehner. (Eds). (2001). Negotiating histories: National museums: Conference proceedings. National Museum of Australia.

7 Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum website, https://museumsvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka. For a review of the first version of this display, which opened in 2000, see: M.G. Simpson. (2006). Bunjilaka. In C. Healy & A. Witcomb. (Eds). South Pacific museums: Experiments in culture. Monash University ePress, chapter 15, http://books.publishing.monash.edu/apps/bookworm/view/South+Pacific+Museums%3A+Experiments+in+Culture/139/xhtml/chapter15.html. For a positive review of the second iteration of this exhibit, see: L. Young. (2014). Review: First Peoples, Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum. Museum Worlds: Advances in Research 2, 213-16.

These comments reflect a genuine effort to transform museological conventions through non-western ways of being and doing. A conference in Canberra in 2015 explored various forms of co-curation, co-authorship and collaboration occurring around Australia, demonstrating clearly that there is much goodwill on the part of museum curators and other professionals to do things differently (Edmundsen & Neale, 2017). Key lessons included: the need for more consultations and collaborations to occur directly on Country; a call for museums to better incorporate Indigenous ontologies into the care and management of Indigenous collections; and more in-depth research on existing Indigenous methodologies of cultural heritage preservation and management. "If Western institutions acknowledged that museums are not only a Western idea but that Indigenous keeping places predate them and coexist with them," Anna Edmundson and Margo Neale concluded, "it would enable [I]ndigenous people to connect better with museums and shift the view suggesting that museums are storerooms of stolen loot" (Edmundson and Neale, 2015, p. 133).

A key concept that frequently comes up in these discussions and that underpins First Nations heritage in Australian is "Country". This is an overall understanding of the universe that includes people together with the natural environment; animals, plants, land, sea, rivers and sky. Indigenous Australians see the earth, created in the Dreamtime by ancestors, and the past, present and future, as indivisible parts of a huge, united realm. It encompasses the past and the present, human and non-human. This poem by Larrakia woman Mililma May describes how she understands her Country:

> **Gulumoerrgin | My country**
> Gulumoerrgin is the trees, the red dirt and blue seas.
> Gulumoerrgin is the sun, the moon and the stars that infinitely surround me.
> Gulumoerrgin is my family, my people and my community.
> Gulumoerrgin is me.[8]

Despite the fact that this is a very different world view, focusing less on objects than the environment they are part of, it has found its way into mainstream museum, archive and environmental management practice in Australia. This is particularly evident in the Outback. Shaun Angelo, Arrernte man and Indigenous Repatriation Researcher at the Strehlow Research Centre in the Northern Territory, talks about taking collections back out to Country to revive ceremonial practices and heal the generational trauma of youth severed from their culture by colonisation and urbanisation. The Centre is now closely engaged with the community, and elders feel comfortable coming in to work with the collections and activate them in the present. He argues, "People and objects have been separated, they need to be re-integrated" (Angelo, 2018). Meanwhile in the national capital, Canberra, the National Museum of Australia has incorporated Country into the concept development of its environmental history exhibition *Great Southern Land*.[9] Alongside western scientific views of the environment, paintings and other objects and practices convey Indigenous knowledge. As the wall text states, "More and more people are using the word Country to express recognition for Indigenous peoples' connection with their land and for the interrelationship all human beings have with the rest of nature" (National Museum of Australia, 2024).

Jilda Andrews, the Aboriginal academic and curator involved with this exhibition, has also talked about bringing Indigenous ideas into collection management through the con-

8 https://www.commonground.org.au/article/what-is-country
9 https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/great-southern-land

cept of "cool burning". "It seems logical to apply methods of tending to Country to museum collections – to tend to them. Care for them," she writes (2024a). Just as Aboriginal people use fire to manage the land and prevent bush fires, so a metaphorical cool burning or cleaning/activation/regeneration of the collection through research also creates space in which "new shoots of knowledge can emerge", reconnecting objects to communities and putting them to work in the present. This shows the "regenerative potentials of collection research when Indigenous philosophies and concepts drive research enquiry and more importantly, frame outcomes" (Andrews, 2024b).

Māori museology: Customary concepts reshaping museum practice in Aotearoa

Aotearoa NZ is the smallest but, in some ways, the most distinctive case study in this research – the scene of advanced experiments in Indigenous museology arguably ahead of its neighbour Australia, perhaps due more to geography and demography than political will.[10] Museums over the last 50 years have witnessed an increase in Māori staff and the evolution of a Māori style of museum policy and practice that incorporates customary knowledge and values (McCarthy, 2007).[11] Māori concepts, closely related to those used in the wider Moana Oceania, have become embedded in museum curation, collection care and management: taonga (ancestral treasure), mana (power, authority, reputation), tapu and noa (sacred, restricted, free from restriction), mauri (vital essence, energy), whakapapa (genealogy, relatedness).[12] These concepts are applied through tikanga (Māori cultural practices) and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge/world view). At the national museum in Wellington, Te Papa, and at regional museums in Auckland, Gisborne, Whanganui and other centres, Māori-led changes in governance, management, policy, education, repatriation and conservation have transformed aspects of professional practice and led to museological amalgams of European and Polynesian culture (McCarthy, 2011; Butts, 2007; Tapsell, 2014; McCarthy, Parata & Sadlier, 2024).

At Te Papa, the customary concept of mana has been linked with taonga, resulting in a policy (mana taonga) that captures the power of these objects but also enables Indigenous ownership and management. Mana taonga allows museums to develop a "structured process of engagement with its communities" by recognising the "living relationships" between taonga and their communities of origin (Hakiwai & Schorch, 2014, pp. 197-198). Mana taonga gives iwi (tribes) the "right to define how taonga within Te Papa should be cared for and managed in accordance with their tikanga or custom" (Nesus, 2004, p. 14). Therefore, the community *outside* the museum becomes a participant *within* the museum alongside professionals and, in many cases, supplants their authority. Recently Awhina Tamarapa has argued that cultural practitioners, such as weavers and carvers, should assume the authority of managing collections, reconnecting historical artifacts with the ongoing maintenance of these living arts and crafts (Tamarapa, 2024).

The mana taonga policy, though debated by some, has been extended successfully to other collections in Te Papa – such as art, history and Pacific cultures – and to other museums in NZ and overseas (Dorfman et al., 2015; Hakiwai et al., 2015). Originally seen as a way of empowering Māori co-management of taonga Māori collections in NZ museums,

10 Unlike Australia, Māori make up a significant proportion of the population, reflected in greater political representation and a higher profile in national economic, social and cultural life. See: Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal. (2005). Māori. Te Ara: The Encyclopedia of New Zealand. https://teara.govt.nz/en/maori.

11 For an overview of museums in NZ, see: McCarthy, 2015.

12 For an overview of these customary concepts, see: Mead, 2003.

it has been extended to facilitate the collaboration of *all* source communities in the management and use of their cultural heritage (Bennington, 2004; Mallon, 2011). Moreover, the notion of taonga has been extended beyond material "artefacts" to a range of tangible and intangible material held in different types of collecting institutions – galleries, libraries, archives and museums – as well as cultural and natural heritage managed by various organisations: film, photographs, manuscripts, oral and performing arts, landscapes, flora and fauna. The diversity and complexity of taonga, and the challenges required to manage them, are described in the Waitangi Tribunal report WAI 262 (*Ko Aotearoa Tēnei,* 2011) on heritage and intellectual property, which has yet to be seriously addressed by government and public institutions, especially the vexed question of ownership.

From theory to practice in Aotearoa: Museums to heritage, objects to cultural landscapes

I turn now to recent examples of kaitiakitanga that show how Māori concepts, world views and ways of being have been applied in practice. These examples, catalysed by decolonisation, indigenisation and ecological crises, also show how this has converted the traditional notion of the museum as a warehouse set apart from the social into a community hub within a broader range of heritage encompassing cultural practices and cultural landscapes. The first example is the work of Dr Huhana Smith, Ngāti Raukawa academic, artist and environmentalist. Smith left her job as a curator at Te Papa because the institution was too slow and too disconnected from the world outside, particularly natural heritage (Smith, 2009). She sought a mechanism more closely engaged with the land where knowledge transfer was less bureaucratic and restricted. Working from a university, she facilitated a major interdisciplinary research grant focused on the tribal lands on the Horowhenua to Kāpiti coast threatened with inundation – Manaaki Taha Moana: Enhancing Coastal Ecosystems for Iwi and Hapū – which combined scientific research and mātauranga Māori, scientists and farmers, culminating in a design exhibition on climate action mounted in the local library, an art and cultural centre and the cow shed on the tribe's farm (Allan & Smith, 2017).

The methodology included reconnecting with the whenua (in Māori terms, whenua is the land but also the placenta that is returned to the earth after birth) by "walking and talking the whenua, returning the farm to nature, and letting the river (an ancestor) be an ancestor" (Smith, 2024). The research team drew on the concept of whakapapa and mauri, and kaupapa Māori methodology, alongside art, design, science, etc., to enhance public understanding of climate change and to explore adaptation strategies, better decision-making and better actions for communities. Since then, Smith has led projects in climate adaption strategies, re-afforestation and revegetation, river and wetland restoration, etc. (Smith, 2024). These have inspired other iwi to embark on similar projects to reconnect their people to the environment and engage them in climate action. An example is the Ngāti Toa project *Te Ara o Raukawa Moana*, described as "active kaitiakitanga in response to climate change", which included an exhibition at Pātaka Art + Museum in Porirua.[13]

The lesson here is that these projects achieved what a museum perhaps could not. Indeed, Indigenous people may very well abandon the museum if it cannot adapt and become a technology of active use in iwi/hapū development and fighting the climate emergency. Museums, therefore, need to see themselves in a wider frame, as part of the broader heritage sector of which they are merely a subset. Objects and collections need to be reconnected

13 For the report on this project see the website of Te Runanga o Ngati Toa. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61a403b442b8840d9ed2143a/t/67859e193eb6c540e18eb789/1736810085798/TOA00000_Te+Ara+O+Raukawa+Moana_Journal_VDA1.1.pdf

to cultural or ancestral landscapes from which they were excised, thereby reconnecting people to the environment. Museum technologies (collections, exhibitions, programmes) need to be employed in social and climate activism. Asked in a recent interview how museums can better support climate action, Smith responded:

> Maybe Te Papa's not the place. The most impactful exhibition I've ever done was the one in the dairy shed. That [engaged] a lot of people [who] went, "Ok, we're in. Now we understand." And this [included] loads of my detracting whanaunga (cousins), those who didn't want to know about climate change and its impacts. ... When we put up the initial maps, this is what it is going to look like in 20, 50 and 100 years in terms of water, everyone went, "Ok, we're listening now." Those maps were based on the best data, and we've got people to put it into visuals. So visuals, visuals, visuals. Keep showing people. Everything's a mind map and everything is connected. Māori worldviews are very interconnected, we see the interdependencies. I think that museums and galleries have a responsibility to do this stuff. I don't want to play politics or be safe. I think, just show them. ... Show really compelling stuff in surprising spaces. ... Don't shy away from the difficult [aspects]. (Smith, 2024)

The next example shows how a museum *can* work with Indigenous communities to express their views of the world and facilitate their role in environmental restoration. The Whanganui Regional Museum Te Puni Tiaki Taonga o Whanganui[14], a small institution with a unique bicultural governance structure and deep relationships with iwi and hapū, staged an exhibition in 2022 that captured the remarkable events surrounding the legislative recognition of the personhood and innate values of the Whanganui River. To local people, the river is Te Awa Tupua, a living ancestor who has been despoiled and neglected through colonial history, legislative actions and inactions, as well as environmental degradation. Whanganui iwi recently settled their claim over Te Tiriti o Waitangi breaches, so the relationships with central and local government now recognise the rights of the River and Whanganui hapū, including the assertion of tiakitanga, participation in decision making, and environmental restoration activities (Lurgio, 2019).[15]

All this is captured in a small exhibition at the museum, which was co-curated with Whanganui iwi and hapū, the most visible public statement of this extraordinary outcome. Called *He Awa Ora*[16] ("A living river") it conveys the intrinsic relationship between the people and the river encapsulated in the whakatauākī or proverb: "Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au / I am the river and the river is me". As well as historical artifacts, documentation of the long-running claim and the statutory acknowledgement of the ancestor-river, photos and video show how people live on/with the river today and give visitors a clear-idea of how active tiakitanga or stewardship works, allaying any fears of separatism. The exhibit also highlights what they can do to look after the awa and reduce their carbon footprint. A remarkable topographic map shows the wider river system, with numerous sites marking marae, kāinga, battle sites, etc., illustrating graphically the close ancestral

14 https://wrm.org.nz

15 For the partnership between the Whanganui District Council and Māori see: "Whanganui council signs off on 'world-first' draft relationship agreement with hapū," Radio New Zealand, 29 January 2025: retrieved 11 March 2025: https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/540303/whanganui-council-signs-off-on-world-first-draft-relationship-agreement-with-hapu. In 2025 Mt Taranaki also gained legal personhood. See: Eva Corlett, "Taranaki Mounga: New Zealand mountain granted same legal rights as a person," The Guardian 30 January 2025.

16 https://www.heawaora.maori.nz

links to the land and water.

The exhibition, though modest in scale, conveys to visitors the radical ontological shift that breaks down the nature/culture divide and sees the awa as a living being inextricably entwined with the people. The curator (or Pou Rauhī) is Dr Rāwiri Tinirau, who leads a Kaupapa Māori research institute, Te Atawhai o Te Ao, conducting research on health and environment, and who sees his work at the museum as a natural extension of community development. He says that taonga are "living beings". Taonga includes "te reo, our language, tikanga or cultural practices… not just old artifacts but things made today," and, of course the natural world (Tinirau, 2022).[17] The exhibition may look at first glance to be fairly conventional, but it is not. For example, one small change in museum practice reflects a radically different perspective of material culture as living object-beings. The labels are not written in third person, the typical detached view of the "thing" by the curator (e.g. "this is a taiaha"), but in first person, a direct statement from the point of view of the taonga ("I am a taiaha"). Worlds that are apart are brought together in a short 25-word object label. This reflects an iwi maxim, "Kauaka e kōrero mō te Awa, kōrero ki te Awa / Don't talk about the River, but speak to the River". It is also inspired by Te Pou Tupua, the human face and voice of Te Awa Tupua,[18] which is formalised within settlement legislation.

Conclusion: Learning from Pacific museologies

The lessons from South Pacific museums and community-led projects beyond the walls of the museum serve to illustrate some of the implications of island thinking for global museology. In some ways, oceanic museology is unique, and while local innovations were occasionally referenced in international literature on art, repatriation and community participation (Hakiwai, 1990; Mead, 1990; O'Regan, 1994), in the main they were unrelated to global developments, not well documented, and the results could not necessarily be replicated elsewhere. Now and then Pacific museology found its way into international debates on conservation, decolonisation and related issues, and disrupted the hegemony of the global north (Clavir, 2002; Simpson, 1996). In recent years, for example, several people with connections to Te Papa and the Pacific contributed to the shaping of the new ICOM definition of the museum, an expansive and bold rethinking of the institution that was ultimately watered down to something more cautious and conventional (Sandahl, 2019). Nevertheless, these early experiments that emerged from Moana Oceania may open up fruitful avenues for the museum of the future in integrating culture/nature, in community-led climate activism, in interdisciplinary, relational frameworks and the use of Indigenous concepts and practices.

Nicholas Thomas (2016) has asked, What are museums good for in the 21st century? In a world threatened by environmental collapse and riven by conflict and political division, the task before us is immense (Janes, 2024). We should explore alternative means to confront the challenge, including island ways of doing things. The answer presented here is that, inspired by Indigenous ways of being, doing and thinking, museums provide a technology to reconnect people to their culture, to other people, and the world around them. The museum is a methodology to bring together the past, present and future. Sal-

17 Rāwiri Tinirau (2022). Interview by Conal McCarthy, MHST502 Victoria University of Wellington, August. For an introduction to the exhibition, see the Whanganui Regional Museum website. https://wrm.org.nz/watch-river-exhibition-wins-architecture-award/

18 https://www.tepoutupua.nz/

mond wrote, “It is possible to see the links between human communities, land and sea, as patterned by complex, multi-dimensional, dynamic systems in which people are related to other life forms, as our fates are tied together” (2018, p. 414). To safeguard our heritage, we have to save the planet and ourselves, and the peoples of Moana Oceania have shown the way.

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Pacific museums and cultural centers: Redefining & indigenizing museum spaces the Pacific way

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Abstract

Pacific Island museums, once shaped by colonial models and tourist demands, are now transforming to serve local communities and future generations. This shift reflects an indigenization of the museum concept, where imported frameworks are redefined through local needs. Museums are becoming spaces of cultural negotiation and repositories of skills, knowledge, and identity. Drawing on case studies from my work with the Pacific Island Museums Association, this paper explores how museums are addressing challenges such as political constraints, geographic isolation, and generational gaps to maintain cultural transmission and provide meaningful, community-centered engagement today and into the future.

Keywords: Indigenizing, colonialism, knowledge transmission, cultural gaps, youth empowerment

Résumé

Musées et centres culturels du Pacifique : redéfinir et autochtoniser les espaces muséaux à la manière du Pacifique. Les musées des îles du Pacifique, autrefois façonnés par des modèles coloniaux et axés sur le tourisme, se transforment aujourd'hui pour mieux servir les communautés locales et les générations futures. Ce changement reflète une indigénisation du concept muséal, où des cadres importés sont réinterprétés selon les besoins locaux. Les musées deviennent ainsi des espaces de négociation culturelle et des réservoirs de savoirs, de compétences et d'identités. En m'appuyant sur des études de cas issues de mon travail avec l'Association des musées des îles du Pacifique, cet article explore comment ces institutions relèvent les défis contemporains pour assurer la transmission culturelle.

Mots-clés: Autochtonisation, colonialisme, transmission des savoirs, écarts culturels, autonomisation des jeunes

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In this day and age of climate change, technology, and decolonization, strides are being made by Pacific museums to adapt. The Pacific Islands, a tropical region located within a vast ocean that borders Asia and the Americas, provide many of its inhabitants a unique

life that many around the world long to experience. As a result, many researchers have visited these lands with the intent of knowing more about the geography and the people that live there. Museums, universities, and other heritage institutions such as archives and libraries are the repositories of such stories and are responsible for storing an abundance of anecdotal accounts and histories of the past for the benefit of present and future generations. This article aims to highlight the role of museums in contemporary Pacific communities and how museums have redefined their roles in fulfilling community needs. To support this discussion, I draw from my Indigenous museum research as well as from the work I have done over the years with the Pacific Island Museums Association (PIMA), and I present the main issues and questions arising in my most recent participation with the Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander Museum Institute (NHPIMI) in 2022.

There are three parts to my efforts herein. First, I provide a small background that informs my understanding about the evolution of museums in the Pacific. This context suits my argument about the colonial genesis of museums set up in the region in the early 1900s. Second, I describe my observations and experiences and lessons learned when interacting with museums in New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, and New Zealand. Finally, I offer some initial thoughts for the indigenizing efforts of museums in the Pacific to suit Pacific communities both in the diaspora and in the Pacific region. Case studies will be included to substantiate the observed changes taking place in museums in recent years.

Background: Pacific museums in the early days

Many museums in the Pacific were founded by colonial administrators, missionaries, and researchers, often as part of broader efforts to record, document, or civilize Indigenous cultures. Collectors back then were focused more on collecting than community involvement, with artifacts sent to museums in Europe, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, or Australia. Some artifacts have even reached museums in Asia and the USA. In the UK, artifacts have reached the British Museum in London. In France, the Musée du Quai Branly has a large Pacific collection, and in New Zealand, Pacific collections are spread across the nation from the Auckland Museum to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch and the Otago Museum in Dunedin.

With the argument that most Pacific museums were formed by expatriates who were working in colonial administration, many could foresee the importance of museums to local communities but there was a gap created between the museum itself and the targeted communities, and it continued to widen over the years. Even though museums were seen as western constructs, the colonial folks back in the day overlooked the fact that local communities themselves have their own traditional educational system that consisted of learned men and women who operated an educational system within their communities. For example, in Polynesia Indigenous curators traditionally existed to put together educational programs for the young and old. Those who specialize in song and dance are called *Punake* in Tonga, *Kumu Hula* in Hawaii, and *Tufunga* in Samoa (Tonga, 2012). Museums are different to western individuals than to people of the Pacific. Welsh (2007) mentioned that for most Pacific communities, artifacts stand for important traditions, ideas, customs, and social relations that are required to continue within their community. Preservation might be an important process for outsiders as, to Indigenous Pacific people, artifacts were always remade, re-carved, re-painted, or newly assembled for a purpose. In some Pacific societies, ritual paraphernalia should be destroyed following a ritual or performance and should not be preserved. For Pacific people, if an object is lost, damaged,

or destroyed, it can always be made once more. To them, stories, traditions, performances, and relationships among and between people and places are more important (Welsh, 2007). In the Pacific, the community and culture itself were the museum rather than a specialized institution (Cowling, 2006).

One classic example is the Museum of New Caledonia, which was established in 1905. This is a history museum that showcases both traditional and modern aspects of New Caledonian society as well as other cultures that call New Caledonia home. It upgraded its facilities following the Melanesian cultural revival of the 1970s, and today it is in the center of the capital city of Noumea. Perhaps tourists do not travel to such exotic locations primarily for the sake of their museums, but, certainly, once in the region, tourists will visit what they are shown, and there they will see inscribed timely statements of national and regional identity and new visions of what Pacific museums can offer to visitors. New Caledonia also has a Maritime Museum and other regional museums that spread across the country. One such cultural center is located on the island of Lifou. The center also has a dance group called the *Troupe de Wetr*, where most of the members are Indigenous Kanaks who performed at the Festival of Pacific Arts in the Cook Islands in 1992. This dance group was formed at the request of Chief Paul Sihaze of Lifou, who saw the cooperation required to bring the community together. During the late 1980s, the pro-independence Kanak people fought the French government. When the newly formed *Troupe de Wetr* was formed, it not only served in community cohesion, but it also developed into a cultural think-tank for the people of Lifou (LeFevre, 2007). Even though the cultural center in Lifou also caters to the tourism demand on the island, it has indirectly given a voice to the Kanak people of Lifou to share their culture and traditions with their island visitors. It is also difficult to compare such cultural centers with the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea.

Another feature of the types of museums built in the 1900s was the emphasis on storytelling based on artifacts and stories focused on what is kept in display cases. There was a common notion that visitors will learn the local cultures from what they view in the museum cases covered in glass. There was no mention that living cultures existed outside the museum's physical spaces, and what you viewed in these cases represented the real life of Indigenous communities. The notion of living cultures versus cultures on display bears a new relationship to government, seeking support not only from public sources, domestic and international, but also from private enterprise, including the regulated sale of artifacts made by local craftsmen, who were not only seen to be the producers of the art on display. To focus on the life of the artist was not something that was taken seriously back then. The notion of a living culture was not a priority to museum and heritage managers at that time (Mead, 1983).

The Solomon Islands National Museum was established in 1969 with financial assistance from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in the United Kingdom. A group of expatriates, many of whom were colonial officers in the 1950s, visited villagers and later kept gifts that were given to them during their visits. Over time, these officers collected their gifts and placed them together on top of filing cabinets in government office corridors. The collection was moved to the Teachers College prior to the establishment of the museum (Foanaota, 2007). Where there are fears that a culture is lost as its objects are taken away, so there grows a closer identification with the objects of that culture. The Solomon Islands Museum also stresses the importance of informing the rest of the world about

local languages. The new museum in Honiara, on Guadalcanal, set up by the Solomon Islands government to preserve local artifacts against being "lost," was more concerned with what the non-Solomon Islanders were going to do and less focused on the local communities. (Welsh, 2007).

In New Zealand, the Auckland War Memorial Museum was established in 1852 and holds a vast amount of Pacific collections known to be some of the best in the world. It has loaned artifacts to the Pacific, for instance to the Cook Islands National Museum in Rarotonga (Stanley, 2005). It has two renowned exhibition spaces called "Masterpieces" and "Pacific Lifeways." The latter gallery includes stories associated with the Pacific diaspora, in particular Polynesians that have migrated to New Zealand over the years. Even though it has a large collection base, most of these artifacts are not able to be exhibited due to the restricted space available in the current exhibition spaces. Much of what is kept in storage can still be accessed for research and for conservation efforts (Johnson, 2007).

The Fiji Museum, established by the Fijian Society in 1904, represents perhaps one of the more difficult challenges. It was established based on the Friends of the Museum Society, which was composed of scientists who had a lot of interest in Fiji's history and its associated cultural and natural heritage. I deliberately mention natural heritage given the fact that most members were scientists in the fields of botany, biology, archaeology, and geology. Bruce Palmer, who was museum director in the 1960s, was influential in the development of proper museum collections during his time. The arrival of Fergus Clunie 20 years later contributed to the increase in the number of wooden carvings such as utilitarian items (bowls, food pounders), war clubs, spears, and kava bowls. Clunie (1986) also contributed to the development of *Yalo I Viti,* a publication that showcased Fijian artifacts. Many of the artifacts in this book were brought back to Fiji from the United Kingdom through the sponsorship of British Petroleum (BP) in the 1980s and have formed the core part of the current museum collection. Staff that manage such collections are local Indigenous Fijians who are trained on the job and also overseas. Set in a beautiful garden, a recognizably European building next to the former colonial government buildings of Suva, the museum has been transformed from a repository of war clubs and canoes into a lively encounter with Fijian life, past and present. But to some observers, important features remain among the silences that neglect the history of the large Indian minority who have shared life in the Fijian islands for over a century (Clunie, 1986). In 1994, the Fiji Museum finally built an Indo-Fijian Gallery to commemorate the history of the Indian people who now have called Fiji their home since the first boat, the *Syria*, arrived in Fiji in 1879.

Pacific museums today: Issues, challenges and solutions as they navigate change

There are approximately 45 museums in the Pacific, not including many more in Australia and New Zealand, or the American institutions in Hawaii, Guam and American Samoa. Today, while the senior European museums retain their ascendancy, linked in many ways to the primacy of the object, the picture is changing on the periphery, where objects are treated in the context of their local importance. In the Cook Islands, the museum staff and tourists are changing their focus to be based on cultural experience rather than viewing cultures in museum glass cases (Stanley, 2007). A very small museum, only two rooms, has developed a similar formula, to cultivate local talents and skills, including

weaving and cooking, and many aspects of traditional women's work that are in danger of becoming lost to memory. The word "pride" enters the mission statement of this small institution – pride in workmanship and handiwork, which rises above the tourist dollar.

Roles of Pacific museums today

Despite tourism being the major revenue source of many Pacific island nations, Pacific museums continue to play a vital role in preserving, interpreting, and promoting the diverse cultures, histories, and environments of the Pacific region for the benefit of local communities. In terms of cultural preservation, museums play a very important role in safeguarding heritage and revitalizing traditions. Safeguarding heritage would include protecting and conserving traditional artifacts, oral histories, art, and cultural artifacts – expressions of Pacific Island communities. Revitalization programs would include supporting language revival activities, traditional practices, and Indigenous knowledge systems that may be at risk of disappearing. In terms of education and awareness, community education and challenging colonial narratives become paramount. Many museums today are providing educational programs that teach both locals and visitors about the rich cultures and histories of the Pacific. When it comes to challenging colonial narratives, many museums are rethinking how they present their own history with the aim of re-centering Indigenous perspectives and voices.

With regards to community engagement, museums are now gathering places for local communities where they host events, exhibitions and workshops that strengthen cultural identity. Another feature is collaborative curation, where Pacific museums are now proactively involving local communities in curating exhibits to ensure authenticity and respect are administered. This is truly a far cry from the early days of Pacific museums. Today, many museums are now becoming knowledge centers where they are conducting and hosting researchers such as archaeologists and anthropologists doing work on the island. Many are now collaborating with universities and cultural institutions to deepen understandings and share findings. As far as advocacy and representation are concerned, advocating for the rights of Indigenous peoples, particularly in matters relating to repatriation and cultural sovereignty, has become paramount in the day-to-day running of some Pacific museums. Some have also become the global voice where they help represent Pacific cultures in global dialogues about heritage, climate change, and cultural resilience.

Globally, the Pacific region has been forced to deal with the climate crisis. In addition to the costs and benefits of tourism, fishing agreements, deforestation, capitalism, political pressures, earthquakes, cyclones, diseases, poverty, illiteracy, and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), Pacific people must deal with these issues. The museums, I believe, must deal with the effects of such problems, and they are not free from challenges. With all these challenges that the Pacific islands face, there are two that I want to discuss at length, the first being *decolonization* and second being the generational *knowledge gap*. With the discussions of the challenges, I will also share some positive case studies of how some countries are dealing with such issues in their own museums.

Decolonizing museum spaces through programming

Decolonization requires a reappraisal of our institutions and their history and an effort to address colonial structures and approaches to all areas of museum work. What does it mean exactly to decolonize a place? It means to free a people or area from colonial status, to relinquish control of a subjugated people or area the year the country was decolonized.

The country faces international pressure to decolonize the territory. It also means to be free from the dominating influence of a colonizing power. One way that many museums in the Pacific are decolonizing their museum spaces is by renaming their institutions as "cultural centers." In Vanuatu, their national museum is known as the Vanuatu Cultural Centre or, translated in the local language, the Vanuatu Kaltoral Senta (VKS). The cultural center redefines the museum as a living space where local artists can come in and teach museum visitors, most of whom are locals. There are artists who teach the art of sand drawing in the city of Port Vila. One does not have to go to the outer islands to experience this unique and wonderful art.

The development of cultural centers is critical to discuss as this became popular in the early 1990s with the creation of centers like the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia. According to Losche (2007, p. 73), it is not just a cultural center but the "star of cultural centres" in the Pacific. It has the ability to harness global interests as well as local ones, in particular for the Kanak people. The Centre was funded by the French government and was designed by Renzo Piano, an Italian architect who created this outstanding architectural wonder, one of the best in the region. The center was named after Jean-Marie Tjibaou who was assassinated in 1989. He was not simply a Kanak leader but the voice of a generation and the leader who was destined to lead New Caledonia into the future (Losche, 2007).

One solution to the issue of colonialism in the Pacific is to indigenize museum spaces. What does this entail? This indicates creating opportunities for members of the local Indigenous communities to participate in museum programs, not only as participants but as trainers. One such example was the Cultural Competency Workshop held online during the COVID-19 pandemic in Hawaii. The training workshop involved Indigenous Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders taking the lead in the training, and participants were from around the Pacific and the world. Trainers had vast experience in the field of museum, library, and archives sectors of Hawaii.

Another key evidence of indigenizing museum spaces is through repatriation programs. Even though repatriation is new in the region, for the last 30 years Hawaii has remained active in its efforts to return artifacts and ancestral remains from international museums. Edward Halealoha Ayau has been involved for close to 33 years. He has trained many younger Hawaiians to assist him in this very important work. The Museum of Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, New Zealand has also been delivering this work for over two decades, and, like the Hawaiians, many young Maori are now working in this field. Across the Tasman, in Australia, many Indigenous Australians are working hard in bringing back their treasures from across the globe as a means of returning their *mana*, or power, that they lost during colonialism in the 1700s and 1800s. In September 2023, Ayau and Vunidilo collaborated in a training program where over 20 tertiary students from universities across Hawaii participated in learning more about ancestral remains and how repatriation works on a global level. Ayau shared the return of Hawaiian ancestral remains from Europe, specifically 14 ancestors that were returned from the University of Gottingen in Germany.

The generational knowledge gap

One of the biggest threats to sustaining Indigenous knowledge that has been documented is this generational gap and the influence of the colonial school system. One way that museums are dealing with the issues is by involving youths in their museum programs and getting them to do collections research and hands-on work. One classic example is the Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island Museum institute that took place in the summer of 2022. Twenty young museum professionals from across the Pacific took part in a six-month museum program that promoted conservation, collections management, and exhibition development. To involve young people in museum work encourages more young people to work in the sector and eventually reduces the generational gap with the older generations (Weaving a Network of Care, 2022).

In 2016 in New Zealand, the Auckland Museum embarked on a museum advocacy and education program that was seen at that time to be ambitious. This program was called the Pacific Collections Access Project (PCAP), funded by the museum with the support of the taxpayers of Auckland and the New Zealand government. The aim of the PCAP was to reach out to Pacific communities within the Auckland region and invite artists who are specialized in the knowledge of museum artifacts to come in and have their stories recorded. In the case of Fiji, it took us one year to complete the research of over 1500 artifacts. These artifacts were renamed from English to the Indigenous iTaukei language. Not only were the physical labels changed, but the digital repository information was also updated. Members of the Fijian communities around New Zealand were invited to be part of the launch of the PCAP Fiji segment. Hundreds attended, many who had not set foot in the Auckland Museum before (Pacific Collections Access Project, 2019).

These two case studies are classic examples of how Pacific island institutions in Hawaii and New Zealand saw the need to reduce the generational knowledge gap and proactively developed the NHPIMI and PCAP programs respectively. Many participants of these two programs are now leaders in their heritage fields in their island country.

Shifting focus: Taking ownership and amplifying Indigenous voices

As we look to the future with great optimism, it is great to see many Pacific museums demonstrate the multifaceted role that they play in preserving, interpreting, and promoting the diverse cultures, histories, and environments of the Pacific region. Recent initiatives and studies highlight their evolving functions. In the cultural preservation and revitalization role, the Australian Museum in partnership with cultural institutions and communities across the Pacific launched the Pasifika Tauhi Project. This initiative aimed to build capacity for cultural revitalization and preservation. It was supported by the U.S. Embassy in Australia, and the project aimed to safeguard local knowledge and practices, particularly those threatened by climate change (Patience, 2024).

With the assistance of UNESCO (2010), many museums in the Pacific began creating community-based museum development and managing world heritage sites. A good example was in 2010 when UNESCO helped create a new approach that emphasizes the importance of involving local communities in museum development, ensuring that museums serve as hubs for cultural identity and sustainable development. By integrating community perspectives, museums can better reflect and support the societies they represent. Through the UNESCO office in Apia, Samoa, they have assisted numerous museums over the years. A decade later, the International Council of Museums (ICOM)

through the education and sustainable development role hosted the ICOM Webinar on museums and education in 2022. The International Council of Museums highlighted the role of museums in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. The webinar discussed how museums in the Asia-Pacific region can engage with local communities and Indigenous peoples to promote education for sustainable development (ICOM, 2022).

In the areas of research and capacity building, it is so uplifting to see organizations such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) supporting heritage museums in the Pacific. Between 2016 and 2018, a special Heritage matters Project explored how heritage museums in the Pacific can contribute to sustainable development goals, particularly in health, education, gender equality, and community sustainability. It underscored the potential of museums to support local communities through targeted research and capacity-building initiatives. This project was led by Professor Nicholas Thomas who shared his work with the museum staff in the Solomon Islands and Kiribati (Thomas, 2018).

As far as my work with the Pacific Islands Museums Association is concerned, I joined the organization in 2010 as their secretary-general (SG). Founded in 1994, PIMA aims to safeguard Oceania's heritage, disseminate cultural heritage information among Pacific Islanders, and advise governments on cultural heritage management. It serves as a collective voice for museums in the region, advocating for the preservation and promotion of Pacific cultures. During my term as SG, I was able to organize workshops across the Pacific region and help museums and cultural centers to deliver content that was tailor-made for their communities. These examples illustrate the dynamic and integral roles that Pacific museums play in cultural preservation, community engagement, education, research, and advocacy.

With these recent examples of indigenizing our museums and cultures, professor Hirini Mead was predicting this new change in the 1980s. He was already proposing the advancement of Indigenous museums, all of which questioned aspects of the western notion of a museum. Mead, an Indigenous Maori academic and anthropologist from New Zealand (*Ngati Awa Tribe*) was the first to explore the practical and intellectual issues of Indigenous museums. He also differentiated western museum concepts from Indigenous ones. To him, western style museums were expensive to maintain and usually do not have a good relationship with any local communities (Stanley, 2007).

Mead (1983) critiqued the western model of museums and proposed Indigenous models that were more conducive to the way Pacific people relate to their objects and associated history. In his article "Indigenous Models of Museums in Oceania" (1983), he argues that there was a distinctive difference between Indigenous models and western examples. As time went by, in particular from the 1980s to the 1990s, this divergence has become more apparent as people in the Pacific begin reassessing and accessing Indigenous cultures.

According to Mead (1983), there are two types of Indigenous museums. Type one is a single-purpose building that tells a people's story from prehistory to modern times. The other type is a multi-functional tribal cultural center, known as a *marae* in New Zealand, with various functions and purposes. For instance, as for the Ngati Awa Tribe in New Zealand, they expected a library, research center, community hall, and an events center to be built alongside the main building, which will be viewed as a museum. The second

option has more interactive functions and an inclusive feature where young and old, urban and rural dwellers can learn about their culture and heritage through hands-on programs and the learning atmosphere. Mead also highlighted the *custom houses* in the Solomon Islands, which have become a repository for culturally valued and historic artifacts and serve as ceremonial locations for religious and cultural practices (Stanley, 2007).

Other qualities that set the *marae* and *custom houses* apart from modern museums relate to audiences. Both venues have cultural restrictions on who may enter, when they may enter, and what class of objects they may view. Another distinction relates to "economy and technology." Indigenous museums do not have funds to employ large numbers of specialists or to maintain special climatic conditions of storage to sustain the collections' physical integrity. In such situations, Indigenous museums turn to local knowledge and expertise.

From my experience working with PIMA, I have seen an increase in museums reaching out to local artists such as weavers and carvers to come to the museum and deliver cultural workshops for local schools and communities. In some instances, they also cater to the needs of tourists who visit their museum and cultural centers. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre is a classic example where locals and tourists visit the museum to participate in their sand drawing activities led by sand drawing artists who were able to master both the local Bislama language and English. Interpreters are also available to assist with other languages should the need arise.

The way forward: Indigenizing museum spaces

There are three existing notions of indigenizing museums that might be considered here. Firstly, there are museums in the Pacific islands that are already shifting the focus of their service deliverables to fulfill the needs and demands of local communities. They are to be commended for adapting and making the necessary changes to set themselves apart from business expectations. It is also commendable to see many museums collaborating with their Ministries of Education to reach local schools and target young learners. In New Zealand, schools that utilize "Learning Outside the Classroom" (LEOTC) can organize busloads of students to visit and support their local museums to learn more about themselves and their history.

The second notion involves a group that must be acknowledged, which are cultural institutions that serve the Pacific communities in the diaspora. Most lend a hand to support island-based institutions in their quest to indigenize museum spaces. The best example is the Australian Museum in Sydney, embarking on a cultural conservation project known as *Tauhi*, which is a Tongan word that means "to look after," "tend to," or "to take care of." The museum is collaborating with the United States Consulate in Sydney and reaching out to museums and cultural institutions in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea.

The third notion involves regional and international organizations such as UNESCO, ICOM, and PIMA, that serve as advocates for Pacific island museums and their staff. They have provided guidance through training manuals, workshops, and scholarships to assist local museums to indigenize their spaces and allow local voices and stories to be shared in galleries and other exhibition spaces. As a result, they have legitimized the use of museum spaces to be used by local communities that speak the local language within the

museum or during outreach, as in the case of the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the United Kingdom. Anthropologists from the UK spent a period of two years working with museum staff in the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, training them and recording their stories of how they worked in their community dealing with climate change and the loss of heritage knowledge. Creating spaces for dialogues, even among the staff, is crucial for moving ahead as these stories are equally inspiring and empowering.

Concluding remarks

Pacific museums today are shifting their processes of collection, conservation, classification, and display of objects. The net effect of these changes is to represent the people of the islands as living cultures rather than exotic residues or as disembodied moments in a pattern of historical evolution that the industrial cultures of the world have left behind. Today, museums also are going through many changes such as roles in society, changing identity, political, and economic impacts, as well as competition with other cultural and leisure industries.

The Pacific is surely a unique place. It was the last frontier on earth to be conquered and, as a result of colonialism, museums were created mostly in the early 1900s. Although museums are western constructs, Pacific museums today are encouraged to adapt to many political and economic changes and to find answers such as drawing upon local resources and producing Indigenous solutions. Despite the many challenges that they face daily in the region, many museums try to find realistic solutions for their institution and the communities that they serve. This paper has shown a shift in power relationships between western museums and Indigenous communities. This is also reflected in the continuing development in the relationships between museums and their local communities and users. Museum curatorship has changed, where now cultural beliefs, values, and traditions of the communities that traditionally owned and used the artifacts are elevated. In the past, the authority of the curator was largely unchallenged; however, time has changed this, where authority is shared with museum users such as individuals or community groups whose cultural heritage is represented in the collection. Museum staff are becoming sensitive to such practices and are adhering to the protocols required by the communities concerned. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa is a classic example of a museum of international standing that is putting into place cultural Maori protocols that must be followed by museum staff and visitors alike.

Museums have become important places of education and entertainment as well as for the conservation of objects. Museums are, in fact, in a constant state of change to attract visitors, engage their attention, and mediate between what objects can “say” and what the audience expects to hear. Today, however, Pacific museums are showing a keen interest in the present, which is charged with statements of cultural independence and the future.

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Narratives and island heritage representation: Navigating the Ainu exhibitions on Hokkaido

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Abstract

This article examines the museum representation of the Ainu, the Indigenous people of Hokkaido, Japan. Drawing on postcolonial theory, exhibit communication models, and critical museology, it explores how museum narratives reflect and shape public understanding of Ainu history, culture, and identity. It analyzes exhibitions at the Hokkaido Museum, Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum, Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park, and the Hokkaido Ainu Cultural Center. These range from state-sanctioned and touristic to community-led approaches. The framing of Ainu culture in the past tense underscores the need for deeper engagement with contemporary Ainu communities and global Indigenous resurgence.

Keywords: Ainu, Indigenous representation, Hokkaido, Japan, exhibition

Resumé

Récits et représentation du patrimoine insulaire : Naviguer à travers les expositions aïnues à Hokkaidō. Cet article examine la représentation muséale des Aïnous, le peuple autochtone de Hokkaidō, au Japon. En s'appuyant sur la théorie postcoloniale, les modèles de communication muséale et la muséologie critique, il explore comment les récits muséaux reflètent et façonnent la compréhension publique de l'histoire, de la culture et de l'identité aïnoues. Il analyse les expositions du Musée de Hokkaidō, du Musée culturel aïnou de Nibutani, du Musée Kayano Shigeru de Nibutani, du Musée national aïnou Upopoy et du Centre culturel aïnou de Hokkaidō. Ces expositions vont des approches étatiques et touristiques à celles dirigées par les communautés. L'ancrage du récit aïnou au passé souligne la nécessité d'un engagement plus profond avec

la vie contemporaine des Aïnous et la résurgence autochtone à l'échelle mondiale.

Mots-clés : Ainu, représentation autochtone, Hokkaido, Japon, exposition

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This article presents an analysis based on fieldwork conducted in early 2023 by two museum studies PhD students based in Japan. Originating from Brazil and Taiwan — two countries with diverse Indigenous populations and complex colonial histories — the authors were naturally drawn to Indigenous narratives in Japan as they began to explore various aspects of their host country. The objective of this study is to analyze various approaches to Ainu representation observed in four exhibitions across Hokkaido, exploring both their origins and interpretive strategies. By examining the frameworks behind different representations of Ainu culture, this research aims to contribute to developing more inclusive and collaborative exhibition models that effectively communicate the contemporary presence and agency of the Ainu people in Japan.

The multifaceted representations of Ainu culture in Hokkaido, the group's ancestral homeland, reflect a layered history shaped by colonial processes and ongoing postcolonial cultural practices (Siddle, 1996; Lewallen, 2016). Museum exhibitions offer a range of narratives, not only from Japanese-Ainu and non-Ainu perspectives but also from within the Ainu community itself, revealing the trajectory of cultural resurgence dating back to Kayano Shigeru's early efforts to collect and preserve Ainu oral traditions and artifacts (Kayano, 1994).

The representation of the Ainu in Japan faces unique challenges. A long history of cultural suppression and assimilation has contributed to the silencing and homogenization of Ainu identity within mainstream society (Winchester, 2013). The reemergence of Ainu narratives in museums has coincided with broader postwar civil movements in Japan, including anti-discrimination campaigns, environmental justice efforts, and Indigenous land rights activism (Siddle, 1996; Lewallen, 2016). Contemporary efforts at representation must therefore grapple not only with the authenticity and revitalization of Ainu cultural expression but also with the issue of agency, ensuring that Ainu voices are central to the narration of their own histories. This shift is essential for fostering deeper appreciation and respect for Ainu culture and its place within the national historical narrative.

Museums are active spaces for meaning making, where narratives are constructed, negotiated, and often contested. Within conventional institutional frameworks, however, dominant discourses have frequently marginalized, misrepresented, and flattened Indigenous histories and identities (Clifford, 1997; Message, 2013). Cultural representation, therefore, remains one of the most significant challenges for museum professionals worldwide: how to communicate the complexities of cultural heritage within the constraints of museum spaces and do so in ways that meaningfully engage the public. These challenges become particularly pronounced when working with Indigenous communities, as representation not only shapes internal community identity – often within minority contexts – but also influences how these communities are perceived by the broader society.

Museum representation of the Ainu in Japan reveals an interplay between colonial legacies and Indigenous agency. State-sanctioned narratives have often relegated Ainu culture to a static past; however, longstanding community-led initiatives actively challenge these

outdated approaches by prioritizing self-determined perspectives. These initiatives highlight the importance of museums building deeper connections with contemporary Ainu activism and aligning with broader Indigenous movements advocating for more effective decolonial representation. By comparing static depictions of Ainu culture with dynamic Indigenous representations, it becomes clear that reflexive museology is essential. Such an approach creates a bridge between historical displays and postcolonial discourses, underscoring the significance of representation and emphasizing the transformative potential of museums.

Background

In museology and cultural heritage studies, the representation of Indigenous groups within museums has received increasing scholarly attention. This growing interest stems not only from an expanded understanding of culture and diversity but also from critical debates surrounding the power dynamics embedded within museum practices as well as the rights of marginalized groups to reclaim their heritage and actively participate in decision-making processes. Grounded in postcolonial theory and critical museology, this study observes institutional practices and advocates for more inclusive and participatory approaches, aiming ultimately to empower the Indigenous communities represented.

In Japan, the official recognition of the Ainu as an ethnic minority began with the enactment of the Ainu Cultural Promotion Law in 1997, which aimed to preserve and promote the Ainu language and certain aspects of Ainu culture. However, as Grunow (2019) argues, this policy emerged from a broader context of structural discrimination, marginalization, and exploitation of Ainu culture through settler colonial frameworks in Hokkaido. Earlier scholarship by Cheung (2003) also pointed out the lack of in-depth research and engagement with Ainu cultural heritage. Although legal developments in 1997 marked a step forward, it was not until the Ainu Policy Promotion Act of 2019 that the Japanese government officially recognized the Ainu as an Indigenous people (Tsunemoto, 2019). Prior to this recognition, state-led promotion efforts often focused on the commodification of Ainu culture through what has been termed “ethnic tourism” (Hiwasaki, 2000).

Although the legal acknowledgment of the Ainu represents a critical milestone, it does not automatically translate into societal acceptance or appreciation. This disconnect is largely attributable to the enduring legacies of settler colonialism in Hokkaido and the persistent myth of culturally homogeneous Japanese society. As Lewallen (2016) highlights, deep-seated marginalization structures continue to shape Ainu identity and limit opportunities for cultural self-determination. Furthermore, Lightfoot (2020) suggests that government welfare policies directed at the Ainu have often framed their cultural and political needs in reductive ways, influencing contemporary debates on Indigenous rights and recognition in Japan.

In discussing the relationship between memory, power, and museums, Chagas (2007) conceptualizes the museum as both a “watcher” and something to be watched – a constructed space that not only presents narratives to the public but also carries an invisible gaze shaped by systems of knowledge and authority. According to Chagas, museums have the potential to function as reflective spaces in which material heritage is imbued with symbolic and spiritual meanings. In this sense, museums are not only repositories of objects but also platforms for critical reflection, dialogue, and social engagement. This

perspective highlights the transformative potential of museums to contribute to more inclusive cultural narratives and reshape the public understanding of historically marginalized groups.

Focusing specifically on Indigenous representation in museum exhibitions, Cury's (2017) study on the decolonization of Indigenous representation in museums is also foundational. Cury argues that colonial thought patterns reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against Indigenous peoples, whereas museums have the potential to counteract these biases through educational and curatorial practices. According to Cury, traditional colonial museum practices involve institutions speaking on behalf of Indigenous peoples. Decolonial transformation occurs when curatorial practices integrate Indigenous voices and spirituality. This shift requires institutional restructuring, compelling museum teams not only to collaborate directly with Indigenous self-representation but also provide infrastructure conducive to intercultural dialogue (Cury & Bombonato, 2022). Additionally, communication theory as articulated by Floyd et al. (2022) emphasizes communication as a symbolic process – one that employs symbols to construct and convey meaning, express values, and represent significance. Thus, Indigenous museology prioritizes collaboration and effective communication to avoid reproducing colonial practices.

Methodology

Our study draws on Tony Bennett's (2005) concept of cultural objecthood. This is particularly relevant as it adapts the actor-network theory (ANT) for the analysis of museum objects. Bennett draws a parallel between the meaning-making processes of museum objects and the agency of materials in scientific laboratories. According to this view, objects in museums are not merely passive representations of history and culture but actively participate in ongoing processes of meaning-making through external frameworks established by curatorial choices, educational programming, marketing, and audience-oriented practices. These practices render museum objects agents within broader social programs that seek to organize and regulate social relations.

The ANT is a social studies approach developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law (Murdoch, 1997). The contributions of Murdoch (1998) provide a critical examination and a pragmatic extension of ANT's applicability, analyzing the limitations of the early framework of ANT and demonstrating how the theory can be used to analyze the complex relationship between society and material representations. Murdoch identifies the spaces of hierarchical configurations where centralized actors (such as institutions) stabilize networks through formalized rules and material arrangements, differentiating them from the spaces of negotiations where the actors contest, reinterpret, or even adapt network relations. One of the main points of his research is how the reflexive characteristics of human actors differ from those of non-human actors because humans have the possibility of resisting or changing network preconceptions.

Kéfi and Pallud (2011) extend the applicability of the theory to the realm of cultural institutions, framing mediation as a multifunctional and multidirectional practice involving a network of activities: communication (as the dialogue between different actors), information (as the curation and contextualization of artifacts), negotiation (as navigating the diversity of interpretations), reception (as the assimilation and contestation of the audiences), and education (as pedagogical activities). Museum mediation to the authors is a multifunctional actor network where prescriptive and negotiative logics intersect, elucidated as prescrip-

tive spaces resulting from a curatorial authority and institutional policies that standardize narratives and visitors' pathways. In parallel, negotiative spaces are created through visitor interactions, reinterpretations, and engagements where meaning is constructed with the audience instead of being imposed by the institution onto them.

Therefore, the Ainu exhibition sites discussed in this study are analyzed within a framework that recognizes museum mediation as a relational and multifaceted process. The analysis highlights the interplay among institutional frameworks, curatorial practices, visitor engagements, the provenance of collections, and specific curatorial strategies employed in the displays. Ultimately, it emphasizes museums as dynamic spaces where meanings are collaboratively negotiated rather than passively transmitted.

The exhibition sites

The Hokkaido Museum

The Hokkaido Museum is a government-administered institution that integrates academic research with education, aiming to construct an official image of the region through exhibitions on environmental history, industrial development, and cultural evolution. The museum houses a diverse collection, including a section dedicated to Ainu culture and recent history. This section adopts an ambitious and contemporary ethnographic narrative, utilizing illustrated panels that follow the story of a modern Ainu family. The storyline begins with a boy who identifies as Japanese and gradually reconnects with his Ainu roots and traditions. Acting as a narrative guide, he introduces visitors to Ainu culture, with artifacts complementing the storyline in a way that presents the Ainu experience as part of modern society.

One of the reasons for this progressive approach is that the museum hosts the Ainu Culture Research Center, established 30 years ago, which includes researchers and faculty members who identify as Ainu. It is thus not coincidental that the Hokkaido Museum presents a more innovative and socially engaged narrative of Ainu culture – one that seeks to counter stigmatization and move away from the encyclopedic, detached portrayals of the past. The exhibition strives to resonate with contemporary audiences and depict the Ainu as active participants in present-day Japan.

However, from another perspective, the narrative still maintains certain traditional representational frames. While it attempts to modernize the portrayal of Ainu culture, it largely adheres to a Japanese cultural framework, limiting the space for more critical discussions on the impact of settler colonialism and marginalization. A deeper exploration of how different groups came to be integrated into the Japanese nation-state – beginning from a multiculturalist standpoint – could provide a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

The Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum and the Kayano Museum

The location of these two institutions is notable: they are embedded within Nibutani, a village known as *Nibutani Ainu Takumi no Michi* (Nibutani Ainu Craftsmanship Town), which has the highest concentration of Ainu population in Japan. Surrounded by craft workshops and tourism facilities, this area is recognized for its authentic Ainu cultural practices. The coexistence of two museums focused on Ainu culture offers an interesting contrast in their object-centered narrative approaches. As Hiwasaki (2000) notes, the village represents a unique model of ethnic tourism in Japan.

The Kayano Shigeru Nibutani Ainu Museum is a private institution operated by the family of Kayano Shigeru, the first Ainu member of the Japanese Diet and a prominent advocate for Ainu rights. The museum's narrative is shaped by Kayano's personal perspective as an Ainu cultural leader. The collection includes traditional objects, replicas, crafts (both traditional and contemporary), and souvenirs. While the layout may appear eclectic – lacking coherent labels or explanations in some areas – it evokes the feeling of a personal archive or collector's vault. Despite these limitations, the museum stands as a testament to a lived Ainu experience beyond the premodern, "ethnic" image. It emphasizes the Ainu's global cultural exchanges and their agency in reclaiming representational space.

In contrast, the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum – housed in a modern facility – focuses on the premodern. It holds many artifacts donated by Kayano and has been designated as an Important Tangible Folk Cultural Property. The exhibition is structured by thematic zones, beginning with a video performance of the *Yukar* (Ainu epic poetry), followed by sections titled *Ainu* (The Ainu Way of Life), *Kamuy* (Dramas of the Gods), *Misur* (Blessings of the Earth), and *Morew* (A Tradition of Figurative Art). While the presentation adopts a contemporary design, the narrative remains rooted in premodern depictions of Ainu life. Through reconstructed environments and ethnographic materials, the exhibition primarily portrays the Ainu as part of Japan's distant past. Although the artifacts come from Kayano's collection, the interpretation is shaped by Japanese scholars with an emphasis on accessibility for general audiences. This approach risks reinforcing the notion that Ainu culture is a static, historical phenomenon rather than a living tradition.

The two collections offer contrasting representational logics. One invites visitors to engage with a contemporary, resilient Ainu identity while the other leans toward a more institutionalized and historicized framing. This contrast is especially intriguing considering both originate from Kayano's efforts. The Kayano Museum, as a privately funded institution, may face limitations in exhibition design due to financial constraints. Nonetheless, its inclusion of objects that highlight the Ainu's international networks is a valuable contribution to cultural advocacy. On the other hand, the Nibutani Culture Museum provides a more structured and visually cohesive experience for the general public, offering an accessible introduction to Ainu culture – even if it remains largely confined to a nostalgic lens.

The Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park

By far the largest complex examined in this study – both in terms of spatial scale, collections, and the range of activities offered – the Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park, located in Shiraoi, was established in 2020. Its creation was initiated under the Act on the Promotion of Measures to Realize a Society in Which the Pride of the Ainu People is Respected, with the primary objective of not only preserving and exhibiting Ainu culture but also serving as a cultural hub to disseminate and celebrate the diversity of Ainu traditions and practices.

While the national museum is newly branded, it is not entirely new. It evolved from a pre-existing museum dedicated to Ainu culture, which was reconstructed, renamed, and rebranded in anticipation of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. As Umezawa (2020) notes, this rebranding was intended to present Japan as a nation that embraces cultural diversity, particularly on the global stage. Upopoy offers a wide range of cultural programming for both visitors and Ainu community members. The permanent exhibition is organized around six thematic zones: Our Language, Our Universe, Our Lives, Our History, Our

Work, and Our Exchange, offering multiple entry points into Ainu cultural knowledge and worldviews.

A particularly notable feature of the museum is the integration of the Ainu language across all signage and explanatory texts within the complex. These are rendered in Japanese katakana, a script typically reserved for foreign words, which subtly signals the "othering" of Ainu language within the dominant Japanese linguistic system. In terms of exhibition style, Upopoy shares similarities with the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, particularly in its ethnographic narrative framing. However, it distinguishes itself through greater institutional resources, immersive exhibit design, and a stronger emphasis on hands-on and multisensory experiences. The park also maintains active collaborations with local Ainu communities, hosting live performances, traditional ceremonies, and other cultural events that aim to foster living connections with the heritage on display.

Despite these strengths, Upopoy's core narrative remains largely grounded in conventional ethnographic portrayals. There is limited engagement with the ongoing historical and political debates surrounding colonialism, assimilation, and Indigenous rights in Japan. While the park has significant national visibility and institutional capacity, its potential to critically address Japan's settler colonial history and promote deeper public awareness of Ainu struggles remains underdeveloped. This reveals a gap between participatory cultural representation and the deeper work of decolonial critique and narrative sovereignty.

Among the museum's extensive on-site cultural performances, hands-on Ainu history corners, multisensory displays, elaborate digital content, and the most up-to-date facilities for object display and storage, one particular corner dedicated to present-day Ainu life reveals the museum's potential to go further. The section, titled "Our Work" (私たちのしごと), presents object-supported examples of Ainu individuals living ordinary lives in contemporary society, no different from other Japanese citizens. While these portraits encourage a sense of connection across a broad spectrum of visitors, the need to underscore that Ainu people hold "ordinary" jobs – as well as the selective nature of the jobs presented – points to an embedded sense of otherness that still underpins the narrative structure.

The museum's upscale platform holds considerable promise in addressing the historical injustices faced by the Ainu, such as forced assimilation, displacement, and land dispossession. While its national-scale administration may hinder immediate and deep acknowledgment of state-related injustices, its long-term institutional position and substantial resources could enable more nuanced and critically engaged representations of Ainu experience in the future. However, to fulfill this potential, Upopoy must move beyond superficial celebrations of cultural diversity. Without a fundamental shift toward decolonial museological practices that confront structural inequalities and elevate Indigenous self-representation, the institution risks reinforcing the very narratives it seeks to overcome. As such, the challenge ahead lies not merely in showcasing Ainu culture but in engaging critically with the legacies of settler colonialism and contributing to a more just and inclusive national memory.

Hokkaido Ainu Cultural Center

This exhibition space, operated by the Ainu Association of Hokkaido and located near Sapporo Station, offers a distinctive approach to Ainu representation that differs significantly from the other sites discussed in this study. Although modest in scale and presenta-

tion, the exhibition is free of charge and focuses primarily on the resistance movements of the Ainu people, emphasizing their ongoing struggle for cultural recognition and political rights. While the interior may appear somewhat outdated and certain media displays are non-functional, the content remains compelling.

The exhibition includes objects that testify to the Ainu's historical trading relationships with neighboring regions, including mainland Japan, China, and Russia. Like other museums, it also features artifacts from the premodern period; however, its most significant contribution lies in its focus on contemporary Ainu activism. Through photographs, publications, flags, personal belongings, and ephemera, the exhibition vividly illustrates the modern history of Ainu resistance and cultural resurgence. Items such as protest flags, archival publications, historic photographs of Ainu rights advocacy, and documents addressing land injustice serve not only as historical evidence but also as symbolic tools for memory and identity reclamation.

This small yet powerful exhibition underscores the critical role of narrative framing in museum representation. While many of the same ethnographic objects appear in larger institutions, the interpretive context here helps to bridge the gap between premodern cultural heritage and present-day Indigenous identity. In doing so, the exhibition challenges the static, past-tense portrayals often found in ethnographic displays and instead foregrounds the dynamic and ongoing nature of Ainu cultural assertion.

Conclusion

The above analysis seeks to understand how narratives are constructed through exhibitions and how they reflect broader national attitudes toward cultural diversity. By examining how Ainu collections are presented to the public, it reveals the paradoxes and tensions inherent in the multiplicity of perspectives shaped by the diverse agents involved in the representation, recognition, and appreciation of Ainu culture in contemporary Japanese society.

The Ainu's assertion of their place within Japanese history serves as a significant call for Japan to more actively embrace and promote cultural diversity as a vital part of its evolving national identity. The postcolonial challenges faced in museum exhibitions are not unique to Japan; they are part of a broader global discourse. Museums not only curate the histories that societies choose to remember, they also reflect long-standing top-down power structures, making them critical spaces for decolonial critique, intervention, and dialogue.

The Ainu exhibitions examined in this study illustrate the potential for reconfiguring museum spaces into platforms for cultural reclamation. The collected objects and the interpretive networks surrounding them offer opportunities to confront historical injustices and to reconsider dominant narratives. The case studies presented here reveal how curatorial strategies shape public perception, particularly through decisions about inclusion, voice, and framing. The persistent portrayal of the Ainu as an exoticized ethnic group – evocative of outdated encyclopaedical depictions – is not incidental but emerges from specific curatorial choices. Across the institutions studied, the selective representation of Ainu culture and the absence of contemporary perspectives underscore ongoing disparities in how the Ainu's past and present are acknowledged.

Community-driven narratives such as the Nibutani Kayano Shigeru Ainu Museum and the Hokkaido Ainu Cultural Center offer more grounded and participatory storylines.

While rich in cultural knowledge and guided by Indigenous leadership, these institutions often face limitations due to inadequate funding and limited institutional support. In contrast, more resourced venues like the Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum, the Hokkaido Museum, and the Upopoy National Ainu Museum and Park tend to perpetuate sanitized or exoticized portrayals, largely avoiding critical engagement with contemporary Ainu struggles or Japan's colonial aspects. These representations reinforce the perception of the Ainu as "the Other" within dominant Wajin society and point to the need for sustained critical reflection on museum practices.

This study has addressed only a small aspect of the complex relationship between the Ainu and Japanese society, with a particular focus on how museum exhibitions can either reinforce a dismissive colonial gaze or contribute to inclusive, decolonial dialogue. The Ainu's active reclamation of their cultural narratives challenges official discourses and calls for a reevaluation of ethnic relations within the broader context of Japan's unresolved colonial history. The role of museums in cultural representation, particularly regarding Indigenous and minority communities, is pivotal. Emphasizing cultural and historical reclamation within curatorial practice can serve as a powerful tool in confronting colonial structures still embedded in institutional narratives.

Such transformations are not only essential for the ethical integrity of museums but also represent a necessary step toward a more inclusive and self-reflective Japan – one that acknowledges its internal diversity and affirms its Indigenous heritage. The postcolonial challenges of museum representation are not limited to Japan but resonate globally as museums across the world continue to grapple with the legacies of empire and the ongoing marginalization of subaltern voices. As spaces of collective memory and public engagement, museums have the potential to become sites of decolonial practice, where reinterpretive strategies can reshape public consciousness and promote more equitable cultural futures.

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Empowering narratives: Rethinking Taiwan through the National Museum of History in Taiwan

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Abstract

This article examines the Oceanic Taiwan exhibition at Taiwan's National Museum of History (NMH) as a pivotal moment in reshaping national identity through museum narratives. Departing from its Sinocentric legacy, the NMH engaged diverse non-state actors to construct a maritime-centered curatorial assemblage that foregrounded Taiwan's settler-colonial history and ongoing democratization. Using Bennett's museum theory and Latour's Actor-Network Theory, the study analyzes the exhibition's agency in producing a counternarrative that simultaneously advanced decolonial aims and revealed representational limitations—particularly regarding Indigenous voices. Oceanic Taiwan exemplifies both the potential and challenges of national museums in cultural decolonization and identity rearticulation in post-authoritarian Taiwan.

Keywords: Decolonization, museum narratives, settler colonialism, Oceanic Taiwan, cultural identity

Résumé

Récits valorisants : Repenser Taïwan à travers le Musée national d'histoire de Taïwan. Cet article analyse l'exposition Taiwan océanique au Musée national d'histoire (NMH) de Taïwan comme un moment charnière dans la redéfinition de l'identité nationale à travers les récits muséaux. Rompant avec son héritage sinocentrique, le NMH a mobilisé divers acteurs non étatiques pour construire une scénographie centrée sur la mer, mettant en lumière l'histoire coloniale de peuplement de Taïwan et sa démocratisation en cours. En s'appuyant sur la théorie muséale de Bennett et la théorie de l'acteur-réseau de LaTour, l'étude examine l'agence de l'exposition dans la production d'un contre-récit à visée décoloniale, tout en révélant ses limites, notamment en matière de représentation autochtone.

Mots-clés: Décolonisation, récits muséaux, colonialisme de peuplement, Taïwan océanique, identité culturelle

In 2005, the National Museum of History (NMH) in Taiwan presented its first exhibition adopting a maritime perspective on Taiwan's history. *Oceanic Taiwan: A Conversation Between the People and the Island* (see Figure 1) marked a significant breakthrough in the NMH's curatorial practice and represented an early stage in the transformation of Taiwan's national cultural narrative. This exhibition explored Taiwan's maritime culture and history within the context of its multiple layers of colonial history. The timeframe extended from the seventeenth century through Japanese colonial rule to post-war Chinese Nationalist governance. This expansion of historical scope along with the emphasis on a maritime perspective – highlighted by the term "oceanic" in the title – signified a paradigm shift. By redirecting focus away from the previously dominant continental narrative in Taiwanese cultural museums, the exhibition's curatorial approach played a key role in this reorientation. It marked the beginning of a shift in its national museum narratives,



Figure 1. Exhibition Poster of *Oceanic Taiwan: A Conversation Between the People and the Island.* © 2005, National Museum of History.

creating the potential for examining Taiwan's settler-colonial features and ultimately contributing to the long-awaited process of decolonization.

Initiated by NMH curator Dr. Tsai Yao-ching, a specialist in art history, the exhibition brought together a diverse group of contributors, including civilian collectors, universities, and research centers. These participants, primarily from non-governmental initiatives, collaboratively constructed a cohesive narrative of Taiwan's maritime experiences throughout its settler-colonial history. This narrative was supported by objects from a wide range of genres, emphasizing their historical significance in connecting the island's past to the sea. Held in a prominent national museum, the exhibition further underscored Taiwan's ongoing cultural and political democratization over the past decade.

This case study examines *Oceanic Taiwan* and employs historical methods and sociological theories to analyze the composition of the exhibition's object assemblage, its agency, and the network of actors and narratives involved in its creation. More specifically, the analysis references Tony Bennett's (2018) museum theory, which explores how modern nation-state displays from the 20th century onward reconstruct objects and their symbolic meanings to align with national narratives. This study investigates how *Oceanic Taiwan* reflected the indigenization of culture, identity, and evolving nationalism in Taiwan. Furthermore, it highlights how the museum narrative crafted two decades ago contributed to cultural decolonization within a national museum setting and continues to inspire both the challenges and opportunities of cultural decolonization in present-day Taiwan.

The NMH, a lens to the construction of Taiwan's national culture

Located at the crossroads of the Pacific Ocean and the Chinese continent, Taiwan has long been a site of seafaring migrations and geopolitical conflicts. The island's geography invited waves of settlers and colonial regimes, each imposing a distinct ideology of cultural and nation. The most recent wave of settler colonialism came with the authoritarian rule of the Kuomintang (KMT) after World War II, marking a pivotal chapter in Taiwan's contested identity and cultural narrative.

The NMH, established in 1955 under the KMT regime, serves as a microcosm for examining the interplay between political ideology and cultural representation in Taiwan. As a product of Sinocentric cultural construction during an era of authoritarian rule, the NMH reflected the Chinese nationalist narrative that shaped Taiwan's official identity for decades. Its architectural design, collection strategies, and exhibition narratives were deeply intertwined with state ideology and Cold War geopolitics under the influence of the American empire (Johnson, 2000). The NMH functioned as a vehicle for advancing the KMT's vision of Taiwan as the legitimate representative of the Republic of China. However, while it once functioned as an authoritative cultural institution, its transitional practices alongside the nation's democratization provides a close-up lens for understanding Taiwan's evolving national narrative amid contemporary historical shifts and transformations in identity.

Tsai (2019), in his study of literary and cultural productions in Taiwan, provides a comprehensive framework for applying settler colonial criticism to conceptualize significant post-war narrative transformations. Similarly, the narratives produced in museums through object assemblages can benefit from being examined within the framework of settler colonialism. While the "national" status of a museum adds another variable to

the narratives it produces, it is precisely such national institutions—once regulated by authoritarian governments—that face the greatest challenges yet simultaneously hold the greatest potential for post-colonial cultural production.

Decolonizing settler colonialized Taiwan

Between 1949 and the lifting of martial law in 1987, Chiang Kai-shek implemented a comprehensive authoritarian governance system to maintain his regime in exile in Taiwan. This regime claimed sovereignty over China while bringing in an influx of settlers who comprised roughly 20% of the island's population at the time (Wakabayashi, 2003). Dictatorship, a Sinocentric cultural narrative, and anti-communist propaganda thrived under the KMT governance for decades after its relocation to Taiwan (Lin, 2009). Consequently, political repression and a Sinocentric ideology dominated Taiwan's official cultural narrative. While debates continue about whether the concept of settler colonialism fully encapsulates the KMT authoritarian state (Wakabayashi, 2016, pp. 90-107), post-World War II Taiwan undoubtedly experienced a regime rooted in settler-colonial policies aimed at nationalist assimilation (Sugimoto, 2018, pp. 283-297).

With the lifting of martial law in 1987, the process of democratization spurred efforts to construct a multicultural narrative that could encompass the diverse memories and identities arising from Taiwan's history of consecutive settler-colonial regimes. This multiculturalism, intertwined with the rise of Taiwanese nationalism, sought to redress the disproportionate emphasis on Chinese culture by advocating a more balanced representation of all cultural groups within the nation. In contrast to the previous monolithic Sinocentric narrative, this new approach aimed to reflect the realities of Taiwan's pluralistic society. However, the nation's political and social polarization highlights the incomplete nature of decolonization in addressing the settler-colonial aspects of its authoritarian past. The KMT's fabrication of a Chinese identity, which deliberately marginalized Indigenous cultures, fostered a "settler-colonial unconsciousness" (Hirano et al., 2018, p. 213). Acknowledging the settler-colonial structure of the post-World War II KMT regime through the contextualization of its cultural constructs is crucial for Taiwan's ongoing democratization and cultural reform.

The KMT's continental-oriented ideology, which underpinned its claims to sovereignty over China, pervaded Taiwanese society for more than half a century. This ideology overlooked the island's maritime history and experiences, creating a disconnect between official narratives produced by public institutions and the lived experiences of the Taiwanese people. For over 50 years, the authoritarian promotion of a Sinocentric cultural framework created persistent societal dissonance. While studies on Taiwan's settler-colonial history have only gained momentum in the past decade, they highlight how the island's complex patterns of colonization pose unique challenges to its decolonization process (Hirano et al., 2018).

Decolonization in Taiwanese national museums

The 1990s saw a surge in the establishment of new national museums in Taiwan that embraced narratives of multiculturalism, pluralism, and oceanic perspectives (Chu, 2011). This cultural reorientation was preceded by the cultural nativism movement of the 1970s, which laid the groundwork for a more inclusive national narrative (Hsiau, 2021). Initiated by grassroots literary movements, cultural nativism in the 1970s called for more relat-

able literary production using local languages, cultural features, and memories anchored in the Taiwanese experience, in contrast to the Nationalists' continental, anti-communist civil war memories and their overarching Sinocentric cultural narratives. The multicultural approach later adopted by Taiwan's democratized government reflects this ideological shift and underscores the population's resistance to monolithic cultural assimilation (Wakabayashi, 2016). National museums played a pivotal role in this transformation, representing a national effort to address the historical neglect of the culture of Taiwan's majority population (Wang, 2004). This ideological shift marked both a process and a milestone in the nation's decolonization, highlighting the gradual decentralization of cultural authority (Chu, 2011). The Indigenous peoples, along with the Chinese Hokkien and Hakka settlers who have coexisted on the island since the seventeenth century, have finally had the chance to be acknowledged and represented alongside the post-1949 Chinese Nationalist settlers in the nation's cultural representations.

However, while multiculturalism seeks to incorporate Taiwan's diverse population with its varied origins and memories, tensions persist. Disparities in resource allocation among cultural groups and enduring socio-economic inequalities. reveal the limitations of current efforts to reform the national narrative. Moreover, the lingering influence of Sinocentric ideology continues to shape institutional structures and public discourse, complicating the construction of a cohesive national identity. As Taiwan's decolonization process remains incomplete, the struggle over national identity reflects broader questions about cultural sovereignty, historical recognition, and the redefinition of belonging. The museum space, as a site of cultural memory and identity formation, plays a crucial role in either reinforcing or dismantling colonial narratives.

Given its dual role as a national cultural institution and an exhibition content producer, the NMH requires a critical reexamination of both its curatorial processes and the implications of its exhibitions. As an institution historically shaped by state ideology, the NMH must confront its role in perpetuating or challenging settler-colonial narratives in Taiwan's national identity construction. The perspectives gained from settler-colonialism studies provide a valuable tool for analyzing how exhibitions shape public consciousness, influencing the collective understanding of Taiwan's past and future. By applying this framework, Oceanic Taiwan, a special exhibition produced by the NMH, can be contextualized as part of a broader effort to dismantle hegemonic narratives and assert an autonomous Taiwanese identity.

Oceanic Taiwan and the NMH

Despite its origins in authoritarianism, the NMH continues to operate within a democratized society. As a national museum aligned with the state's cultural governance, it faces the challenge of creating exhibition narratives that reflect Taiwan's evolving national perspective. The production of *Oceanic Taiwan* exemplifies this transitional process, offering insights into how the museum reoriented its narrative ideology that connects the broader social changes taking place in the nation.

The concept of the exhibitionary complex expands the potential of museum objecthood in the process of decolonization (Bennett, 2018). In colonial museums, the act of collecting reflects the governing network, whereby objects are selected, organized, and presented to align with dominant ideologies. These objects possess agency through their interactions with the governing ideology, shaping and reinforcing narratives of power. For the NMH,

its assemblages of objects and subsequent exhibitions provide tangible evidence of the nation's settler-colonial history and its postcolonial aspirations in recent decades. As Taiwan transitions from authoritarian rule to a democratized society, the NMH, which has been in operation since the early years of the Nationalist regime in Taiwan, holds both the potential and the responsibility to create historical frameworks that facilitate decolonization and critically address the country's settler-colonial past. Examination of the exhibitionary complex created under the Taiwanese society's transformation from Sinocentric authoritarianism to a democratized oceanic one is a process that also contributes to the understanding of this island nation's settler-colonial features in culture.

While some researchers have attributed the shift in museum narratives – from Sinocentric to multiculturalism – to political rivalry between the KMT and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (Denton, 2021), the transition reflects deeper tensions between the older and newer settler groups in Taiwanese society. The Han Chinese settlers in Taiwan, whose presence dates back to the seventeenth century and who constitute the largest proportion of the population, experienced Japanese colonization alongside the Indigenous peoples and differ significantly from the post-war Nationalist settlers. However, upon establishing its regime in Taiwan, the KMT imposed a Sinocentric cultural narrative by designating certain art genres as "national" arts to advance its governing ideology (Kuo, 1995; Guy, 2020) — an approach that excluded the memories and experiences of Taiwan's largest population at the time.

The transition in cultural narratives – from Sinocentrism to authoritarian leader worship, and, ultimately, to multicultural inclusiveness – mirrors the multiethnic composition and diverse memories of Taiwanese society. Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a valuable framework for understanding how museum objects serve as both passive carriers of meaning and active intermediaries in cultural formation (Latour, 2007). The processes of cataloging, acquiring, displaying, and reproducing imbue objects with agency, enabling them to influence cultural frameworks and narratives far beyond their original contexts. Through exhibitions and public engagement, museum collections continue to shape societal understandings of identity and history.

The *Oceanic Taiwan* exhibition, introduced as a special exhibit at the NMH in 2005, exemplifies the museum's evolving role in constructing inclusive narratives. This exhibition marked a significant departure from the NMH's earlier Sinocentric practices, highlighting its agency in promoting an oceanic perspective on Taiwan's history. The layered meaning-making processes of the objects involved in this exhibitionary complex provide evidence of the power dynamics at play during the exhibition's creation (Bennett, 2018). Moreover, Actor-Network Theory allows for a further unpacking of the roles that objects play within museum functions (Bennett, 2005; Byrne, 2011).

Democratization has shifted the nation's cultural narrative toward an oceanic perspective, which offers the potential to incorporate multiple viewpoints and reflect the diverse memories and identities of its people. By acknowledging the island nation's maritime history and past experiences, this oceanic approach aims to foster a shared and relatable national identity. *Oceanic Taiwan* thus serves as an example of how national museums can act as mediators in reorienting cultural narratives and advancing the processes of decolonization and democratization. By analyzing the participating actors, including objects, and narrative strategies within the exhibition, *Oceanic Taiwan* reveals the agents of change driving the NMH's evolving mission in response to democratization and cultural decolonization in Taiwan.

The agents

The cultural administration structure in Taiwan positions its museums within a hierarchical framework directly aligned with government directives. This structure enables the ruling political authority's ideology to shape museum narratives. The transition of power from the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which positions itself as more aligned with Indigenous perspectives, in 2000 marked a significant shift in Taiwan's national doctrine. As the first political party established after the lifting of martial law in 1987, the DPP introduced an ideology distinct from the KMT's authoritarian and continental-focused construct. The society experienced a shift of governing ideology from Chinese continental to a more local, oceanic oriented one. National cultural institutions began to promote an oceanic perspective, reflecting a broader ideological shift. Although originally designed to reinforce the governing ideology during the authoritarian period, the NMH embraced this trend, launching its first exhibition aligned with the new narrative in 2005 as part of its 50th anniversary activities.

The *Oceanic Taiwan* exhibition was a collaborative effort involving a variety of non-government actors alongside the NMH initiated by one of its curators, Dr. Tsai Yao-ching. Dr. Tsai played a pivotal role in shaping the exhibition's narrative. He was inspired by the differing perspectives embedded in maps from various generations and purposes. His curatorial approach emphasized the untold maritime experiences of Taiwan, creating a narrative naturally guided by the objects selected for the assemblage. This approach highlighted the island's unique relationship with the sea, offering a counternarrative to the Sinocentric constructs of the past.

Key contributors in the *Oceanic Taiwan* object assemblage included J.M. Lin Architect/ The Observer Design Group + Graduate Institute of Architecture at NCTU (Taiwan), the Taiwan Historic Map Society, and the Chinese Culture University's Digital Earth Research Center. This collaboration of private collectors, architectural firms, universities, and research institutes demonstrated the exhibition's inclusivity. J.M. Lin Architect and its affiliated groups contributed a centerpiece for the exhibition based on a project originally developed for the Second International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam (IABR, 2005). This project analyzed Taiwan's coastline development and inspired urban design concepts, symbolizing the island's connection to its maritime environment. The Council for Cultural Affairs under the Executive Yuan oversaw the project, signifying government support in constructing a new national cultural image aimed at gaining international recognition.

The Taiwan Historic Map Society and the Chinese Culture University's Digital Earth Research Center played vital roles in visually situating Taiwan within the Pacific context. The Taiwan Historic Map Society, a private collector's group, provided historical maps, particularly from the Japanese colonial period, that highlighted Taiwan's colonial and modernization history. The Digital Earth Research Center, on the other hand, supplied contemporary satellite imagery and coastline analyses, reinforcing the exhibition's modern and scientific perspective. Together, these resources supported a narrative positioning Taiwan as an integral part of the Pacific rather than a continental appendage (see Figure 2).

Private collectors and research institutes also contributed significantly to the construction of an object-based counternarrative that diverged from the NMH's previous practices. This partnership between government entities and civic communities reflected a decentral-



Figure 2. Exhibition Hall of *Oceanic Taiwan*. © 2005, National Museum of History.

ization in the NMH's curatorial process. The involvement of multiple actors allowed for a broader range of perspectives, contributing to a more inclusive representation of Taiwan's cultural and historical identity. By hosting *Oceanic Taiwan* on a national platform (see Figure 3), the NMH demonstrated its evolving agency in challenging the hegemonic continental cultural construct. This collaborative exhibition symbolized Taiwan's progression toward democratization and decolonization, reflecting the museum's commitment to representing a more inclusive national identity.

The collections curated by the NMH in post-war Taiwan, originally intended to reinforce a continental-focused national narrative, now serve as material evidence of the island's modern cultural development and its shifting identity. Through *Oceanic Taiwan*, the NMH and its curator coordinated a network of contributors who collectively provided an array of objects aligned with the oceanic narrative. By serving as the exhibition's venue, the NMH itself became a key agent in this narrative transformation, playing a central role in Taiwan's efforts to redefine its cultural identity and historical perspective.



Figure 3. Preparations for the opening ceremony at the main exhibition hall of Oceanic Taiwan. © 2005, National Museum of History.

The assemblage

The *Oceanic Taiwan* exhibition embodied a collaborative storytelling effort by multiple agents, both human and non-human, positioning their contributions as integral to the nation's historical narrative. The assemblage of objects collectively constructed a linear narrative of Taiwan's development through its relationship with the sea. These objects highlighted the seafaring traditions of Han Chinese settlers, maritime economic activities, and the diverse cultures representing the lives of generations of immigrants on the island. The exhibition included a wide variety of materials – maps, documents, prints, ship models, photographs, postcards, posters, and folk artifacts – all of which contributed to a multidimensional narrative.

At first glance, the assortment of objects in this exhibition might seem scattered in comparison to the paintings and antiques that had shaped the NMH exhibitions before. However, this diversity was intentional, reflecting the range of agents involved in the NMH's evolving cultural narratives. The exhibition featured religious artifacts tied to the maritime faith of Han Chinese settlers, such as objects related to the worship of the sea goddess Matsu. It also included a portrait of an Indigenous grandmother within a Han settler family, as well as the iconic canoe of the Tao people from Lanyu (Orchid Island). The presence of the Indigenous peoples and a history of interactions and coexistence was presented with objects as evidence. Mapping equipment and maps across time and with various functions were put together to demonstrate an interaction between people and the island and the sea. Postcards and posters highlighting harbors, maritime goods, and coastal salt pond practices further illustrated the island's ontological connection to the

sea. Together, these objects offered a counternarrative to the Sinocentric, continental history that had dominated Taiwan's cultural narrative for more than half a century.

Maps formed the centerpiece of *Oceanic Taiwan*'s narrative. Spanning different historical periods, the maps ranged from Qing Dynasty depictions of the island to Japanese colonial cartography and post-war Chinese continental perspectives. This historical collection was supplemented by contemporary satellite photographs, vividly emphasizing Taiwan's geographical and cultural ties to the sea. Posters, postcards, ship models, and seafaring pamphlets further underscored the interconnectedness of Taiwan's people with their maritime environment, illustrating the economic and cultural exchanges shaped by the island's position in the Pacific.

By assembling a wide-ranging collection of objects, *Oceanic Taiwan* presented a narrative distinct from the Chinese continental perspective that had previously permeated the NMH's exhibitions. The exhibition's emphasis on Taiwan's maritime history and diverse cultural experiences highlighted the island's ontological relationship with the sea. Although it did not fully explore Taiwan's connection to the Pacific Islands, as implied by its title, the shift from a continental to a maritime focus nonetheless marked a significant transformation in the NMH's role as a national cultural institution. This shift not only challenged the museum's historical narrative practices but also demonstrated its evolving agency in contributing to Taiwan's broader efforts at decolonization and democratization.

The narrative

The preface of the catalog by the NMH director Tsung The-gin specifically stated that *Oceanic Taiwan* was to achieve communication and synthesis between different fields and that by presenting this exhibition, the museum continued its tradition of shedding light on the "daily lives of the ordinary people" (NMH, 2005). Indeed, focusing on shared culture represents the least provocative decolonizing narrative to counter the previously Sinocentric one. This exhibition, involving various actors in constructing the Taiwanese maritime experience, further extended its reach to an international project that encompasses the experiences of ordinary people. The project was an ontological representation of Taiwan at the International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam (IABR, 2005, p. 99). The original title for this international project by J.M. Lin Architect (仲觀聯合建築師事務所) and NCTU (國立交通大學建築研究所) was "Ocean of Taiwan – from NOwhere to NOWhere." Its equivocal terminology suggested the ambiguous situation of contemporary Taiwan and its unresolved sequential colonial experiences. When incorporated into *Oceanic Taiwan*, the concept was extended by the NMH curator. With a telescopic view of the island of Taiwan and its extensive coastal development records, this interactive center piece of the *Oceanic Taiwan* was reframed into a narrative for a domestic audience for a fresh perspective in understanding their culture and experience.

This narrative turn was further extended in the prologue by the Taiwan Historic Map Society director, Yang Lian-fu, in the exhibition catalog. With an opening paragraph stating how the exhibition aimed to introduce an underrepresented history of the island, the article included four sections: Origin of Taiwan's Oceanic Culture; Historical Changes in Taiwan's Oceanic Culture; Immigration, Commerce, and Diversity of Character in Taiwan's Oceanic Culture; and Revelation of Oceanic Taiwan. By tracing the history from Taiwan's earliest recorded encounter with settlers from the sea to the present, this narrative emphasized the interactions between the island, its people, and the world.

Yang's descent from pre-1949 Chinese immigrants—who lived through both Japanese and Nationalist Chinese colonization—mirrors the experience of the largest settler group on the island. While these Han settlers became the primary opponents of post-war authoritarian governance during Taiwan's democratization, the decolonizing practices led by these earlier settlers have continued to marginalize Taiwan's Indigenous peoples, who have deep-rooted connections to the broader Oceanic region. This representational paradox underscores the need to reconstruct more inclusive narratives, highlighting that the oceanic perspective holds greater potential than how it was conveyed in *Oceanic Taiwan*.

The invisible

Despite the reconstructed cultural narrative in *Oceanic Taiwan*, critical gaps in this exhibition complex underscored the challenges Taiwan continues to face in constructing an inclusive, decolonized cultural narrative. The first significant omission was the absence of the NMH's own collection in the assemblage of over 300 objects presented in the exhibition. While special exhibitions are not strictly required to incorporate the hosting museum's collection, this absence was conspicuous for a museum claiming to represent the national history of Taiwan. It suggested that the NMH's established collection was incompatible with the narrative proposed by *Oceanic Taiwan*. This disconnect revealed the limitations of the museum's capacity to reorient its practices to align with the democratized government's new cultural governance, despite efforts to create a more inclusive national narrative.

A second notable shortcoming was the exhibition's focus on Han Chinese experiences, which effectively redirected the national cultural narrative from a continental to an oceanic orientation. However, this focus largely excluded the deeper connections between Taiwan and the broader oceanic community, signaling the preliminary nature of efforts to overcome multiple colonial and authoritarian legacies. Relying heavily on private collections, the exhibition was constrained by the individual ideologies and biases of the collectors, leading to a lack of representation for Taiwan's Indigenous peoples. Among the 300 objects, only four specifically addressed Indigenous presence: a photograph and portrait of elderly Indigenous women, a model of a Lanyu Island canoe, and an actual canoe from Lanyu.

This marginal representation was particularly problematic given that the languages and cultural practices of Taiwan's Indigenous peoples form the most direct connection between Taiwan and the Pacific islands. These connections could have provided stronger legitimacy for reorienting Taiwan's cultural narrative toward an oceanic perspective. Instead, *Oceanic Taiwan* focused primarily on Taiwan's coastal developments and historical narratives beginning with the Qing period. The limited inclusion of Indigenous maritime traditions reflects the NMH's historical lack of attention to Taiwan's Indigenous cultures, a deficiency compounded by the museum's reliance on private collections for this exhibition.

The NMH, as an institution, embodied the model of cultural narrative construction under authoritarian rule in Taiwan. Its collecting and exhibiting practices prior to democratization were dominated by art exhibitions centered on Chinese culture, with little engagement in narratives about Taiwan's island identity or maritime history. While the democratization process triggered shifts in cultural governance, these changes were initially limited to emphasizing the local dimensions of Chinese culture rather than creating an ontological narrative rooted in Taiwan's island experience. The NMH's structural detachment from maritime perspectives and Indigenous narratives impeded its ability to contribute meaningfully to *Oceanic Taiwan's* object assemblage.

At the same time, the pervasive continental Chinese narrative imposed during the authoritarian period appeared to have indirectly inspired private collectors to assemble objects that served as a counternarrative. These privately collected objects filled the gaps left by the NMH's Nationalist colonial practices, but their limitations revealed how the authoritarian settler-colonial structure continued to haunt the creation of new cultural narratives.

Nonetheless, *Oceanic Taiwan* represented a significant step in Taiwan's cultural decolonization process. By excluding the NMH's collection, the exhibition diminished the influence of the museum's colonial characteristics. Moreover, the involvement of actors outside the state-controlled cultural administration system decentralized the narrative, allowing for greater inclusivity. *Oceanic Taiwan* demonstrated a unique angle of decolonizing practice in Taiwan's museum scene. By composing an object assemblage that redirects attention to Taiwan's maritime experiences, the exhibition seeks to foster an island-focused national identity.

In this process, both the objects corroborating a settler-colonial construct and those offering counternarratives were indispensable. These objects not only served as bridges to Taiwan's past but also acted as agents of decolonization, facilitating the reorientation of the nation's cultural narrative. While gaps in representation remain, *Oceanic Taiwan* exemplified the challenges and opportunities inherent in reframing Taiwan's history and identity through the lens of the sea, signaling a crucial shift in the NMH's role as a cultural institution.

Prospects and challenges

Oceanic Taiwan can be understood as a composite network of actors and evidence, demonstrating the NMH's transition from affirming a continental, colonial Chinese narrative to inspiring a decolonizing, oceanic Taiwanese one. The three aspects of *Oceanic Taiwan* highlight key elements within the exhibition complex that contribute to cultural decolonization. By engaging decentralized agents, constructing an object-based counternarrative against entrenched continental historiographies, and shifting its narrative toward an evidence-based island culture, *Oceanic Taiwan* marked a significant departure from the promotion of a refined Chinese literati tradition. Instead, it embraced Taiwan's maritime identity. These aspects—along with certain notable absences—illustrate the National Museum of History's evolving role as an agent of change in Taiwan's cultural decolonization. *Oceanic Taiwan* demonstrates how a national museum can embody both colonial institutional practices and the potential for decolonizing reinterpretation (Craggs & Wintle, 2016). The exhibition serves as a reminder of the ongoing and unending process of cultural decolonization.

From the participating agents to the assemblage of objects and the shaping of its narrative, *Oceanic Taiwan* materialized a reorientation of history from a continental to an oceanic perspective. It presented a new cultural narrative while enabling an object assemblage that challenged its original Sinocentric settler-colonial framework. Examining this assemblage reveals the evolving role of cultural institutions as decolonizing agents, offering inspiration to societies navigating their own processes of decolonization. Under the pre-democratization KMT regime, cultural nationalism was deeply rooted in its Sinocentric ideology, authoritarianism, and settler colonial framework. Aligned with this agenda, the NMH played a crucial role in constructing a Chinese cultural narrative – a legacy that now requires critical reexamination in a postcolonial context. The exhibition's diverse actors, evolving narratives, and institutional networks attest to the multiple dimensions of

nationalism in Taiwan's pre-democratization era. In this way, *Oceanic Taiwan* provides valuable insight into the decolonization process and its broader implications for national identity in contemporary Taiwan.

At the same time, the oceanic narrative within *Oceanic Taiwan* reveals an inherent duality: while it represents a decolonizing attempt from a pre-Nationalist Han Chinese perspective, it simultaneously reaffirms the underlying settler-colonial structure that continues to marginalize Taiwan's Indigenous oceanic communities. Despite these limitations, the NMH took meaningful steps toward fostering a more inclusive curatorial approach. By bringing together diverse actors, adopting a co-creative curatorial structure, and integrating civic, it established a viable model for crafting new cultural narratives within a former authoritarian cultural institution. Over the exhibition's two-month period, it attracted approximately 20,000 visitors (NMH, 2005, 2006), and the exhibition catalog was recognized as an *Outstanding Government Publication* in 2006 (Government Publications Information, 2006).

Significant challenges persist in the decolonizing practices examined in this study. Initiated by a single curator and lacking a long-term implementation strategy, the project faced a 15-year gap before the production of its intended sequel, *Beauty of the Sea: Maritime Culture and Faces of Taiwan*. Following the shift in government leadership in 2009, national cultural policies took a different direction, steering away from decolonization efforts. It was not until another change in political leadership over a decade later that the NMH regained the capacity to organize another maritime-focused exhibition. The long-delayed sequel, *Beauty of the Sea*, was made possible during the NMH's major renovation through an exhibition at an archaeological museum and an online virtual gallery, presented as a joint project by the NMH and the Shihsanhang Museum of Archaeology (NMH, 2021). It subsequently toured to Taiching in 2022, collectively attracting over 65,000 onsite visitors over its nine-month run (NMH, 2022).

In the case of the NMH, political and governmental influences continue to exert a significant impact on national museum practices, shaping the scope and direction of exhibitions and their ability to engage with Taiwan's decolonizing narratives.

Conclusion

Oceanic Taiwan's exploration of Taiwan's maritime experience reveals the potential of national museums to contribute to the country's ongoing decolonization. This exhibition challenged the NMH's prior narratives in response to the demands of a democratized society, serving as an example of how Taiwanese national museums can explore possibilities for contributing to the formation of an ontologically distinct Taiwanese history. This process necessitates confronting its past practices, rediscovering its connections to Taiwan's evolving identity, and aligning its curatorial approach with the nation's transformative cultural ideology.

Oceanic Taiwan exemplifies how curatorial strategies can contribute to Taiwan's collective journey toward a more inclusive historical consciousness. By mapping the island's history through its maritime heritage, the exhibition reflects the diffusion of democratic values from Taiwanese society into government-led cultural institutions. However, its limited visitor numbers and lack of structural support for its continued development highlight the ongoing challenges the NMH faces in becoming an effective agent of change in Taiwan's identity formation.

The significance of revisiting *Oceanic Taiwan* lies not only in its narrative but also in the network of actors involved in its creation, the production processes behind the exhibition, and the broader ways in which these elements intersect with Taiwan's national development. Decolonization within Taiwan's national museums remains an iterative and evolving endeavor. The NMH's historical role in reinforcing a Chinese-centered identity under authoritarian rule underscores the institutional challenges of realigning with contemporary, democratized audiences. Yet Taiwan's national identity formation is inseparable from the decolonization process, which requires more than policy shifts – it demands a fundamental transformation of cultural institutions to reflect the realities, complexities, and aspirations of a self-determining society.

This case study demonstrates that, despite its origins under authoritarian governance, the NMH has the capacity to mediate Taiwan's cultural decolonization. While still in its early stages, *Oceanic Taiwan* signals a burgeoning shift in the national narrative – one that prioritizes inclusiveness, respects diversity, and fosters a collective commitment to embracing Taiwan's island identity. As the NMH continues to evolve alongside the nation, its cultural representation will serve as a critical measure of Taiwan's progress in reclaiming its historical and cultural autonomy.

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Museums as social action: Building equity in marginalised communities

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Abstract

This case study proposes a new methodology for museums to engage and activate marginalised communities, using a social action approach to identify social vulnerabilities and become an actor for equity and justice in the community. The ecomuseum Te Fare Natura in Moorea, French Polynesia, serves its Indigenous community through the social reintegration and cultural rehabilitation of disenfranchised youth. Mediating science through culture and revalorizing ancestral Polynesian knowledges, the ecomuseum collaborates with civic services to hire disadvantaged youth as museum guides, providing them with the skills needed to reclaim their dignity and protect their island homes, building cultural and climate resilience.

Keywords: ecomuseum, social action, Indigenous, decolonial museology, cultural resilience

Résumé

Musées comme action sociale : Construire l'équité au sein des communautés marginalisées. Cette étude de cas propose une nouvelle méthodologie permettant aux musées d'impliquer et d'activer les communautés marginalisées, en adoptant une approche d'action sociale pour identifier les vulnérabilités sociales et devenir un acteur d'équité et de justice au sein de la communauté. L'écomusée Te Fare Natura, situé à Moorea en Polynésie française, sert sa communauté autochtone à travers la réintégration sociale et la réhabilitation culturelle des jeunes en situation de précarité. En médiatisant la science par la culture et en revalorisant les savoirs ancestraux polynésiens, l'écomusée collabore avec les services civiques pour recruter des jeunes défavorisés en tant que guides, leur offrant ainsi les compétences nécessaires pour retrouver leur dignité et protéger leur île, tout en renforçant la résilience culturelle et climatique.

Mots-clés : écomusée, action sociale, autochtone, muséologie décoloniale, résilience culturelle

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The concept of the museum is a fundamentally Eurocentric one, evolved from curiosity cabinets and colonial trophies displaying the might of empire to Foucault's heterotopia

hoarding all things in a universal archive outside time. Today ICOM defines the museum as a not-for-profit institution that aspires to research, collect, conserve, interpret, and exhibit heritage, *in service of society*. However, the focus too often remains on displaying beautiful objects in the old logic of the art gallery, devoid of difficult context to not overburden the visitor, who is also the customer, further perpetuating hierarchies of knowledge rooted in the European Enlightenment. The need to decolonise museums through o/Other approaches is not new, for example with emerging Intangible Cultural Heritage museums (Ferrer-Yulfo, 2020) or community-led museums based in Indigenous deontologies (McCarthy, 2016), but this case study offers a new methodology for consideration.

The ecomuseum Te Fare Natura on the island of Moorea, French Polynesia, is founded on an innovative approach of inclusion, scientific education, and cultural transmission: the museum as a social action project in service of the Mā'ohi (Indigenous Polynesian) community, directly supporting the social reintegration and cultural reconnection of marginalised Indigenous youth. In the French colonial context, formal education was a means of oppression and erasure of Indigenous peoples, leaving Polynesians alienated from academic spaces such as the museum and from their own culture, which is inseparable from nature and place. How then can a museum empower this marginalised audience in its mission to transmit knowledge while building equity and capacity? On this small Pacific Island, Te Fare Natura acts as a bridge between Indigenous and Western spaces by uplifting disenfranchised local youth, giving them the tools to (re)build the skills and resilience needed to protect their island homes.

In service of society

Museums are inherently sociopolitical, yet it wasn't until the new museum movement of the 1990s that they discovered sociology as part of an existential scrutiny, shifting from the coercive art museum as bastion of symbolic power and hegemonic ideology to museums as contested spaces embedded in specific contexts and historic dynamics of power (Kirchberg, 2015). Sociology is the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society; one of its many areas of interest is the nature and power dynamics of knowledge, including its perceived legitimacy and role in social hierarchies, a central theme in museums today. Despite recently popular critical museology concerning itself with many of the same issues as public sociology, there is often a disconnect between sociology-inspired policies of inclusion and museology-based praxis (Tlili, 2008).

As an institution with high sociocultural capital, the museum plays a formative role in exclusion and inclusion. It is a vector of dominant ideologies, enforcer of historic narratives and mechanism for enculturation that may reinforce in-group/out-group hierarchies through its curatorial judgments, definitions of stakeholders, or specific treatments of visitors (Coffee, 2008). It is also an important educational provider often called upon to complement school curricula, reinforcing its civic function and wider role in society. Considering this social function and the accompanying obligation to democratise, museums are increasingly asked to assume roles as agents of social inclusion. However, when it comes to implementing inclusive policies, the structural nature of the problem is revealed: diversity, equity, inclusion, and access remain optional, superficial add-ons to a traditionally exclusionary institutional structure, manifested in systemic praxis and staffing hierarchies that maintain systems of domination (Tanga, 2021). For subaltern groups such as the colonised, whether in former or current colonies or within the imperial core as descendants or diaspora, the Eurocentric museum remains a perpetrator of symbolic

violence, a space to be enjoyed by a genocidal and epistemicidal elite that upholds colonial denialism. Within the "temple of whiteness" (Kassim, 2023), the decision to be valued or erased continues to be made by the oppressor.

I argue the museal lens of what it means to "serve society" remains too narrow and that inclusion must reach beyond institutional walls, both physical and epistemological, to fulfil its promise. Community museums, including ecomuseums, have done the most work in this area by seeking new forms and structures, but while combining museology and sociology is not new, I believe it remains underutilised. I propose the case study of Te Fare Natura as an example of using a sociological lens to serve society *through* museums – the museum as social action.

From the French *action sociale* (also translated as social work or welfare), social action here is defined as policies, programmes, and interventions implemented by public authorities and non-governmental organizations to solve or alleviate social problems and improve the quality of life of individuals and groups; it is a central pillar of social justice and equity. Within the French context, social action is based on three major principles: 1) social cohesion, the responsibility of society as a whole to address social vulnerabilities; 2) the old 'assistant' logic where the unfortunate are a passive beneficiary of social services; and 3) the newer approach of 'accompanying', empowering the disadvantaged to learn the necessary skills to increase their power to act and their real capacity to decide how to manage their life (Jami et al., 2016).

Reimagining the museum as an actor for social welfare goes a step beyond internal inclusion policies, expanding its sphere of concern not only to the visitor or heritage stakeholder but to the wider conditions enabling real participation in sociocultural capital. How can a museum improve the quality of life of the community and help address their problems and needs? How can it resolve internal and external barriers to inclusion in processes of power and account for political and economic factors in colonial contexts? How can it actively empower marginalised groups to build equity rather than leave them waiting to be so gifted by dominant groups? The museum is an institution of memory, a business, an educator, a political tool; its responsibilities and influence extend beyond the niche of cultural heritage, and under the social action paradigm it seeks to use its privileged position to become a pillar of social justice.

Context of French Polynesia

The ecomuseum Te Fare Natura, 'the house of nature' in the Tahitian language, is located on Moorea in the Society Islands of French Polynesia (FP). An Overseas Collectivity of France (COM) on the opposite side of the globe from the French Metropole, FP's better-known islands include the capital island of Tahiti, home to 85% of the COM's total population of 280,000; Bora Bora, 'the pearl of Pacific' and famed luxury hotel destination; and the Marquesas Islands, isolated archipelago and since 2024 a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

At the heart of the Polynesian Triangle formed between the points of Hawaii, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Rapa Nui Easter Islands, FP is part of a continuous cultural seascape going back millennia, sharing a common ancestry, culture, languages, and skilled arts and practices such as *tātau* (tattoo) and wayfinding (Teriierooiterai, 2013). FP's five archipelagos are home to several distinct yet closely related cultures, once a complex caste society

where nature and culture were sacred and inseparable. Here there is no Cartesian dualism between human and non-human but instead complementarity. People were an integral part of the environment in Polynesian cosmovision, but one part of the great weaving of land, sea, and sky, the celestial realm of the Gods, origin of all things. *Te Moana Nui a Hiva* (the Pacific Ocean) was the connecting lifeblood between the living, animate islands born of divine flesh; *fenua* (land) generated genealogy and kinship bonds that shaped human society and regulated communal resource use; and *'orero* (oral literature) was embedded in the landscape-library, with place names recording histories and essential information for survival. Place embodied ancestral and spiritual connection – when a Mā'ohi is born, she is bound to her identity through the burial of the *pūfenua* (placenta), the 'call to earth'. A child not thus anchored is *hutu pāinu* (flotsam), adrift in the world, and she will not grow at the foot of the tree that bore her, will know nothing of her origins, and will not benefit from the strength of a lineage.

Traditional Polynesian society, including this holistic cosmovision, was disrupted by Christian missionization and European colonisation beginning in the 1700s. From 1842 onwards France annexed the various islands of today's FP, a process marked by three major events along with smaller bouts of military 'pacification' that have shaped today's Mā'ohi culture and society: depopulation by disease; French policies of assimilation; and nuclear testing.

The first contacts between Europeans and Polynesians in the late 1700s resulted in the transmission of new diseases that wiped out over 90% of the islanders in less than a century. Within a generation, epidemics devastated the thousands of small Pacific Islands and their unique peoples, a context that remains rarely discussed (Sand, 2023). This rapid depopulation resulted in the permanent loss of centuries of knowledge and the collapse of traditional Polynesian society, while facilitating the subsequent seizure of land by colonising powers.

Into this vacuum came Francisation, a policy of complete assimilation aimed at converting lazy, incapable Indigenous subjects into productive, civilised French citizens, instructing them in the superior culture particularly through the medium of education (Schuft, 2013). Colonial education was not meant to be equalizing but to maintain hierarchies and control, including the extraction of resources and human labour. Discriminatory policies and racist ideologies disenfranchised Polynesians and restricted their access to academia, in turn denying them social mobility and reinforcing structural inequity. For example, in parallel to Christian missionaries banning heathen rituals and beliefs, speaking Indigenous languages in school was illegal until 1983, with children like my father physically punished and humiliated for speaking their mother tongue. Even today FP uses the same standardised national curriculum as the Metropole, delivering content designed for students in Paris to ones in distant Papeete (though in practice the latter is of lesser quality). A colonial system completely divorced from Polynesian lives and needs but that maintains the ideological supremacy of France, predisposes Mā'ohi students to failure, and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy attributed to racial determinism. These are causative factors in FP's high rates of school dropout and illiteracy, with only 40% of the COM's youth graduating secondary school with a diploma (Vernaudon, 2015). On the individual level, Mā'ohi children, rather than the system, are cast as 'failures', internalizing a sense of shame and inferiority. On the societal level, locals being academically unqualified then justifies their exclusion from positions of authority, which are instead filled by an upper class of rotating metropolitan

civil servants who come to the COM on temporary contracts, embodying and reinforcing ideological dominance (Johannes, 2023). Doctors, judges, police, and over half of secondary school teachers are metropolitans, while locals are relegated to the periphery, with over 60% of the population living beneath the national poverty line.

Finally, from 1966 to 1996, the French military detonated 193 nuclear bombs in the skies, waters, and soils of French Polynesia, sabotaging the territory's 1958 independence referendum and exercising non-democratic control to secure the operation (Gonschor, 2013). Along with the seizure and destruction of customary subsistence lands and waters, forced dependency on imported food and goods, waves of metropolitan settlers, and a new economy based on white-collar work and tourism, the arrival of nuclear testing infrastructure marked the transition into modernity and set the foundation for contemporary FP society (Kahn, 2000). The French government officially denied the negative effects of nuclear fallout on the environment and people until 2010, denying compensation to hundreds of victims of radiation-induced cancers, and it continues to suppress related information from historic records, national education, and public discourse (Gabel, 2023).

The same colonial government and laws applied from 1842, when two Frenchmen violently overthrew the Tahitian Queen in defiance of European treaties, to 1977, when France granted FP autonomy of management as an Overseas Territory with its own (non) democratically-elected territorial government, evolving in 2003 into an Overseas Collectivity prone to legal ambiguities between national laws and special statutes (Gonschor, 2013). However, FP is not eligible for many of the social nets available in the Metropole, such as unemployment pay. It is also not part of the European Union or the Schengen Zone, with their funding opportunities or consumer rights protections. While ethnic Polynesians have remained the majority at an estimated 80% of COM's population, there remain clear ethnic and socioeconomic lines between the elite *farāni* (ethnic French) and *demi* (half-whites), with Mā'ohi as the lower class. Given this unique status as both part of France and apart from France, it is particularly complex to discuss colonialism and Indigeneity in FP, reflected in the lack of a term for referring to the entire population without dividing it based on ethnic lines. Identity comes first from the family and the valley, then the island, then the archipelago, and lastly (or maybe not at all) from the distant nation-state as French citizens.

The ongoing trauma of violence, including forced assimilation, nuclear testing and denial, and an educational system designed to maintain their subordination, left Mā'ohi communities with a deep mistrust of authorities and experts even as they are convinced of their own inferiority. French education was weaponised to erase Polynesian-ness, inextricably linked with sacred lands and waters, and structural colonialism continues to perpetuate cycles of poverty and alienation from Indigenous culture. How then to develop a museum in this fraught context in a way that does not marginalise but instead builds up the local community?

Developing the ecomuseum

The concept of ecomuseums originated in France in the 1970s in a shift from the 'museum of objects' to the 'museum of ideas'; one simple definition is a community-based heritage project that supports sustainable development (Davis, 2011). The ecomuseum is an inherently decolonial model, as it is created by a community seeking to represent their local context and small heritages, including the environment that shapes them. I argue that the

ecomuseum is a particularly appropriate format for engaging with Polynesian nature-culture and for insular communities thanks to four main principles that already address many of the shortcomings of Eurocentric models. The ecomuseum is:

1. a museum of ideas: It relies less on objects and collections and more on a holistic and collaborative approach, recognising the importance of inclusivity, the intangible, and sustainability, which also means less need to finance acquisitions for a small institution, all the more relevant in colonial contexts where communities may not have access to their objects.
2. community-led: It is created not by top-down experts but bottom-up by locals who seek to convey meanings and values about their place, identities, and memories; this empowers local stakeholders in reclaiming agency and making space for silenced voices.
3. place-based: It represents heterogenous islands and their unique ecosystems and specific heritages; especially relevant in the Polynesian context where knowledge is intrinsically tied to place in traditional epistemologies, rejecting the false homogeneity of post-colonial borders.
4. present-focused: It seeks to answer current community needs and challenges, finding relevant local solutions to local problems; this means not only building local capacity, but recognising existing capacities, such as Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) passed down by fishers.

The development of an ecomuseum on Moorea began in 2012 when the Centre for Island Research and Environmental Observatory (CRIOBE), a research outpost affiliated to the metropolitan higher education institution *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (EPHE), sought to create a space to share the scientific knowledge they gathered with locals. By 2017, the territorial government pushed the idea of a museum that would also benefit tourism. However, they turned not towards a museum professional but towards Olivier Pôté, a social worker with a background in agronomics and a career in project development (personal communication, 15 February 2024). He approached the ecomuseum as a pedagogical project in a disenfranchised community through the lens of social welfare and would develop the new institution for its first five years.

Inaugurated in 2021, Te Fare Natura is a non-profit owned by the COM and managed by the EPHE, and it reflects the recent desire to promote Polynesian culture alongside sustainable development in the spirit of the Mā'ohi revival movement begun in the 2010s. Its mission statement is "to understand, preserve, and transmit knowledge of Polynesian ecosystems of land and sea" (*Ecomusée Te Fare Natura*, 2025), including the Polynesian people who are an integral part of the island environment. This mission is crucial in the face of the climate crisis: Pacific Islanders are on the front lines of biodiversity loss and sustainability challenges, and overlooking human dimensions such as socioeconomic pressures and cultural significance is one of the most common factors behind conservation failure (Kelly et al., 2020). To fulfil its goal, Te Fare Natura used the distinctly local resources: the fauna and flora of the volcanic island, the lagoon, and the Pacific Ocean, as well as the Indigenous community and their millennia of experience shaping delicate insular ecosystems – a holistic approach in line with contemporary Western best-practice and Polynesian cosmovision.



Figure 1. The entrance to Te Fare Natura, 2003. © Leilani Wong.

When arriving at the island of Moorea, to Opunohu Bay and the district of Papetoai, we first see Te Fare Natura's impressive exterior architecture inspired by the traditional *fare va'a* (canoe house) with its high-peaked roof, the traveller's palm, and the seashell. It is surrounded by a botanical garden showcasing endemic flora used for traditional medicine and connected by a canal to the saltwater of the bay some hundred metres distant – a deliberate fusion of land and sea reflecting the holistic Polynesian understanding of the environment. Thanks to its bioclimatic design and solar panels, it is energy self-sufficient and remains cool without air-conditioning, both sustainable and cost-effective. It is built next to the CRIOBE research centre, which allows convenient access to environmental scientists and their work.

Within is an open hall allowing the visitor to flow freely between four thematic areas:

- Sea, with aquariums showcasing the four main marine ecosystems (estuary, lagoon, reef, and deep-sea) that cycle fish through catch-and-release, and, in a side room, an immersive 3D experience where the visitor can safely swim alongside whales and sharks.

- Land, with interactive videos showing the formation of volcanic islands, video recordings of community elders passing on ancestral knowledge in their mother tongues (subtitled in French and English), and dioramas of local species in their habitats, such as endemic birds threatened by invasive rats.

- Culture, representing traditional crafts, such as tātau and wood and stone carving, and new ones such as pearl farming, another major FP industry.

- Community, with six small temporary exhibition spaces filled by activity stations for schoolchildren or rotating displays from local artists and associations.

For the educational aspect, rather than written content that would be alienating in the FP context, the ecomuseum relies heavily on interaction: digital and physical games; encounters between scientists, teachers, and traditional knowledge-holders; events and workshops, etc. Inspired by both traditional oral transmission and by the Montessori Method, which encourages the learner's natural curiosity through activities rather than formal classroom-style lectures (Kirahu Howard, personal communication, 04 December 2024), the staff (entirely composed of locals except the now-former director) and local community build the content together based on their shared interests, expertise, and Polynesian culture, incorporating Indigenous and Western science, and myth as anchor for memory. This alternative, 'informal' approach is essential to reaching local learners, who continue to have traumatic relationships with the national educational system and with people of authority, usually synonymous with the coloniser. Moreover, reviving Indigenous science is vital to reconnecting Polynesian people, culture, and environment by recognising the value of ancestral knowledge and practices and reclaiming a sense of identity and a positive esteem in being Indigenous, rejecting colonial narratives of inferiority.



Figure 2. Posters displayed in the ecomuseum valorising STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and math) within traditional Pacific Island culture and practices © Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2024.

Methodology in action

From the start, Te Fare Natura's primary goal was to help the unique community of Papetoai through its position as a museum. Te Fare Natura followed a simple methodology: what is the problem/need affecting this local place? And how can the ecomuseum help address it in context?

Instead of creating an overly Eurocentric academic space that would intimidate local audiences or acquiring an expensive curated collection focused on preserving objects till the end of time, Te Fare Natura took a novel approach. Using a welfare lens and working backwards from the communities' social vulnerabilities, the ecomuseum was developed as a social action project accompanying the marginalised Indigenous community in reclaiming their heritage as a prerequisite for sustainable development. Cultural resilience is intrinsically linked with climate resilience, especially in the Polynesian cosmovision of nature-culture. First the ecomuseum had to address the enabling conditions for knowledge transmission, and it did so by restoring pride in Indigenous identity as capable through its structure of co-creation and learning that revalued place-based Indigenous knowledge. Most significantly, the museum fostered pride in identity through a partnership with civic services to hire disadvantaged youth as museum guides.

The place of the ecomuseum is the volcanic island of Moorea, ringed by reef and lagoon; birthplace of the overwater bungalow, its main industries are tourism and small-scale agriculture. It is in the district of Papetoai, in the green valley and bay of Opunohu, ancestral heart of the island which bears testimony to a once-great civilisation through its many *marae* (ancestral temples) and embedded myths, a landscape-library weaving place, oral literature, genealogy and identity to its black-sand beaches and mountain crests. It is in a French colonial context with ongoing legacies of trauma and Indigenous erasure by structural systems of domination.

The problem is that the local youth have no prospects. Designated as a disadvantaged neighbourhood, the Indigenous youth of Papetoai (ages 18-25) experience high rates of socioeconomic inequality. Unable to thrive under the French educational system, their disenfranchisement leads to a pervasive sense of shame and failure, and this low self-esteem discourages them from pursuing education, compounding difficulties in finding a job without a degree. The need is to give these youths the tools to socially reintegrate, to teach them basic skills leading to job opportunities, and to help them regain their dignity through revaluing their culture and identities.

The question then became: how can the ecomuseum teach science, culture, and environmental sustainability in a way that helps uplift Mā'ohi youth from poverty and alienation? Te Fare Natura answered by hiring disadvantaged youth as museum guides. While the usual museum guide is there to serve visitors, here the ecomuseum serves the Indigenous guide: if the problem is that they are jobless, then we must provide them with professional training and skills. If they are disenfranchised and hopeless, then we must help them develop self-confidence and personal skills. If the Western educational model is failing them, then let us revive culturally appropriate learning methods such as oral transmission and *O te ʻūputa o te ʻite*, learning through observation and first-hand experience. If they suffer from the loss of traditional knowledge and cultural identity alongside the climate crisis, then let us help them reconnect with ancestral cosmovision and together build cultural and climate resilience rooted in their living communities.

Te Fare Natura sees an average of 35,000 visitors per year, including residents, school groups, and tourists. In the three years since opening, it has trained nearly 400 youths from various social programmes, with priority given to those living closest geographically to the ecomuseum, working closely with civic services, local associations, and schools in a ripple effect. These youths come from difficult backgrounds, experiencing poverty, school dropout and low literacy levels, alcoholism and substance abuse, and prison as part of community service programmes. Their needs and interests are far from those of the classic museumgoer, primarily motivated by finding a job and economic stability. As part of a six-month internship, they learn alongside staff to master valuable skills and content, and an estimated 70% will go on to find a job or continue with vocational training (Kirahu Howard, personal communication, 04 December 2024). But more than that, new interns begin intimidated by science and convinced of their inability to learn, and by the end they are far more confident in their abilities and self-worth, expressing a desire to continue working with the museum and possibly even pursue a scientific career. In mediating science through the familiar, namely Polynesian, epistemologies and lived island experiences, Te Fare Natura makes knowledge and its accompanying social mobility accessible to this unique audience.

1. Every six months, the ecomuseum rotates its temporary exhibitions and, together with staff, hired youths, and community members, builds the new exhibitions around new themes. The youths both learn and help co-create the content, then pass on knowledge to visitors as museum guides. This innovative approach of the ecomuseum providing training to disadvantaged Indigenous youth has been successful on several levels:
2. It provides them with an opportunity to develop valuable professional skills through lived practice, including presenting themselves appropriately, working with a team, welcoming visitors, managing the ticket office and gift shop inventory, and communicating and mediating content for different audiences. It also exposes them to new potential careers.
3. It gives them the chance to learn about science in a more approachable way, as well as their own culture in a setting where Polynesian knowledge is valued. Staff members work closely with youths to adapt the content to their abilities and interests, dividing themes into conceptual, intermediate, and advanced levels of difficulty, centred around the ecomuseum's permanent and rotating exhibits. This in turn generates interest in these topics and increases knowledge levels and capacity.
4. Having young guides learn and present their own culture reconnects them with their elders and sacred ancestral knowledge, fostering a sense of belonging and pride in caring for their environment, a connection essential to shaping values that then inform decision-making. In reclaiming their culture, they reclaim their Indigenous identities as island guardians.
5. It revives the practice of oral literature and transmission at the core of Polynesian culture, itself a form of intangible heritage, contributing to its preservation and the preservation of Indigenous languages, all the more essential in a context of colonial suppression.
6. Finally, for many of these youths, working as a museum guide is the first time they have felt themselves capable of learning and being good at something. The transformative effect of being valued and of seeing themselves as valuable is, according to staff, the most important outcome of the programme, a vital step in emancipating themselves from colonial mindsets.

This last success plays a critical role in emancipating the youth of Moorea from colonial systems of poverty and inferiority – social reintegration as positive members of society in this context must pass through cultural rehabilitation of Polynesian-ness. Traditional knowledge-holders are made equal to Western experts in the ecomuseum's approach and practices, allowing these youth to imagine the possibility of change from the status quo wherein they are fated to remain subordinated. This in turn engaged the local community in scientific and cultural transmission. By activating the community's existing knowledge and abilities, the ecomuseum reaches a wider audience and begins to heal colonial wounds, bridging the gap between Western and Polynesian spaces. Co-creating the ecomuseum with locals rather than building another Eurocentric institution for tourists has encouraged islanders to appropriate the ecomuseum as their space: Te Fare Natura is for the people of Moorea, by the people of Moorea. Here there is little question of musealisation or commercialising culture thanks to the non-profit, civic service focus; there is also little conflict of elitist hierarchy as the staff are locals in service of their own community, supported by metropolitan allies such as the EPHE. Finally, it allows both local and foreign visitors to engage more authentically with the unique identity and ecology of Moorea, to deepen their understanding of the island beyond the illusion of postcard paradise.

One example of a Te Fare Natura educational activity was the youths' project for the 2022 territorial science festival centred on climate change. Inspired by Jenga, a game where removing certain pieces weakens the whole until it topples, they designed a "climate tower" game (Kirahu Howard, personal communication, 04 December 2024). They created pieces representing environmental factors symbolically divided into the Polynesian categories of air, land, and water, with the most critical forming the base of the tower. For example, ocean warming (sea) is foundational to coral bleaching, excess atmospheric carbon dioxide (sky) from fossil fuels (land) is foundational to ocean warming, and so forth. To design this game of interlocking elements, the young museum guides had to master environmental content, understand the relationship between various aspects of climate change, think creatively to invent a fun and engaging activity for all ages, and then present and host their game at the science festival held in the capital of Tahiti, interacting with a wide audience. Their "climate tower" was a tangible representation of the fragility and interrelatedness of ecosystems, and provided a fun, tactile way to learn about climate change.

Another example is the way youths accompany scientists into the field. Kirahu Howard, one of the senior ecomuseum staff, is also a researcher studying the reintroduction of the Polynesian tree snail, known locally as *'areho* or genus *Partula*. Driven extinct in the wild by invasive species in the 1980s, a reintroduction programme launched in 2015 has reintroduced 25,000 individuals bred in British zoos to FP (TNTV, 2024). As part of her research and her role as scientific mediator at the ecomuseum, Kirahu brings her young interns into the field, giving them first-hand experience of conservation programmes, scientific research and data collection, the role of endemic versus invasive species in ecosystems, as well as the sensory experience of trekking into the mountain jungle to interact with nature. By making science accessible through practical learning connected with culture and lived experience (e.g., seeing invasive carnivorous snails everywhere), this allowed the youth to overcome their wariness and prove to themselves that they were capable of practicing conservation science.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that the Global South remains synonymous with poverty, insecurity, and pollution, the ongoing legacy of colonialism and systemic oppression, nor is it coincidence that the museum as display-case of imperial glory and vehicle of dominant narratives remains the norm for institutions in the Global North. This case study of a museum as a pedagogical project in a disenfranchised community, using a social welfare approach, appears as an innovative solution in the world of museology and decolonial praxis.

Most European museums design their content based on the assumption of the general public as a secondary school member of the dominant culture. Their goals are to preserve and display objects high in age value and exoticism, to extol a historic narrative of the nation-state in accordance with current political tastes, and to attract a profitable number of customers. While many alternatives exist, including Indigenous approaches to museology such as Māori *mana taonga* (McCarthy, 2016), Te Fare Natura went a step further in its mission to educate, addressing the underlying conditions preventing inclusion and social equity for the youth of Papetoai. Learning is not neutral: it was essential to make the ecomuseum an empowering space built on the specific cultural, historic, economic, and educational context of Moorea, to help with what the community really needed, which was both professional skills and cultural reconnection. It is the same principle as doing a market study before launching a business – what do consumers need, and how will the business provide a solution to that need? By providing skills, economic opportunity, and value to Indigenous youth, Te Fare Natura is able to fulfil its mission of understanding, preserving, and transmitting knowledge of uniquely Polynesian ecosystems to uniquely Polynesian stakeholders.

Museum professionals are tasked with conveying truths – the truths present in beauty, in archives, in nature, in uncomfortable histories; but as members of an institution of memory, business, education, and political tool *in service of society*, founded on colonial principles, they also bear a responsibility to address the systemic injustice resulting from these power dynamics. To move away from being a space of violence, museums must be ambitious in their understanding of society and their role in promoting social equity. The museum is not a faceless abstract entity, nor an apolitical collection of objects; it is first and foremost a collection of people, people who make choices about what is worth keeping and what merits passing on, that impact communities in complex ways beyond their immediate audience. At the core of Te Fare Natura is a methodology that is applicable in any institution that enacts the means to do so. While in this case the ecomuseum was able to implement these civic service collaborations from the start, the most essential component was the mindset of the staff who asked themselves how to empower their own community and how to build a better future together. This study hopes to inspire other institutions to engage with their communities' challenges on a deeper level, to expand the definition of the museum, its goals and possibilities, and its role and responsibilities in fostering social equity and justice through enabling meaningful participation in processes of power and sociocultural capital.

Te Fare Natura shows us how a museum can uplift Indigenous people and their knowledge by providing them the opportunity to flourish and learn new and old knowledges and skills in a culturally meaningful way, using the lens of social welfare and the ecomuseum's place-based approach. Rehabilitating youth both professionally and culturally is the first step towards decolonising the mind. By empowering local stakeholders to take pride

in their place and in themselves, to know themselves competent and capable of positively impacting the environment as their ancestors did before them, Te Fare Natura fosters the cultural resilience foundational to climate resilience. Museum staff accompany Mā'ohi youth and their communities in acquiring the tools to take ownership of their museum, their identities, and their futures.

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L'exposition comme émanation d'une parole : Symbolique et mise en espace à la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie

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Résumé

L'article explore comment la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Paris utilise la scénographie pour incarner et transmettre une parole kanak contemporaine. Conçue comme un « chemin initiatique », son exposition réunit objets, symboles et récits, intégrant une pensée autochtone vivante. Les poteaux sculptés, ambassadeurs d'une identité en transformation, et l'alliance du sacré, du secret et de l'émotion, nourrissent une réflexion sur la décolonisation muséale. Loin d'être statique, cet espace interpelle la relation entre culture et politique, ouvrant des perspectives sur l'évolution des identités dans des contextes postcoloniaux, et sur le rôle des musées comme lieux de dialogue et de transmission vivante.

Abstract

The exhibition as an emanation of voice: Symbolism and spatial design at the Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. This article explores how the Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie in Paris uses scenography to embody and convey a contemporary Kanak voice. Designed as an "initiatory path," its exhibition brings together objects, symbols, and narratives that incorporate a living Indigenous worldview. The sculpted posts, acting as ambassadors of a transforming identity, along with the fusion of the sacred, the secret, and emotion, contribute to a reflection on museum decolonization. Far from being static, this space challenges the relationship between culture and politics, opening up perspectives on the evolution of identities in postcolonial contexts and on the role of museums as spaces for dialogue and living transmission.

> Auparavant, des objets anciens ont été pris pour se retrouver dans des musées en Métropole. Aujourd'hui, des enfants du pays ont engagé une démarche qui tient compte de la construction identitaire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. … La Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie [MNC] nous a officiellement et avec politesse demandé ces sculptures. Demain ces poteaux seront nos « Ambassadeurs ». (Téin, 2008, cité dans MNC, 2009, p. 13)

Dans ce discours se dessine une rupture entre un passé de domination coloniale et une démarche contemporaine consentie dans laquelle le peuple autochtone prend la parole. Prononcé à l'occasion d'un des « gestes » du parcours coutumier des poteaux sculptés pour former le tour de la Grande Case de la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (MNC),

il présente ces derniers comme des « ambassadeurs » kanak. Ce terme est imprégné de l'héritage du leader indépendantiste Jean-Marie Tjibaou, dont les interrogations sur les objets anciens dispersés dans les musées, « Où sont-ils ? Comment sont-ils conservés ? Que dit-on sur nous ? » (Boulay, cité dans Bertin, 2019), résonnent avec les problématiques de décolonisation muséale actuelles. Plutôt que la restitution des œuvres, l'intérêt de Tjibaou pour ce « matériel mort » est une vision de ces objets comme « ambassadeurs », donnant l'occasion « d'ouvrir une discussion » sur ce que la culture kanak a de particulier dans sa réponse aux questions essentielles (1985). Selon lui, une « étape d'explication » de ce qui est au fondement de la société kanak est nécessaire à la compréhension de la revendication indépendantiste. La reconnaissance culturelle est indissociable de la question politique, et d'une quête d'identité et d'émancipation (Tjibaou, 1985). Après une période de tensions violentes (1984-1988) dans un contexte de lutte indépendantiste, cette reconnaissance de la culture kanak devient l'un des premiers jalons du parcours de la Nouvelle-Calédonie sur un chemin de paix et de décolonisation, institutionnalisé par les signatures des accords de Matignon-Oudinot et de Nouméa. Inaugurée en 2008, la scénographie de la MNC prend le préambule de ce dernier comme feuille de route, avec entre autres objectifs de servir la médiation de cette singularité politique, notamment auprès du public de France hexagonale et de ses élus lors de visites officielles (Decorce, 2020).

Les questions autour de l'indépendance, restées présentes dans le débat politique, se sont complexifiées ces dernières années. L'archipel est aujourd'hui marqué par les manifestations de violences qui ont eu lieu en mai 2024 dans un climat insurrectionnel. La sortie de l'Accord de Nouméa et les cristallisations des postures indépendantistes et loyalistes laissent l'avenir institutionnel du pays incertain. De nombreuses structures culturelles se font outils politiques et identitaires en Océanie (Bertin, 2020) et les institutions calédoniennes qui s'inscrivent en soutien du projet de société des accords en affrontent les difficultés associées. Les résultats de l'Accord de Nouméa, « présenté de manière consensuelle comme un chef d'œuvre de décolonisation », sont remis en question par une partie de la recherche, et le texte lui-même est perçu par certains comme un programme de « recolonisation » (Mokaddem, 2018). On comprend aisément que la symbolique de la scénographie de la MNC, figurant ce chemin de décolonisation constitutionnalisé, n'en fait pas pour autant un espace décolonial.

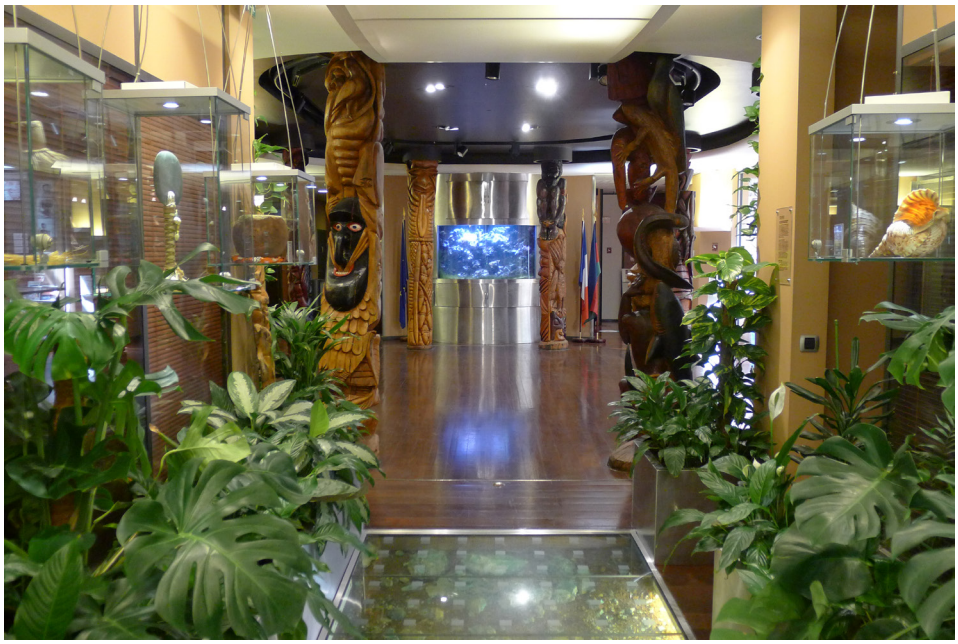


Figure 1. Le chemin de la MNC, photo by Cassandre Decorce, © Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie

On peut souligner toutefois la prise de parole kanak au travers de la Grande Case formée par les poteaux « ambassadeurs » au cœur de la capitale parisienne. En admettant que « la décolonisation ne se limite pas à un processus institutionnel » et « requiert une transformation des mentalités » (Mokaddem, 2018 : 8, cité dans Blaise, David, Prinsen, 2022), nous pouvons envisager cette installation sous le prisme d'un décentrement du regard qui y contribue. Le discours porté sur la culture autochtone est essentiel pour donner une légitimité et une force aux représentations. Nourrir le « rapport spécifique » aux objets « qui n'ont sens qu'en regard des savoirs et des dimensions immatérielles qui les accompagnent » (Bertin, 2023) participe à une autochtonisation, dont l'exposition de la MNC est une forme. Après une résidence de création en Province Nord de l'archipel, les poteaux sculptés sont confiés coutumièrement par les représentants kanak au directeur de la MNC, avant d'entamer leur voyage pour rejoindre Paris. Ils n'ont pas subi de rupture primordiale de sens (Kasarhérou, 2020) et sont considérés comme vivants. Ils sont porteurs d'une parole, comme la scénographie signifiante à laquelle ils participent, dont les différentes dimensions seront le fil conducteur de cet article.

La scénographie de la MNC, qui pour un œil non averti peut sembler le simple décor d'une structure vitrine de l'archipel en Europe, se révèle être un exemple singulier d'autochtonisation par sa symbolique plurielle, dans laquelle la vision kanak de l'espace et de la relation à l'objet est structurante. Polysémique et plurivocal, ce discours expographique non muséal produit une « hybridation » avec l'intention d'exprimer le « patrimoine culturel autochtone dans ses propres termes et dans sa vision du monde » (Brulon Soares, 2022, p. 86). Ses dimensions symboliques et sensibles, laissant l'espace de l'interprétation et du mystère, en font une tentative de synthèse des singularités, sans réduction ni fusion de l'altérité.

Le chemin de la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Paris

« La MNC n'est surtout pas un musée et encore moins une folklorisation de notre histoire. C'est une maison vivante, un point d'ancrage pour les Calédoniens dans l'Hexagone, auprès de qui nous assurons des missions de service public » affirme son directeur (2006-2022) Joël Viratelle (2020, cité dans Parlan, 2020, n.d). Créée en 1989, au lendemain des accords de Matignon-Oudinot, la MNC à Paris est selon son expression, « dans l'ADN de la poignée de main » entre Tjibaou et Lafleur, symbole de la réconciliation entre les indépendantistes et les loyalistes. Sous l'élan de l'Accord de Nouméa, les institutions de Nouvelle-Calédonie nomment Viratelle directeur de la structure en 2006. Pour remplir ses missions élargies, institutionnelles, administratives, d'information et de diffusion culturelle, la MNC emménage dans un nouveau lieu polyvalent, dont le directeur conçoit la scénographie (Société des Océanistes, 2023-1) en conformité avec la volonté du conseil d'administration, composé des élus de l'archipel.

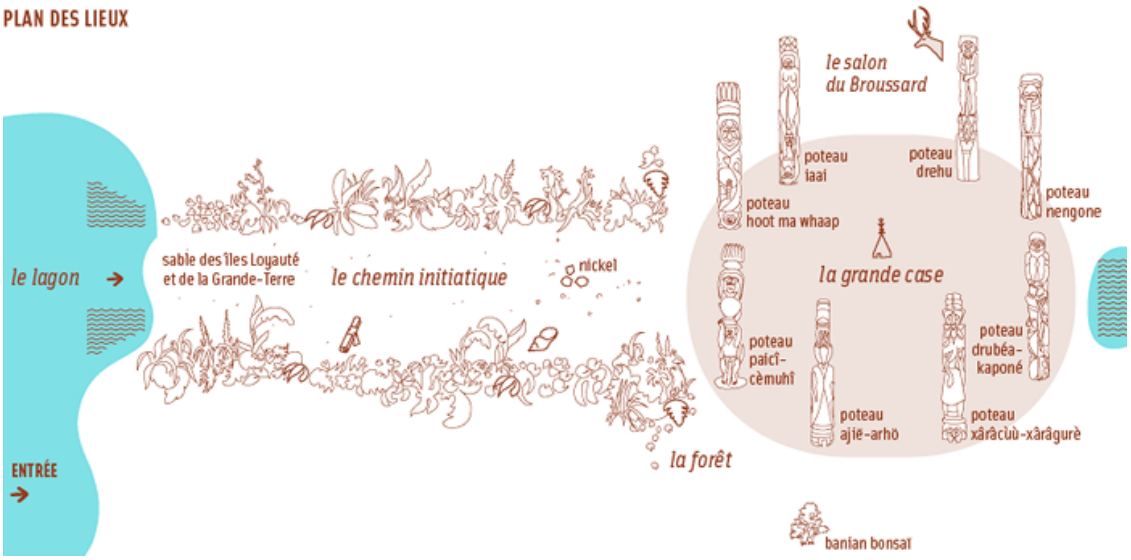


Figure 2. Plan symbolique du chemin de la MNC. Source : site internet de la Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie.

L'architecture intérieure du lieu superpose à un agencement pragmatique (centre de ressources, espace événementiel, bureaux) une scénographie signifiante à la symbolique plurielle (Decorce, 2020). Œuvres, objets exposés, cartels, composent le parcours construit autour de l'axe du chemin, allée centrale menant à la Grande Case, en référence à une configuration architecturale traditionnelle kanak. L'architecture emprunte ici à la scénographie : « l'espace fonctionnel devient espace signifiant » et « l'objet soumis à l'interprétation dépasse sa fonction primitive pour devenir un élément de langage chargé de sens » (Mazlouman, 2012). Des éléments non-exposés et de décor, jouent un rôle dans la symbolique de la mise en espace. Le bleu du hall d'entrée et ses aquariums figurent le lagon, sous des pavés de verre le sable évoque le littoral, et le velum au plafond le vent des alizées. La végétalisation illustre l'avancée du visiteur dans les terres avec sous ses pieds la terre de l'archipel, jusqu'à l'espace central de la Grande Case. Menant de façon allusive du littoral à l'intérieur des terres à la rencontre des habitants, l'installation fonctionne par métonymie, des échantillons figurant le lointain.

Le chemin de la MNC est une parole scénarisée dans l'espace, une exposition comme texte et objet communicationnel (Glicenstein, 2009 ; Davallon, 1999) visant à transmettre une vision de l'archipel. Viratelle s'en est souvent fait médiateur par le discours au fil des visites et événements. Cette dynamique d'actualisation du récit caractérise l'installation dès sa conception, qui résulte d'une synthèse des dialogues avec Calédoniens, coutumiers, et élus, rencontrés pour expliquer le projet. Viratelle confie aussi avoir beaucoup appris sur la pensée kanak grâce à cette réalisation : « j'ai creusé pour comprendre ». Il souligne l'enrichissement mutuel issu des échanges et la médiation progressive ayant permis une construction de sens non totalement préméditée. La scénographie reflète ce processus, où les symboles s'emboîtent pour créer des récits. La scénographie de la MNC participe ainsi à un décentrement du regard s'ouvrant sur la pensée autochtone, que Viratelle a eu à cœur de transmettre. Il admettait en effet se montrer « intarissable » sur le sens que revêtent les motifs des poteaux, remis par les sculpteurs accompagnés des mots de Goroboredjo : « nous vous permettons de toucher aux poteaux et d'accéder au fond de chacun d'entre nous » (MNC, 2009, p. 13). À l'image de l'imbrication des différentes strates signifiantes, des niveaux d'autochtonisation prennent corps de façon non préméditée, permis par la

polyvalence et la symbolique plurielle du lieu. Sa caractérisation non-muséale évacue les frictions autour du concept de musée, né en Europe et parfois jugé illégitime et inopérant par les populations océaniennes (Kasarhérou, 2020). Tout en ayant en commun des missions de promotion de la culture et de construction identitaire post-coloniale, la nécessité de composer avec un passé « d'outils d'affirmation impérialiste et de domination » propres aux musées coloniaux devenus nationaux (Bertin, 2020, p. 96) ne concerne pas la MNC. Elle est une « maison », terme dont la polysémie reflète l'hybridation des représentations en présence. La MNC, peut s'apparenter pour le passant parisien aux maisons régionales voisines qui promeuvent une destination touristique, mais se définit comme maison de tous les Calédoniens, « petit bout de la Calédonie » immersif et représentatif de la singularité de l'archipel (Decorce, 2020). Dans une lecture kanak, c'est la chefferie qui est dénommée « maison, grande maison ou pays dans les langues locales » (Godin, 2020, p. 43). Le terme entre en résonnance avec la Grande Case et avec les fondements des organisations communautaires autochtones qui « ne dissocient pas les liens entre les hommes et les liens à la terre », et sont pensées « comme des rapports d'appartenance à une même maison » (Godin, 2020, p. 42). La notion polysémique de chemin, choisie pour sa connotation dynamique et son écho culturel par Viratelle pour nommer la scénographie, est aussi particulièrement structurante dans la société autochtone. Commune à tous les langues kanak elle recouvre plusieurs idées complémentaires :

> Dénotant le lien généalogique entre deux personnes ou entre deux groupes sociaux, un « chemin » est aussi la relation d'échange qui en procède, sa matérialisation sous la forme d'un itinéraire à suivre lors des fêtes et autres événements sociaux d'importance et un mode institutionnel de circulation de la parole. (Godin, 2020, p. 128)

La parole institutionnelle comme poème pour dessiner l'espace

Outre l'allégorie spatiale, le chemin symbolise aussi celui des institutions calédoniennes. La scénographie émane du Préambule de l'Accord de Nouméa, qui est le « poème » donné au scénographe pour « dessiner l'espace », selon l'expression de Claude-François (cité dans Mazlouman, 2012, pp. 284-90). Le texte imprègne de significations précises la configuration des lieux et les éléments mis en espace, illustrant notamment le passage : « Il est aujourd'hui nécessaire de poser les bases d'une citoyenneté de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, permettant au peuple d'origine de constituer avec les hommes et les femmes qui y vivent une communauté humaine affirmant son destin commun » (Préambule, 1998). La frise de portraits pluriethniques ornant les murs du centre de ressources et le Salon du Broussard et des communautés représentent les populations émigrées, reconnues aussi victimes de la colonisation. La contiguïté avec la Grande case symbolise la réconciliation entre les communautés, et la place centrale du peuple d'origine. Selon Viratelle les symboliques proposent plusieurs cheminements pour mener le visiteur à un message final : « le chemin il mène à la case, c'est-à-dire à la meilleure connaissance du monde kanak et à sa capacité à construire l'avenir calédonien avec les autres communautés » (2020). Les objets anciens et les plantes de l'allée centrale rappellent la reconnaissance de la culture kanak, mentionnée dans les accords de Matignon. Le préalable minier, qui fut la condition nécessaire à la signature de l'accord de Nouméa, est évoqué par des fragments de nickel sur le sol. Ce rééquilibrage est indissociable du chemin de décolonisation. Ce processus qui découle de la reconnaissance de l'atteinte portée « à la dignité du peuple kanak » par la colonisation (Préambule, 1998) est une singularité au sein de la République française. L'un des objectifs de l'installation est de pouvoir l'expliquer aux visiteurs officiels : « Les gens qui font de

la politique, en venant ici, ils découvrent une autre façon de décrypter la Calédonie » (Viratelle). Elle invite aussi les plus initiés à réfléchir à leurs propres interprétations, comme les élus en déplacement qui disposent de bureaux à la MNC qui confièrent au directeur que le lieu leur permettait de se réinterroger sur le chemin à prendre (Decorce, 2020). Si « l'ambiance tamisée » peut sembler « coller à la neutralité affichée » de la MNC (Parlan, 2020) cela est peut-être du fait de la valeur consensuelle de la scénographie. Selon Kasarhérou, la personnalité du directeur y joue un rôle clé, puisqu'elle imprègne le lieu par sa parole et son incarnation, ainsi que sa vision de la Nouvelle-Calédonie fondée sur le respect des identités et la quête d'une concorde par la construction commune. Ce discours n'en est pas moins situé et plurivocal, et on peut imaginer que la représentation aurait été sensiblement différente avec d'autres élus et une autre temporalité dans l'agenda politique.

Sur le territoire de Nouvelle-Calédonie, plusieurs institutions culturelles et patrimoniales s'inscrivent également en soutien au projet de société de l'archipel. Reconfiguration encore en cours du musée de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, le projet du MUZ est celui d'un espace que tous les Calédoniens pourront s'approprier, symbole d'une identité partagée, dont la philosophie est elle aussi puisée dans le Préambule de l'Accord de Nouméa (Gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, 2022). Bertin précise que dans cet esprit de « destin commun », il « vise à une représentation plus fidèle de la société calédonienne, tandis que l'ancienne présentation est principalement dédiée aux sociétés kanak », quand « les débats autour de l'indépendance sont omniprésents » (2020, p. 103). Le Centre culturel Tjibaou, créé suite aux accords de Matignon-Oudinot, répond initialement à l'objectif de valorisation de la culture kanak dans le cadre du rééquilibrage en faveur de la population autochtone. Ses missions sont ensuite modifiées en parallèle des enjeux introduits par l'Accord de Nouméa et de la mutation des débats politiques (Puel et Van Geert, 2021), notamment pour se faire l'outil de la construction d'une citoyenneté calédonienne, en faisant là encore une place plus large aux autres communautés de l'archipel. Il rencontre un certain nombre de difficultés qu'analysent Puel et Van Geert, rappelant « la dépendance des musées aux redéfinitions constantes des intérêts sociaux, culturels et politiques de leur contexte » (2021, p. 130). Si l'on ne peut nier des avancées, les résultats de l'Accord de Nouméa en termes de rééquilibrage sont jugés insuffisants par certains. La compatibilité de l'avenir des colonies de peuplement dont la Nouvelle-Calédonie fait partie, ainsi que celle d'une « souveraineté partagée dans un destin commun », avec l'aboutissement d'un objectif de décolonisation est largement questionnée (Gagné, Salaün, 2017 ; Mokaddem, 2019 ; Blaise, David, Prinsen, 2022). S'inscrire en soutien à l'Accord de Nouméa pour les structures dont les discours se sont construits dans son élan, c'est donc aussi porter ses ambivalences, et éventuellement négocier avec ses interprétations. Parmi ces dernières, une friction est perceptible entre une vision où prévaut une sorte d'équivalence entre les identités dans la construction du destin commun, et une vision où la culture kanak se fait pilier central et sert de base à cette construction en offrant « le patrimoine kanak en héritage à l'ensemble de la population de Nouvelle-Calédonie » (M-C Tjibaou, 1998, cité dans Puel et Van Geert, 2021, p. 123).

La parole politique de la Grande Case kanak

Espace central de la MNC, la Grande Case est un dispositif de médiation de la culture autochtone produit par les personnes concernées. Elle porte la parole du peuple kanak dont les représentants coutumiers ont désigné les sculpteurs des huit poteaux du tour de case, offerts par Paul Néaoutyine, président de la Province Nord et membre du conseil d'administration. Comme les grandes cases traditionnelles, lieux de palabres et de cérémonies, c'est un espace institutionnel et protocolaire. On y dépose des gestes de coutume et des discours y sont pro-

noncés, y compris dans des contextes non-kanak. Si l'on y trouve des pupitres et drapeaux, témoignant d'une association avec des modes protocolaires occidentaux, les fonctions de la Grande Case s'hybrident aussi avec les usages polyvalents de la MNC. Ouverte sur les espaces contigus, elle accueille tous types d'événements.

Après les cases des villages kanak des Expositions coloniales à Paris, qui contribuèrent à construire une image dégradante des Kanak en Occident et servirent à légitimer leur domination (Chataigner, 2019), dresser une Grande Case « sublimée » dans le 1er arrondissement (Kasarhérou) vient dire leur rapport nouveau avec la France. Ce geste offre un regard contemporain sur la culture kanak, loin de l'image d'un Autre « resté coincé dans un lointain passé » à la « production matérielle » proche du « stade primitif » (Chataigner, 2019). Cette représentation, dépassant l'opposition entre « moderne » et « traditionnel », s'inscrit en rupture avec une vision occidentale de la « tradition » séparant symboliquement le passé et le présent, et l'évolution des populations sur « l'échelle du temps du progrès et de la civilisation » (Brulon Soares, 2020).

Les poteaux de la MNC représentent les huit pays kanak, les motifs sculptés évoquent leurs mythes respectifs. Chacun symbolise le poteau central de la grande case virtuelle de son aire coutumière, formant ainsi la Grande Case de l'archipel. Les sociétés kanak sont riches de 28 langues parlées[1] et organisées en une multitude de clans et chefferies. Elles sont des « sociétés en relation, où l'élément exogène est non seulement fortement valorisé mais aussi profondément structurant » (Cayrol, 2020). Les poteaux du tour de la grande case représentent les clans, et le poteau central le grand chef, coiffé de la flèche faîtière dont c'est le visage : « Donc de l'extérieur il n'y a qu'un, mais à l'intérieur il y a plusieurs » explique Kasarhérou. Selon lui, la Grande Case de la MNC est un symbole pertinent pour représenter la cohésion des Kanak et de la Nouvelle-Calédonie tout entière :

> Ce qu'il [le monde kanak] pouvait partager avec les autres Calédoniens, c'est cette idée qu'une Maison s'est faite aussi de diversité, et que c'est cette diversité qui trouve les moyens de sa coordination, qui lui permet une existence, et de faire vivre à la fois des êtres divers à l'intérieur d'un corps unique. (Kasarhérou)

La Grande Case se fait elle-même Maison de tous les Calédoniens. Les représentations des autres communautés manquent de ce fait selon certains. La symbolique du chemin de la MNC est en effet moins une « parcellisation » juxtaposant des représentations identitaires, que la voie héritière des idées de Jean-Marie Tjibaou, que décrit Cayrol comme découlant « des relations à l'exogène à partir desquelles les sociétés kanak se constituent » : « En tant que premiers, nous sommes en haut de l'allée, reconnaissez-nous en tant que tels et venez prendre place et constituer la Nouvelle-Calédonie en vous présentant de l'autre côté de l'allée, nous vous accueillerons » (2020, p. 61).

Selon une lecture kanak, la parole de la Grande Case porte l'unité et le consensus. Godin explique que la notion de « chemin » recouvre notamment un « mode institutionnel de circulation de la parole » informant « une véritable organisation sociale de la communication » dont un modèle est donné par la charpente de la grande case (2020, pp. 128-30). Il cite l'expression de Wenehoua qui le décrit comme une « hiérarchie de la concertation » ne définissant pas « une chaîne de commandement, mais un ordre de préséances qui vise à la construction d'un consensus social » (2020, p. 130). La nécessité architecturale et

1 La multitude des langues kanak expliquerait l'absence de leur usage dans les supports de la MNC. La symbolique d'unité des pays kanak ne permet pas de faire un choix représentatif.

symbolique du poteau central est absente de la Grande Case de la MNC. C'est une forme « où tout le monde parle. Il n'y a pas de restriction à la parole » interprète Kasarhérou. Les éléments de culture kanak sont remobilisés et actualisés dans le discours scénographique de la MNC dans un esprit de synthèse et de cohésion. Avec notamment la présence de « pardons », la symbolique « joue avec des formes de mains tendues, d'ouvertures dans le discours » qui ne fonctionneraient pas forcément ailleurs selon lui.

Le chemin des poteaux ambassadeurs et la parole des ancêtres

> *Hoot ma Whaap, Païci Cemuhi, Ajië Aro, Xârâcûu, Drubea Kapumë, Iaai Drehu, Nengone*, les hommes vivent debout. Aux lointains rivages, quelques hommes sages, font voler les copeaux, sous les coups de ciseaux. Ils gravent en creux, la Parole des Vieux, unis pour dresser, les vivants piliers. Par-delà les mers, au-dessus des terres, ils portent la Parole, enracinée dans le sol. (Diawari et Folcher, 2018)

Le titre « Les hommes vivent debout » du duo de musiciens kanak et caldoche Kaori évoque la création des poteaux de la MNC dont les sculpteurs « savaient que leur mission allait d'être debout pour porter la parole kanak » (Viratelle). Téin les positionne selon une logique coutumière, déterminée par l'histoire des aires et les relations qu'elles entretiennent : « dans le monde kanak, on ne déambule pas par hasard, il y a toujours un sens, il y a toujours un fléchage » (Viratelle). Ce placement introduit des éléments non-autochtones dans sa symbolique. Le poteau de l'aire Ajië Arhö, positionné à proximité du centre de documentation, est « gardien de la maison des savoirs », les premières écoles missionnaires ayant été installées au nord-est de cette région (MNC, 2009). On peut y percevoir une forme de représentation dialogique de la différence culturelle (Brulon Soares, 2022).



Figure 3. Les poteaux de la Grande Case de la MNC. © Maison de la Nouvelle-Calédonie.

Dans cette démarche, il ne s'agit pas de décoloniser en transformant le discours, ni de charger des objets en rupture avec leur contexte de production (Kasarhérou, 2020) d'une nouvelle fonction de médiation (Tjibaou, 1985). Le peuple autochtone est ici pleinement acteur de ce qu'il donne à voir au monde occidental, à travers les œuvres et leur exposition. La démarche se rapproche des centres culturels en contexte océanien, outils d'affirmation et de représentation politique et culturelle, dans lesquels interagissent patrimoines et pratiques contemporaines (Bertin, 2020 ; Kasarhérou, 2020).

Les parcours coutumiers qui ponctuent la création du chemin de la MNC imprègnent les éléments d'une pensée kanak, leur donnant une portée symbolique culturelle qui dépasse la fonction communicationnelle occidentale de l'exposition. Les poteaux sont l'objet de nombreux gestes de coutumes, avant leur création en Nouvelle-Calédonie, jusqu'à l'inauguration du lieu à Paris. Ce chemin coutumier les légitime dans une fonction et un contexte qui leur sont propres, assurant une liaison et une forme de communication sur les événements, ainsi « une fois que l'objet est installé, on sait qu'il a respecté toutes ces étapes, donc ça lui donne une force que n'a pas un objet qui est amené simplement comme de la déco » (Kasarhérou). La coutume ne se résume pas au geste qui n'en est que la partie visible. Elle englobe « toutes les pratiques sociales kanak » et crée du sens et de la norme (Viratelle). Selon Kasarhérou, les poteaux de la MNC sont comme des poteaux dans une case, dotés d'une fonctionnalité sociale qui les rend vivants : « on les interpelle quand on parle … il y a une relation, ils existent, ils font partie d'un univers humain ».

L'un des gestes de coutume concerne le clan propriétaire des terres sur lesquelles ils sont sculptés, lui demandant la permission d'accueillir les copeaux qui vont s'y décomposer. Dans la tradition kanak, le bois a une valeur sacrée. Il est vivant et habité par les ancêtres avec qui le sculpteur est en relation directe : « les sculptures sont dépositaires d'une parcelle de l'esprit qui habite le bois et que le sculpteur a dévoilé » (Laulanné, 1990). Aussi les copeaux du bois sculpté ont valeur égale avec les œuvres, et sont connectées à elles. Selon les mots de Viratelle, « l'enracinement des poteaux est vivace à Paris, parce qu'il y a les copeaux dans la terre de Hienghène » ; ils font partie de ces sculptures « qui se mélange avec les morts, qui se mélange avec les ignames, qui se mélange avec la pensée de Tjibaou ». Cette dimension permet d'appréhender la complexité de la pensée kanak, « globale » et « magique » , dans laquelle « l'infiniment petit rejoint l'infiniment grand » (Viratelle). Cette relation kanak à la terre est décrite par Godin comme une alliance fondatrice des « maisons » qui unit en une « véritable hiérogamie » vivants, ancêtres, esprits et êtres du monde naturel – des profondeurs marines jusqu'au ciel – dans une véritable parenté instaurée par les échanges cérémoniels (Godin 2020).

Une monnaie kanak posée par les coutumiers lors de la cérémonie d'arrivée des poteaux de la Grande Case est visible dans une vitrine du chemin. Elle « n'est pas exposée » mais a une signification intrinsèque expliquait Viratelle : « elle a été posée ici coutumièrement. Si les gens peuvent la voir, tant mieux, mais elle est là parce que c'est sa place ». Représentant un ancêtre convoqué pour veiller au respect de la parole prononcée, la monnaie est la manifestation d'une parole performative qui « donne toute la puissance symbolique du chemin ». En la posant, les représentants kanak font du lieu une « terre coutumière », un « morceau de la Nouvelle-Calédonie » à part entière (Viratelle). Les poteaux de la Grande Case ont aussi été entourés de plusieurs tours de manous symbolisant leur interconnexion dans la représentation des ancêtres qui veillent sur le lieu.

La parole qu'on ne dit pas et le chemin de la perception

De manière similaire à l'exposition de certains objets liés au sacré dans les vitrines du musée national du Vanuatu (Bertin, 2019), les explications sur la symbolique des poteaux de la MNC sont succinctes. Elles sont livrées par les sculpteurs eux-mêmes dans le livret de médiation, lequel mentionne : « les sculptures sont la propriété des clans, qui seuls ont le droit d'en révéler les mythes associés. C'est pourquoi une infime partie de leur signification est dévoilée dans ce document » (MNC, 2009, p. 14). Comme au Vanuatu où il peut exister des réglementations culturelles (Bertin, 2019), il existait par le passé un droit de représentation des motifs, qui représentent les mythes, totems, et histoires claniques kanak. Il pouvait être inconvenant de les regarder et encore plus de les reproduire sans autorisation. Le secret intrinsèque à la culture kanak est préservé ici sans nécessité de négocier ou d'aménager l'exposition (Kasarhérou, 2020). Les modalités de production et de transmission de sens adoptées par la scénographie comportent elles-mêmes cette dimension de mystère. Les différentes strates symboliques sont abordées par le visiteur « en fonction de son degré de développement, de son degré d'interprétation, de son degré de connaissance », le parcours ayant été conçu avec une idée d'accès initiatique au savoir dont les « gens de la culture originelle du pays » sont dépositaires et le cheminement intrinsèquement lié aux chemins coutumiers qu'il faut parcourir (Viratelle).

À la différence d'une exposition occidentale classique, le chemin de la MNC ne fonctionne pas sur un mode linéaire de circulation d'un élément à un autre. Les objets « n'entrent pas dans une suite » analyse Kasarhérou. L'appréhension de l'installation est plutôt synthétique et partielle, et non « une leçon que vous apprenez de A à Z, et après vous pouvez tourner la page » (Kasarhérou). Plutôt qu'argumentatif ou démonstratif, la logique adoptée par le discours scénographique se rapproche de la pensée kanak. Selon Viratelle, la pensée occidentale cherche de façon rationnelle le chemin le plus court, pour les Kanak le chemin est « celui qui va donner le plus de sens à la présentation ». « Très elliptique » il peut prendre « toutes sortes de formes » dans les méandres d'une pensée souvent « magique » (Viratelle). Le chemin de la MNC, où l'on « déambule » et où l'esprit « serpente » dans un univers de symboles, se rapprocherait donc davantage d'une pensée kanak « spiralaire ».

Le chemin de la MNC s'adresse à la sensibilité des visiteurs. Pour Viratelle, c'est la beauté des symboles qui poussent à les observer et à les décrypter, l'affectif se faisant « le carburant » du cognitif. Les musiciens du groupe Kaori jugent cette approche très « océanienne » : « les gens qui connaissent bien la culture kanak, ils disent que d'abord on sent les choses, et après on explique » (Folcher, dans Decorce, 2020, p. 63). La perception de la scénographie se fait progressivement analyse Kasarhérou : « c'est une bonne image de la Calédonie, parce qu'elle ne se laisse pas découvrir d'un premier regard ». Selon lui c'est un discours qui « parle à l'émotion », les poteaux vous parlent « d'une autre manière, dans une autre langue, avec une autre sensibilité ». L'installation conserve ainsi une incommunicabilité caractéristique de la pensée kanak, liée à une « impuissance langagière » à exprimer dans sa totalité la réalité et l'expérience de l'individu (Byron-Portet, 2019, p. 61). Selon les mots du sculpteur Dick Bone : « On parle beaucoup de la culture kanak, mais c'est un « discours de blanc ». Pour nous c'est davantage un discours qu'il faut vivre : c'est vivre quelque chose qui évolue tout en regardant ce qui disparaît » (1992, p. 77). L'exposition émanerait d'une parole qui se vit plus qu'elle ne se dit, dans l'idée d'une tradition vivante et de sa « reformulation permanente » (Tjiabou, 1996).

Conclusions

La polysémie du chemin de la MNC tente de fédérer autour d'une identité plurielle. Chercher un terrain d'entente, laisser une porte ouverte, « négocier l'incommunication » est le défi de la communication (Wolton, 2019). « Structurantes », les incommunications humaines sont des « points d'appui pour la communication, la négociation, la cohabitation, la compréhension entre chacun tout autant qu'entre les cultures » (Renucci et Paquot, 2019, p. 9). L'acceptation de l'incommunication est une condition nécessaire au maintien de l'échange. La dimension symbolique du discours scénographique de la MNC, son approche sensible et synthétique, ainsi que les représentations dialogiques permises par les fonctions polyvalentes du lieu, créent un espace d'introspection et d'ouverture. La parole kanak au cœur de l'exposition se révèle structurante, notamment par son incommunication constitutive liée à l'incommunicable et au sacré (Byron-Portet, 2019). Ce mystère préservé dans une représentation culturelle profonde de la pensée autochtone, invite à la découverte de l'altérité dans le respect des sensibilités de chacun. Cet exemple d'autochtonisation pose la question des musées comme « institutions pertinentes » dans un contexte de construction identitaire post-coloniale commun à de nombreuses populations océaniennes (Bertin, 2020). Dans quelle mesure l'hybridation des pratiques muséales peut-elle permettre une mutation des espaces, qui davantage que de prendre en compte les spécificités, s'enracinent dans la singularité des pensées autochtones ? Répondre aux difficultés de fréquentation et d'appropriation des structures par les populations locales (Puel et Van Geert, 2021) demande peut-être de repenser moins les outils que le modèle dans ses fondements, pour « refaire musée » à partir d'un rapport océanien à la transmission, et d'une relation au monde où on vit avec les œuvres plutôt que de les visiter.

Dans une vision de « reformulation permanente » de l'identité (Tjibaou, 1985), se sont les conditions non pas de conservation, mais de vitalité de la tradition et des discours qui l'expriment, qu'il convient d'interroger. Comment dépasser la rigidité intrinsèque de l'architecture et des mises en espaces permanentes autrement que par l'artifice des programmations ? Comment ne pas scléroser les représentations et cristalliser les crispations identitaires dans des contextes socio-politiques sensibles et instables ? Une maison est rendue vivante par ceux qui l'habitent. À la MNC, les ancêtres veillent sur les lieux et les vivants portent la parole en actualisant le récit. Qu'en sera-t-il maintenant que la figure du médiateur du lieu s'en est allé, amenuisant le souffle de la transmission orale ? Et quel peut être l'avenir de ces lieux bâtis sur l'Accord de Nouméa partageant ainsi son destin incertain ? « Tant que l'idée des Accords et l'idée de destin commun survit, ce genre d'espace aura vocation de survivre. Si on passe à autre chose ce sera une page de l'histoire » (Kasarhérou). En pleine crise budgétaire, la question se pose déjà pour la MNC, face au « conflit entre les défenseurs d'un espace commun et les partisans de la partition. Il est bien difficile de savoir ce que les élus veulent faire de cette représentation institutionnelle en France et en Europe » peut-on lire dans le journal le *Chien Bleu*. Terre coutumière au cœur de Paris, morceau de l'archipel dans la France, abandonner le lieu sans autre considération serait comme le souligne l'article « en contradiction avec tous les discours et les coutumes qui ont été faits dans la grande case de la maison ».

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Retrouver la voix de nos objets : démarche muséale et revendications culturelles au *fenua ènata*

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Résumé

Aux Îles Marquises, en Polynésie française, le patrimoine culturel matériel, qu'il soit archéologique ou contemporain, recouvre de multiples enjeux. À la fois culturels, identitaires, pédagogiques et économiques, ils ont été réaffirmés par l'inscription récente de l'archipel au patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO. Cet article s'appuie sur l'exemple de l'île de Ua Huna, où un nouveau musée fut récemment construit sur le site culturel et communautaire Tetumu. Il explore l'engagement des dirigeants locaux et de la communauté dans la préservation et la valorisation de leur culture, en s'intéressant aux démarches entreprises et aux objectifs visés, réponse autochtone à une

frustration causée par l'éloignement d'un patrimoine largement dispersé. La mise en avant de la langue marquisienne y devient également outil de réappropriation. Cette initiative pionnière de Ua Huna s'inscrit dans une dynamique proprement marquisienne, en écho aux préoccupations croissantes concernant la préservation et la transmission du patrimoine au sein de l'archipel.

Mots-clés : Polynésie, Marquises, musée communautaire, archéologie

Abstract

Rediscovering the voice of our objects: Museological approaches and cultural claims in the *fenua ènata*. In the Marquesas Islands of French Polynesia, material cultural heritage, whether archaeological or contemporary, carries multiple stakes. At once cultural, identity-based, educational, and economic, these stakes have been reaffirmed by the recent inscription of the archipelago on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This article draws on the example of the island of Ua Huna, where a new museum was recently built on the Tetumu cultural and community site. It explores the involvement of local leaders and the community in preserving and promoting their culture, focusing on the initiatives undertaken and the goals pursued – an Indigenous response to frustration caused by the dispersal of much of their heritage. The promotion of the Marquesan language also becomes a tool of reappropriation. Ua Huna's pioneering initiative is part of a specifically Marquesan movement, echoing growing concerns about the preservation and transmission of heritage throughout the archipelago.

Keywords: Polynesia, Marquesas, community museum, archaeology

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L'archipel des Marquises, *fenua ènata* / *henua ènana* (la « Terre des Hommes » en langue marquisienne), est l'un des cinq groupes d'îles formant l'actuelle Polynésie française, aux côtés des îles de la Société, des Tuāmotu, des Gambier et des Australes. Situé à environ 800 km de Tahiti, il se compose de douze îles, dont six habitées. Ces terres volcaniques se distinguent par leurs reliefs spectaculaires et leur riche héritage culturel.

La valorisation du patrimoine culturel des Marquises, tant archéologique que contemporain, occupe une place centrale dans les initiatives locales, en raison des enjeux culturels, identitaires, éducatifs et économiques qu'il représente. Ce processus a été amplifié par le classement de l'archipel au patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO, effectif depuis le 26 juillet 2024[1]. Cet événement historique reflète une dynamique de réveil culturel entamée dans les années 1970, marquée par des initiatives telles que le *Matavaa* (Festival des arts des îles Marquises), et la mise en place de salles patrimoniales (Moulin, 1990 ; Ivory, 1998 ; Schemith, 2013 ; Donaldson, 2019 ; Mury, 2022). Parmi ces initiatives, le renouveau du *patutiki* (la pratique du tatouage traditionnel) incarne un symbole de résistance et de réappropriation culturelle, à l'instar des efforts pour préserver et revitaliser la langue marquisienne (Huukena, 2020 ; De Bergh & Ottino-Garanger, 1998). Cependant, ce réveil culturel se déploie dans un contexte historique marqué par des traumatismes profonds.

1 Décision 46COM 8B.8 - Te Henua Ènata - Les îles Marquises (France) : https://whc.unesco.org/fr/decisions/8602

Annexé par la France en 1842 (Bailleul, 2001), l'archipel connut un déclin démographique sans précédent, largement commenté dans la littérature. Ce phénomène témoigne d'une situation catastrophique associée à une dépopulation massive tout au long du 19e siècle (Conte & Molle, 2022). Les effets de cette crise démographique, conjugués à l'influence des missionnaires catholiques et de l'administration coloniale, provoquèrent un bouleversement des structures traditionnelles. Avec la disparition des spécialistes et des prêtres détenteurs des savoirs, des histoires, des chants et des généalogies, la transmission fut brutalement interrompue.

Le 20 mars 1863, à l'initiative conjointe de l'Évêque René Dordillon, également Directeur des affaires indigènes, et du Commissaire Impérial Louis Eugène Gaultier de la Richerie, entre en vigueur un « Règlement pour la conduite des indigènes de l'île Nuka-Hiva », plus communément appelé « Code Dordillon » (Koenig, 1995). Ce règlement faisait preuve d'une forte volonté d'éradication de pratiques culturelles en interdisant par exemple les chants (et par voie de conséquence les danses), la pratique du tambour de manière « païenne », ou encore le port de vêtements en pandanus (Moulin, 1990). Le tatouage aussi fut interdit[2] et, sans les efforts d'enregistrement de Willowdean C. Handy (1922) et de Karl von den Steinen (1925), la plupart des motifs et de leur signification auraient été définitivement perdus. Bien qu'il n'ait été appliqué que pendant deux ans, ce code a profondément altéré les pratiques culturelles qui constituaient l'identité des Marquisiens.

La langue *ènata* ne fut pas pour autant interdite par les missionnaires. En réalité, ce n'est qu'après la seconde guerre mondiale qu'elle fut bannie du système éducatif polynésien, avant d'être remplacée par le tahitien, imposé dans les établissements et les programmes scolaires. L'usage des langues vernaculaires était strictement interdit dans les écoles reflétant une volonté de marginaliser les langues autochtones dans l'espace éducatif (Paia & Vernaudon, 2022).

En 1978, le synode des Marquises organisé à Nuku Hiva permit d'identifier les problèmes rencontrés tant par la population que l'église catholique. L'Évêque du diocèse de Taiohae, Mgr Hervé Le Cléac'h, fort apprécié par les populations locales, suggéra alors la création d'une association culturelle qui étudierait notamment les questions d'éducation générale dans le respect et la fidélité aux valeurs marquisiennes (Hodée, 1983 ; Motu Haka, 1987). Cette association, baptisée Motu Haka, vit le jour la même année grâce aux efforts de trois enseignants de Ua Pou : Georges Toti Teikiehuupoko, Benjamin Teikitutoua et Etienne Hokaupoko. Motu Haka rassemblait les six îles habitées autour d'un objectif commun prioritaire : défendre la langue marquisienne et la réhabiliter au cœur de l'enseignement alors dominé par le français et le tahitien. En 1987, l'association fut également à l'origine du premier Festival des arts traditionnels des îles Marquises, ou *Matavaa*, une initiative destinée à revitaliser les chants, danses, tatouages, sculptures et autres expressions artistiques marquisiennes. Aujourd'hui, Motu Haka est devenue une fédération culturelle.

Tout aussi prioritaire pour l'association, apparaissait alors la création d'un musée du patrimoine marquisien, au même titre que la préservation de la langue par son application dans l'enseignement primaire. Le musée représentait alors une structure capable de protéger le patrimoine matériel, défini comme l'un des symboles de l'identité culturelle marquisienne centrée autour des artefacts, des sites archéologiques, de la langue et les présentations artistiques au sens le plus varié (Moulin, 1990).

2 Pour un exposé plus précis de l'histoire des interdictions de la pratique du patutiki, voir Huukena, T. (2020). Le matatiki, art graphique marquisien. Fiche d'inventaire du patrimoine culturel immatériel. 2020_67717_INV_PCI_FRANCE_00463.

Si ce musée marquisien voulu par Motu Haka n'a jamais vu le jour,[3] l'archipel s'illustre par une série d'autres initiatives patrimoniales, le plus souvent portée à l'échelle d'une île ou d'une vallée par l'autorité locale. Cet article revient sur un des exemples les plus forts de cet élan de création de structures de préservation et de présentation patrimoniales, celui de l'île de Ua Huna.[4]

L'engagement des dirigeants et de la communauté envers la préservation et la valorisation de leur patrimoine matériel et immatériel sera ainsi explicité par l'étude de leur démarche et objectifs, réponse autochtone à une frustration causée par l'éloignement d'un patrimoine largement dispersé à l'échelle du territoire polynésien ou à l'international. L'évolution de l'infrastructure muséale la plus aboutie, celle du musée archéologique, sera revisitée à l'aune du projet identitaire et de revitalisation linguistique qu'il incarne. Ce dernier donne à voir une reprise en main de leur patrimoine par les Marquisiens, témoignant d'une réappropriation autochtone caractéristique des mouvements muséologiques contemporains.

Initiatives patrimoniales locales et communautaires

L'archipel s'illustre par une série d'initiatives patrimoniales (Johnson, 2007 ; Vallée, 2019), le plus souvent portée à l'échelle d'une île ou d'une vallée par l'autorité locale.[5]

C'est le cas par exemple à Vaitahu, sur Tahuata, où, sous l'impulsion du maire de l'époque, un espace a été aménagé dans l'enceinte de la mairie pour recevoir notamment des artefacts recueillis lors des fouilles archéologiques de Barry Rolett. Fondée en 1987 par Tehaumate Tetahiotupa et Rolett, la salle Te Ana Peua a été rénovée en 2017.[6]

Un autre exemple est celui de la salle patrimoniale *Hae haina ènana* à Hatiheu à Nuku Hiva, dont la création a été instiguée par la maire Yvonne Katupa. Deux salles adjacentes sont ouvertes au public depuis 2011. Elles présentent des moulages de pétroglyphes et de *tiki*, des objets anciens dont certains issus de fouilles archéologiques ou de découvertes fortuites, d'autres contemporains, ainsi que des photographies. La médiation écrite est en grande partie issue de l'ouvrage de De Bergh et Ottino-Garanger, *Le tatouage aux* Îles *Marquises - Te patu tiki* (1998). Elles illustrent ainsi une approche qui place l'entité muséale à travers le prisme marquisien (Schorch et al., 2021).

Toujours dans cette même veine, la salle du conseil communal de Taiohae à Nuku Hiva, expose, elle aussi, sous vitrine, quelques artéfacts provenant de fouilles réalisées sur le littoral du village.

À Ua Pou, une autre salle patrimoniale située dans un bâtiment municipal à Hakahau

3 Bien que son établissement avait été préssenti sur le terrain de l'ancien Fort Collet à Nuku Hiva et que des échanges et ateliers avaient été organisés entre différentes instances étatiques, territoriales et communales pour le développement de ce projet.

4 Si le nom de l'île s'est longtemps prononcé Ua Huka, nous suivrons ici la volonté de la communauté locale de réhabiliter le nom Ua Huna.

5 Cet intérêt pour des structures muséales multiples et adaptées renvoie également à la construction de l'identité marquisienne, associée à une vallée, soulignant ainsi un souhait de développer des lieux dédiés à l'héritage culturel matériel pour chaque village/commune de chaque île, selon Debora Kimitete, Mata Hoata symposium, musée du quai-Branly - Jacques Chirac, Avril 2016.

6 "Te Ana Peua, The Tahuata Museum", AFAR http://www.afargo.org/te-ana-peua-the-tahuata-museum-copy page consultée le 22 janvier 2025.

présentait des collections de prêteurs particuliers ainsi que des documents pédagogiques jusqu'en 2008, date de sa fermeture.

Un petit musée fut ouvert à Atuona, sur Hiva Oa, durant le 3e festival des arts des îles Marquises en 1991, mais cette initiative ne déboucha pas sur une structure permanente. Quant au centre culturel Paul Gauguin, bien qu'il présente 456 artéfacts (Perrin 2024), il n'est pas dédié à la culture *ènana*.[7]

Pour finir, mentionnons que des structures privées marquent aussi le paysage patrimonial de l'archipel. À Fatu Iva, la maison Grelet (Johnson, 2007 ; Vallée, 2019), devenue salle patrimoniale dans les années 1960, présente les collections familiales dans une maison coloniale dont Sarah Vaki est aujourd'hui la gardienne.

Le petit musée de Rose Corser, nommé *Taetae Tupuna Ènana* – Musée Ènana à Nuku Hiva offre, lui aussi, un panorama de la culture matérielle locale, d'objets archéologiques aux productions plus contemporaines. Ajoutons enfin que certaines familles exposent leurs collections privées dans des vitrines au sein de leur domicile et utilisent souvent le terme de « musée » pour les désigner (Vallée, 2019).

Ua Huna et une ambition de patrimonialisation de longue date

Bien qu'étant l'une des plus petites îles de l'archipel, avec une population actuelle d'environ 725 habitants répartis dans trois vallées, Ua Huna témoigne d'une forte volonté de patrimonialisation menée depuis près de 50 ans par la commune. Cinq « musées » ont vu le jour entre 1978 et 2013. Cette floraison muséale répond au dynamisme de la recherche sur le patrimoine de l'île, tout en reflétant les efforts et initiatives de personnalités politiques locales et tout particulièrement Léon Lichtlé (maire de 1977 à 2008), Nestor Ohu (maire actuel depuis 2008) et Ranka Aunoa (premier adjoint au maire actuel).

Dès 1977, le Service de Développement Rural avait mis en place des parcelles expérimentales d'arbres et arbustes adaptées aux conditions sèches des Marquises sur plusieurs terres domaniales. Avec l'introduction de nombreuses espèces fruitières, elle devint rapidement un jardin communal maraîcher avant de se transformer officiellement en 1985 en l'arboretum de *Papua keikaha* qui s'étend sur environ 15 ha (Butaud, 2010). Dans l'enceinte de l'arboretum fut ouvert, en 2000, le musée du bois dans lequel sont présentées plus d'une cinquantaine d'essences de bois d'arbres, à chaque fois via une planche et une section transversale du spécimen.

Lichtlé disposait par ailleurs d'une collection de coquillages personnelle et avait acquis des pirogues et éléments de pirogues anciennes de Tahiti et des îles Australes qu'il avait fait amener à Ua Huna avec d'autres antiquités des 19e-20e siècles (Spitz, 2023). Ces pièces furent exposées dans le musée de la mer de Hane, dans un bâtiment qui abrite également la salle d'exposition artisanale.

Dans le village d'Hokatu, en bord de mer, est édifiée une petite salle d'exposition servant de musée des pétroglyphes, *ohoau keâ haatiki*. Elle contient de nombreux moulages de pétroglyphes réalisés par François Ollier, alors assistant-conservateur du MTI, dans les

7 Un projet de rénovation de cet espace dans le but de le transformer en « musée des arts marquisiens » a été formulé par la Commune de Hiva Oa. Voir PEM, *Hiva Oa : projet de réalisation d'un musée des arts et du patrimoine Marquisien.* O'Marquises.com. : https://www.omarquises.com/2023/11/29/hiva-oa-projet-de-realisation-dun-musee-des-arts-et-du-patrimoine-marquisien/ page consultée le 20 janvier 2025.

vallées de l'île permettant aux visiteurs d'admirer ces œuvres graphiques *ènata* dont les originaux sont souvent difficiles d'accès.

À ces sites s'ajoute le musée de l'archéologie de Vaipaee, transféré en 2016 sur le complexe de Tetumu, et qui constitue le principal objet d'étude de cet article. Nous reviendrons ci-dessous en détail sur son historique, mais notons dès à présent que, suite au déplacement des collections de la première salle de Vaipaee, cette dernière fut récemment transformée en un musée de la généalogie. Cette initiative, portée par l'équipe municipale actuelle, a été réalisée grâce à l'engagement d'une jeune fille de l'île, Kelly Taiaapu, alors stagiaire à la mairie. Aucun généalogiste ou professionnel du domaine n'a été mobilisé, illustrant une démarche locale, pragmatique et guidée par l'objectif de permettre aux enfants de l'île de renouer avec leur histoire familiale. Sur les murs de cet espace, les lignages des grandes familles de Ua Huna sont représentés, invitant les jeunes générations à retrouver leurs racines.

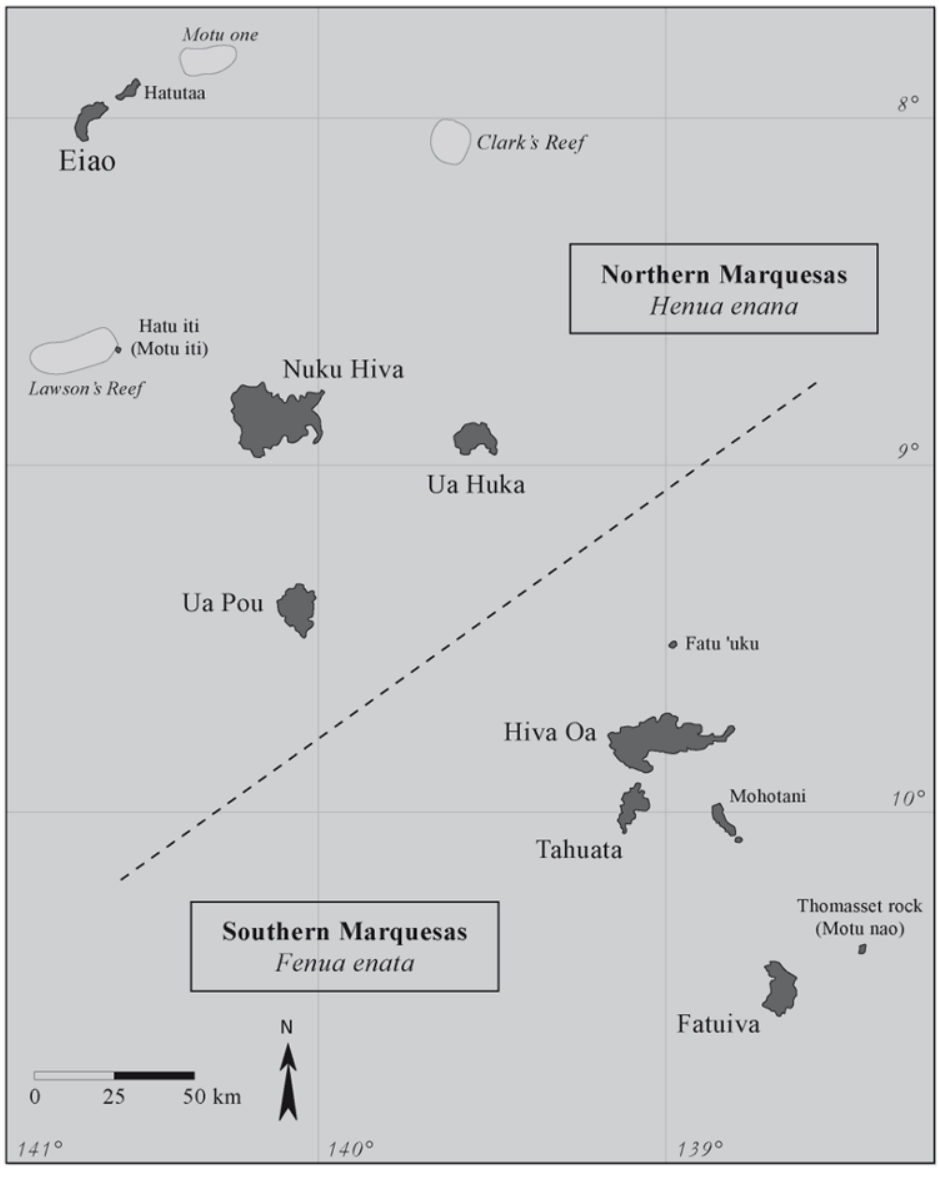


Illustration 1 : Carte de l'archipel des Marquises © G. Molle.

Du musée de Vaipaee au centre culturel Tetumu

La première initiative curatoriale[8] au *fenua* è*nata* prend forme en 1978, lorsque le maire de Ua Huna et ministre de l'agriculture de Polynésie française Léon Lichtlé, crée une petite exposition sur des étagères de la mairie de Vaipaee (Spitz, 2023), une opportunité importante de préservation de l'ancienne culture pour les futures générations (Johnson, 2007). Cet ensemble accueillait alors des objets anciens découverts ou acquis par Lichtlé lui-même tant aux Marquises que lors de ses déplacements dans le Pacifique, ainsi que la collection personnelle de Joseph Tehau Vaatete, sculpteur renommé de l'archipel qui produisit un nombre important d'objets patrimoniaux conservés dans les musées internationaux et auprès de qui Lichtlé commissionna plusieurs productions. Litchlé invita également les familles de l'île à donner ou à mettre en dépôt dans cette collection les objets archéologiques en leur possession.[9] Face à l'engouement progressif pour cette démarche et ce « musée », l'espace d'exposition et les conditions de présentation devinrent insuffisants. Le musée, dont Vaatete fut nommé conservateur, s'installa alors au rez-de-chaussée du bâtiment de la Poste nouvellement construit dans les jardins de la mairie.

Une collection de photographies archéologiques prises par Ollier entre 1970 et 1972 formait une première contribution iconographique à l'exposition. Par la suite, Lichtlé acquit des reproductions des photographies de la *Bayard Dominick Expedition* organisée par le Bishop Museum dans l'archipel entre 1920 et 1921 (Handy E.S.C. 1923 ; Linton 1923, 1925) et des documents réalisés par le Département d'Archéologie du Centre Polynésien des Sciences Humaines.

Cette salle continua d'étoffer ses collections avec le lancement, à partir de 1991, d'un vaste programme de recherches archéologiques sur l'île mené par Eric Conte de l'Université de la Polynésie française (Conte & Molle, 2012). Plusieurs artefacts issus des fouilles, notamment du site côtier de Manihina, rejoignirent l'exposition où se côtoyaient alors objets anciens et plus récents : sculptures sur bois comprenant des bols et des plats, des modèles de tatouage, des petits *tiki* en bois et en pierre, des répliques de rames, des hameçons en nacre et des ornements en coquillage et en os.

Au-delà d'une proposition d'agencement expositif sous vitrine pour la plupart des objets avec un éclairage par spots lumineux, ce qui distinguait d'autres initiatives patrimoniales moins bien fournies (Johnson, 2007), les responsables choisirent rapidement d'explorer d'autres directions muséographiques. Deux espaces furent aménagés : le premier offrait une reconstitution de cuisine ancienne comprenant différents ustensiles traditionnels tels que des plats et bols en bois, paniers tressés, pilons en pierre ou pèle-fruits en coquillage ; le second représentait une grotte funéraire présentant d'anciens cercueils et *kotue* en bois, des contenants funéraires découverts par Vaatete et d'autres gens de l'île dans des grottes et abris-sous-roche et ramenés au musée dans un but de préservation (Molle, 2011). Ces reconstitutions s'inscrivaient dans une tendance déjà visible en Polynésie française depuis plusieurs années dans les salles de TFI-MTI[10] (Bono et al., 2022 ; Millaud & Mu-Liep-

8 Ce terme s'entend ici dans un contexte de monstration au sein d'un espace intérieur. En effet, d'autres initiatives curatoriales, notamment autochtones, peuvent s'inscrire dans des contextes plus performatifs et extérieurs, comme c'est le cas lors de festivals artistiques et culturels (Vallée, 2019).

9 « [...] j'ai toujours été conscient de l'importance des musées et j'ai essayé sans grand succès de partager la conviction avec les habitants de Ua Huka qu'un musée est quelque chose de vivant qu'il faut sans cesse nourrir. » Lichtlé, entretien avec C. Spitz, 2023.

10 Principale institution muséale de Polynésie française, Te Fare Iamanaha - Musée de Tahiti et des Îles (son nom depuis sa réouverture après rénovation de sa salle permanente en 2023) fut créé administrativement en 1974 de, puis ouvert en 1977 et inauguré dans sa version complète en 1979 (Lavondès, 1979). La visite

man, 2001) où un certain héritage des explorations muséographiques métropolitaines développées dans les années 1960 autour des collections ethnographiques était sensible (Vallée, 2019). Ces ensembles organisés, « unités écologiques » ou « *period rooms* » mêlaient objets patrimoniaux « authentiques » et d'autres récents ou répliques (Rolland-Villemot, 2016 ; Georgel, 2016), dans des « ambiances » reproduisant, à l'échelle, intérieurs ou maisons. La médiation écrite consistait en une série de cartels manuscrits ou tapuscrits permettant d'identifier les catégories d'artefacts et parfois leur origine. Toutefois, la majorité de ces informations relevait en réalité de la mémoire orale entretenue et transmise par Lichtlé et Vaatete, les deux personnalités incontournables du musée dont ils avaient aussi en charge la maintenance.[11]

La salle d'exposition de Vaipaee, accessible gratuitement avec un encouragement aux donations, devint un lieu emblématique pour les visiteurs de l'île. Ces publics arrivaient notamment par l'Aranui qui accostait environ une fois par mois et représentait une fréquentation d'environ 180 personnes.

Les collections s'étoffèrent encore lorsque les pièces lauréates du concours annuel de sculpture de l'île y furent intégrées de façon systématique[12]. À cela s'ajoutait la difficulté d'accueillir les touristes de l'Aranui, divisés en petits groupes successifs au fil de leur excursion. Il s'avéra de nouveau nécessaire d'envisager un déménagement.

Un musée au cœur de la vie culturelle et communautaire

Face à ces problématiques grandissantes, une opportunité vit le jour à l'occasion de la préparation du *Matavaa* qui se tenait pour la première fois à Ua Huna en 2013. Devant les difficultés foncières de restaurer un site archéologique pour l'évènement, comme il est d'accoutumée dans l'archipel (Ottino-Garanger, 2006), la commune décida d'organiser le festival sur le terrain domanial de Tetumu situé sur un plateau surplombant l'aéroport, en bordure de la route principale reliant les trois villages. Le nom Tetumu est issu d'un ancien toponyme du lieu et signifie également « la racine » ou « le tronc », marquant ainsi la volonté d'en faire un lieu d'ancrage culturel. Cette initiative originale conduisit à la construction d'un site dédié au déroulement des festivités et à l'accueil des visiteurs, mais avec l'ambition d'en faire un point central de la vie communautaire de Ua Huna au-delà du *Matavaa*.

Au cœur du complexe se trouve le *tohua* Tetumu, une place de festivités où se déroulent les danses et cérémonies, ceinturée de plusieurs maisons pour accueillir les délégations et les visiteurs ainsi que d'immenses sculptures de *tiki* en tuf volcanique.[13] Autour ont été édifiés d'autres bâtiments servant notamment de restaurant, de salle d'artisanat ou encore d'atelier communal de sculpture.

L'un des aspects de l'inscription dans la durée de ce site culturel nouvellement investi est la

virtuelle de l'ancien parcours d'exposition permanente est par ailleurs visible sur le site internet du musée. https://www.museetahiti.pf/

11 J. Vaatete en tant que conservateur s'occupait également de l'entretien régulier de la salle.

12 Ce concours, lancé par Lichtlé en 1996, a lieu chaque année au 29 juin et voit les sculpteurs de l'île présenter leurs œuvres autour d'un thème décidé par la commune. Il s'agissait à l'origine d'encourager les artisans à mettre en avant leur savoir-faire dans la copie d'œuvres anciennes, réalisée le plus souvent à partir de documents iconographiques. Rapidement, ce concours acquit une grande notoriété en Polynésie et beaucoup des pièces étaient emportées hors de l'île par des acheteurs extérieurs.

13 Les *tohua* sont des monuments mégalithiques emblématiques de la culture marquisienne ancienne où se rassemblaient autrefois les populations des chefferies (Ottino, 2001 ; Tamarii & Molle, 2021).

création du nouveau “Musée Tetumu” ou “Musée communal de Ua Huka”. La construction du musée, financée entièrement par la commune, démarra après le festival. Il s’agit d’un bâtiment en dur, de 450 m², recouvert d’une toiture en palmex, plus durable que les palmes végétales traditionnelles. Il fut inauguré en juin 2016.



Illustration 2 : Vue aérienne du site culturel de Tetumu avec de gauche à droite : la reconstitution du meàe Meaiaute, le musée, le tohua © A. Tamarii

La nouvelle salle d’exposition

Les collections de Vaipaee ont été transférées dans le musée Tetumu, où un parcours d’exposition permanente combinant différentes approches muséographiques mène le visiteur dans deux salles contiguës. Il se place, à ce jour encore, comme le parcours le plus développé de l’archipel (Vallée, 2019). Au cœur du propos muséographique, la culture matérielle relie passé et présent, en regroupant à la fois des objets issus de fouilles archéologiques, des artefacts collectés par la population, ainsi que des reproductions d’œuvres anciennes réalisées à l’occasion des concours de sculpture annuels.

Certaines vitrines à plusieurs niveaux présentent toujours des assemblages typologiques d’objets anciens tels que herminettes, pilons ou poids de pêche, relevant à la fois d’une tradition d’accumulation héritée des musées européens du 19e siècle (Dias, 1991 ; Grognet, 2005) et d’influences possibles des propositions du premier parcours d’exposition permanente du TFI-MTI (Vallée, 2019). Seul un dispositif de montage d’hameçons en nacre de Manihina sur deux petits panneaux de plexiglas reflète dans une certaine mesure la chaîne opératoire de fabrication de ces objets.

Dans un espace désormais bien plus grand que la salle de Vaipaee, les reconstitutions grandeur nature d'une cuisine traditionnelle et d'un abri funéraire ont été conservées et réaménagées côte-à-côte sur une plate-forme commune, poursuivant ainsi la volonté immersive souhaitée par les concepteurs. Un troisième lieu fut reconstitué au centre de la salle voisine et consiste en un *paepae* ou soubassement de pierres sur lequel sont disposés les magnifiques *tiki* en pierre et en bois ainsi que les *kātina* ou poteaux sculptés qui comptent toujours aujourd'hui comme des pièces-maîtresses de l'exposition (Molle, 2013).

Enfin, aux collections transférées de Vaipaee s'ajoutèrent de nouvelles créations et une croissance exponentielle de ce fonds : les sculptures contemporaines lauréates des concours du 29 juin. Des séries de massues, de pagaies et d'échasses sont accrochées sur les murs des salles et témoignent d'une diversité stylistique des motifs gravés. Un mur est également dédié à la présentation de modèles réduits de pirogues.

La médiation écrite comme outil et vecteur de transmission patrimoniale et linguistique

A l'ouverture du musée Tetumu, les collections de Vaipaee avaient été disposées dans le nouvel espace de manière un peu aléatoire en conservant les ensembles d'objets auparavant regroupés dans les anciennes vitrines. Dès 2018, la commune exprima le souhait d'affiner le parcours muséographique du musée de façon plus thématique. Forte des relations étroites existant de longue date avec les archéologues du CIRAP[14], elle confia à l'équipe scientifique le soin d'élaborer un nouveau plan d'organisation et de prendre en charge la rédaction de panneaux d'exposition. Ces derniers devaient présenter au visiteur les thèmes retenus en s'appuyant sur les données ethnographiques et archéologiques recueillies au cours des dernières décennies. L'ambition était aussi d'atteindre, à leur échelle locale, les standards des grands musées nationaux.

À l'issue d'une série de discussions collectives, il fut arrêté qu'un premier panneau de synthèse sur le peuplement de la région ouvrirait l'exposition à l'entrée du musée, suivi d'un autre panneau sur l'histoire de Ua Huna depuis les premiers peuplements humains autour du 11e siècle de notre ère. Les visiteurs évoluent ensuite à travers les deux salles en découvrant les thèmes de la pêche traditionnelle, le travail des outils en pierre, la préparation de la nourriture, la maison marquisienne et l'espace domestique, les pratiques funéraires, les monuments religieux et communautaires, et l'incontournable figure de Tiki.

Au départ de ce projet de médiation, une condition fut posée par les représentants de la commune : celle de mettre au premier plan la langue marquisienne, aujourd'hui l'objet d'un double mouvement de réappropriation et de revitalisation essentiel dans l'archipel. Les textes de vulgarisation scientifique furent rédigés en français puis traduits en marquisien par des membres de l'académie des langues marquisiennes, et en anglais. Soucieux d'associer au projet la jeunesse de l'île, les représentants de la commune décidèrent également d'impliquer les jeunes élèves du Centre des Jeunes Adolescents (CJA) de Hane, qui furent chargés de produire les supports accueillant ces nouveaux outils de médiation (panneaux, cartels, etc.), renforçant ainsi leur sentiment d'appartenance à leur patrimoine culturel.

14 *Centre International de Recherche Archéologique sur la Polynésie* qui mène sur Ua Huna un programme de recherches archéologiques de longue durée depuis 1991 (Conte & Molle, 2012 ; Molle, 2011).



Illustration 3 : Haut : Espace de cuisine traditionnelle reconstitué ;
Bas : Exemple de panneaux d'information trilingue mettant en avant la langue marquisienne © G. Molle

Musée gardien et centralisateur du patrimoine

L'initiative menée par Ua Huna reflète des préoccupations profondément marquisiennes, déjà exprimées à la création de Motu Haka, et amplifiées par l'inscription récente de l'archipel sur la liste du patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO.

Au-delà d'un espace de représentation perçu comme vitrine de l'art marquisien aux visiteurs, il s'agit de se réapproprier l'espace et le discours de représentation. En ce sens, cette initiative se place en héritière des concepts associés à la « Nouvelle muséologie » qui replaça au cœur du discours muséographique réflexivité et identité (Macdonald, 2006) et le musée comme instrument social (Brulon Soares, 2015). En outre, Tetumu offre également une réponse à l'inquiétude partagée par les responsables politiques : *retenir* les objets sur l'île. Si l'expression de cette crainte de perdre ou de voir vendre des objets patrimoniaux s'intensifie, elle n'est ni nouvelle ni restreinte à Ua Huna[15], malgré les outils législatifs interdisant l'exportation de biens patrimoniaux.

Si des règles solides existent, la volonté de Ua Huna et, d'une manière générale, des Marquises, de retenir les objets patrimoniaux sur place s'inscrit dans une dynamique historique mais aussi dans une quête de renouvellement des pratiques de protection et de valorisation.

À Ua Huna, le musée apparaît donc comme une infrastructure offrant une centralisation de ce patrimoine pour qu'il ne sorte pas de l'île vers la capitale ou d'autres îles polynésiennes, ni vers la métropole ou des pays étrangers. La valorisation de ce patrimoine par son exposition et le soutien des dirigeants à cette institution replacée au cœur de la communauté permet aussi d'inciter la population à contribuer aux efforts de préservation sur l'île.

Intrinsèquement lié à cet objectif de contrebalancer la déperdition de leur culture matérielle dispersée depuis la fin du 18e siècle, les responsables souhaitent également voir le retour des objets sur leur île d'origine. Ces dernières années, plusieurs musées occidentaux ont largement ouvert les portes de leurs collections aux communautés polynésiennes et leurs représentants dans un effort de consultation élargie. Si celui-ci offre à une reconnexion salutaire des populations avec leur héritage matériel, il conduit aussi à une prise de conscience grandissante de la dispersion de leur patrimoine à une échelle globale.

Au travers des réseaux sociaux et médiatiques, ainsi que de par leurs propres déplacements dans les collections nationales et internationales, Nestor et Ranka affirment être de plus en plus attristés de constater le très grand nombre d'objets marquisiens hors du territoire (Ivory, 1990), en considérant certes des objets ambassadeurs exposés dans les musées (Bertin, 2021 ; Vallée, 2019), mais aussi et surtout la majorité des pièces conservées dans les réserves. « Ces objets pleurent. Ils sont loin de chez eux » (Ranka Aunoa, communication personnelle).

15 En 2008, l'ancienne maire-déléguée de Hatiheu à Nuku Hiva, Yvonne Katupa, exprimait également son envie « de faire un musée sur place, pour que nous ne soyons pas forcément obligés de nous déplacer loin d'ici pour voir des éléments de notre culture [...] Mais j'ai un peu peur. Je veux que les objets restent ici, dans la vallée d'où ils proviennent. » (del Rio 2008 : 21).

Au-delà du musée, un centre culturel

Le projet du musée de Tetumu s'inscrit dans la continuité d'un processus de valorisation culturelle locale initié dès les années 1970, tant sur l'île que dans l'ensemble de l'archipel. L'une des particularités de ce projet est qu'il est situé au cœur du complexe aménagé en 2013 pour le festival. Le développement de ce site s'inscrit dans une vision à long terme de la municipalité qui souhaite faire de cet endroit un véritable centre culturel. Suite à ce *Matavaa*, le lieu n'est pas resté inactif, bien au contraire. Il accueille régulièrement la population pour les évènements qui rythment la vie de l'île, les concours lors des fêtes de juillet, des grandes commémorations, les rassemblements des enfants des écoles. Il constitue un lieu privilégié pour les représentations et performances qui accueillent les délégations extérieures ainsi que pour les touristes qui peuvent en un seul lieu faire l'expérience de la culture Ua Huna.

Se déploie aujourd'hui un projet de développement économique et social bien plus large puisque la construction d'un nouveau lotissement débutera prochainement, tout comme celle d'une nouvelle agence de poste et d'une école centralisée. C'est ainsi en quelque sorte un véritable modèle de développement que la commune souhaite instaurer autour du centre culturel et du musée, plaçant la culture et l'identité *ènata* au centre des préoccupations.

Projet autochtone pionnier porté par la communauté et répondant à des objectifs propres au *fenua ènata* comme celui de mettre en avant la langue marquisienne, Tetumu adopte un modèle de salle d'exposition finalement peu éloigné des écomusées occidentaux (tant dans l'architecture du bâtiment que dans les dispositifs curatoriaux) et s'appuie sur une collaboration soutenue avec les équipes scientifiques extérieures impliquées de longue date dans la préservation du patrimoine de l'île. Il offre ainsi une combinaison de propositions curatoriales réappropriées par sa communauté cherchant à en faire une structure capable de conserver et exposer ses collections patrimoniales dans un projet de gestion qui lui est propre. Cette initiative, comme d'autres mentionnées dans l'archipel, matérialise les revendications culturelles énoncées par les *ènata* depuis près de 50 ans et montre que ces derniers, plus que jamais, prennent en main le devenir de leur patrimoine.

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Transmission, archipels et publics : Le musée rénové à Tahiti

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Résumé

Après cinq ans de fermeture de son parcours d'exposition permanent, le Te Fare Iamanaha – Musée de Tahiti et des Îles rouvre ses portes en mars 2023. Repenser le projet muséographique et de médiation d'un musée qui avait été conçu dans les années 1970 questionnait les modes de transmission des savoirs, au cœur de sa mission. Ainsi, la variété culturelle des communautés des archipels de Polynésie française et leur demande de meilleure visibilité a été au cœur du projet muséographique. La médiation scientifique a été également confrontée à la grande diversité des publics attendus au sein de l'unique institution publique muséale de ce vaste territoire, tout en gardant le fil conducteur du projet d'établissement : construire un musée « par des Polynésiens, pour les Polynésiens ». Outils, expériences et premiers retours illustrent les innovations, les limites et les perspectives qui entrent en jeu dans un tel projet.

Mots-clés : transmission des savoirs, médiation muséale, patrimoine polynésien, diversité culturelle, scénographie rénovée

Abstract

Transmission, archipelagos, and audiences: the renovated museum in Tahiti. After five years of closure of its permanent exhibition, the Te Fare Iamanaha – Museum of Tahiti and the Islands reopened its doors in March 2023. Rethinking the museographic and mediation project of a museum originally designed in the 1970s raised questions about the modes of knowledge transmission that lie at the heart of its mission. Thus, the cultural diversity of the communities from the archipelagos of French Polynesia, along with their

demand for greater visibility, was placed at the center of the museographic project. Scientific mediation also had to address the wide diversity of expected audiences within the only public museum institution of this vast territory, while maintaining the guiding principle of the institution's project: to build a museum "by Polynesians, for Polynesians." Tools, experiences, and initial feedback illustrate the innovations, limitations, and future prospects involved in such a project.

Keywords: knowledge transmission, museum mediation, Polynesian heritage, cultural diversity, renovated scenography

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La Polynésie française s'étend sur un territoire maritime de la taille de l'Europe, avec 118 îles habitées réparties administrativement en cinq archipels. Ces derniers représentent une diversité linguistique culturelle, archéologique et historique unique. Les enjeux de représentativité de cette richesse renvoient à un patrimoine matériel et immatériel que les institutions culturelles locales, et notamment le principal établissement muséal du territoire, *Te Fare Iamanaha* – Musée de Tahiti et des Îles, ont à cœur de préserver et de valoriser.

Face à une infrastructure vieillissante, sa rénovation marque un élan nouveau de réflexivité et de représentation. Elle se place en écho d'une émulation muséographique régionale associée aux musées ethnographiques océaniens (Schorch et al., 2021), et lui offrait une opportunité de reconnexion avec les publics qui, à l'exception des scolaires, d'une certaine élite locale et des touristes, tendaient à la délaisser. Pour le musée, vitrine d'un riche et unique patrimoine encore trop méconnu du grand public, cette reconnexion est synonyme d'une ambition de réappropriation par les communautés polynésiennes dans leur diversité.

En 2018, *Te Fare Iamanaha* ferme les portes de son parcours d'exposition permanente et entame une reconstruction complète du bâtiment d'exposition et des parties adjacentes pour rouvrir en mars 2023 (Ill. 1)[1].

Cette refonte complète des parcours muséographique et de médiation marque la modernisation d'un l'établissement successeur de l'ancien Musée de Pape'ete (MP) créé en 1917 par la Société des Études Océaniennes (Millaud & Mu-Liepmann, 2001), en charge de la préservation du patrimoine matériel mobilier de la colonie.

Après plusieurs déménagements, les collections du MP sont transférées en 1974 au *Fare Iamanaha*, le nouvel établissement public créé et établi sur un site à 15 km de la capitale, sur la côte ouest à Punaauia. Inauguré en 1979, le musée a accueilli le public pendant plus de 40 ans (Bono et al., 2022).

Reflétant les considérations curatoriales de son temps (Vallée, 2019), l'ancien parcours muséographique se répartissait autour de quatre salles de plain-pied.

Il débutait par l'environnement naturel et le peuplement humain des îles, où l'accent était mis sur les premières campagnes archéologiques des années 1960-70 (Lavondès, 1979 ;

1 La salle d'exposition temporaire resta ouverte jusqu'en juin 2022 poursuivant l'offre muséale pendant une partie des travaux.

Millaud & Mu-Liepmann, 2001 ; Maric & Vallée, à paraître)[2]. La deuxième salle illustrait outils, ornements, ainsi qu'objets et pratiques associés à la vie quotidienne des Polynésiens. La troisième abordait les thèmes associés au sacré, au prestige, à la hiérarchie sociale et aux pratiques religieuses. La quatrième était dévolue à la période dite des contacts avec l'Occident, d'évangélisation et de colonisation, ainsi que les évolutions économiques, sociales et culturelles jusqu'au milieu du 20e siècle (Bono et al., 2022). Enfin, à la sortie de l'exposition, un espace semi-ouvert exposait des collections monumentales associées à la navigation et aux campagnes de chasse à la baleine.

Après plusieurs décennies, le besoin de faire évoluer le discours muséographique et les infrastructures invitèrent à formuler un projet de rénovation dont la genèse prit forme au début des années 2010 (Rebeyrotte, 2013) et aboutit à un concours d'architecture en 2015. Le parcours permanent fut fermé en septembre 2018, le bâtiment démoli l'année suivante, l'espace permanent rouvrit cinq ans plus tard[3].

Te Fare Iamanaha est le seul établissement culturel entièrement dédié au patrimoine mobilier des cinq archipels de Polynésie française. Un large panel représentatif de la culture matérielle et des objets sacrés est ainsi présenté.



Illustration 1. Vue de la façade extérieure du nouveau bâtiment, côté mer. © Te Fare Iamanaha – Musée de Tahiti et des îles, 2023.

2 L'intervention des auteurs sur la muséalisation des collections archéologiques au *Fare Iamanaha* et l'histoire du lien de cette discipline avec le musée, lors du colloque international d'archéologie de 2022 à l'Université de la Polynésie française est disponible ici : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BCofLUZhdY&list=PLIkb3z3tR8DR1zDHTO-bthh7KPiapCZnv&index=41

3 https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/polynesie/tahiti/polynesie-francaise/te-fare-iamanaha-metamorphose-reussie-de-l-ex-musee-de-tahiti-et-des-iles-1371102.html

Une des questions fondamentales revisitées lors des phrases de conception du projet de nouveau parcours muséographique était celle de la transmission des savoirs. L'élaboration des contenus de médiation se devait de prendre en compte la richesse culturelle des cinq archipels, ainsi que les différents types de publics amenés à visiter l'établissement : résident·e·s polynésien·e·s et métropolitain·e·s, scolaires, et enfin visiteur·euse·s ou touristes.

À l'aune de cette rénovation et des moyens de médiation mis en œuvre, il convient ici de s'interroger sur les enjeux et possibilités offerts en termes de transmission, de valorisation et d'évolution. Un premier bilan permettra d'aborder les limites qui sont apparues, notamment à la lumière de directives muséologiques ou de problématiques autour des savoir-faire immatériels ou d'éléments de contextualisation. Tout au long de cette réflexion, cet article interrogera la réception du parcours et la renégociation du musée comme institution en quête de (re) connexion avec ses publics.

Enjeux régionaux de représentation : un musée pour une pluralité d'archipels et de publics polynésiens

Conserver au sein d'une Polynésie plurielle

L'une des préoccupations principales de cette rénovation était de pouvoir répondre aux critères internationaux de conservation muséale et de contrôle climatique : l'ancien bâtiment, construit en 1975, aurait posé à terme à la fois des problèmes de conservation et des écueils spatiaux pour l'évolution scénographique. La remise aux normes induite par le nouvel espace a permis l'accueil de 17 objets issus du patrimoine polynésien dispersé, par le biais de prêts (et un dépôt) du musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, du British Museum, et du Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology de Cambridge[4].

Cependant d'autres enjeux majeurs s'articulaient autour d'un nouveau projet scientifique dans lequel l'axe central était de valoriser l'identité culturelle des archipels tout en soulignant leurs origines communes. En effet, aujourd'hui les cinq archipels composant administrativement le territoire, se caractérisent par des langues et cultures distinctes. Par exemple, l'archipel des Tuāmotu composé de 76 atolls, comptait au début du 20e siècle sept aires linguistiques différenciées, tandis qu'aux îles Australes, chacune des cinq îles avait sa propre langue.

L'ensemble de ces régions était présent dans les collections précédemment exposées mais les objets étaient disséminés au gré des thématiques, sans répartition géographique identifiable par le public[5].

Ainsi le nouveau projet scénographique propose une organisation en neuf espaces thématiques illustrant les bases culturelles communes, cinq zones dédiées aux archipels, détaillant leurs spécificités géographiques, historiques et culturelles, une section consacrée au reste de la Polynésie orientale et occidentale, et l'espace « Contacts ».

Ces seize zones s'étendent donc, chronologiquement, de la formation géologique et premier peuplement humain, à la période des contacts avec les Occidentaux. Cette dernière section débute ainsi avec l'arrivée des premiers voyageurs occidentaux, entre la fin du 16e et la moitié du 18e siècle, et se termine aux débuts de la colonisation française, entre le milieu et la fin du 19e siècle.

4 « Ouverture de Te Fare Iamanaha, » museetahiti.pf, https://www.museetahiti.pf/evenements/ouverture-de-te-fareiamanaha/#:~:text=Inauguré%20le%2028%20février%202023,aux%20partenaires%20de%20l'établissement

5 L'ancien parcours d'exposition a été numérisé et publié sur le site internet du musée : https://www.museetahiti.pf/visite-virtuelle/

Si elle permet une déambulation libre au sein du parcours, cette répartition en « îlots » de diverses plateformes offre un écho opportun à la situation géographique de la Polynésie, ainsi qu'à la conception épistémologique océanienne archipélique articulée par l'auteur Epeli Hau'ofa en 1993 et depuis largement relayée dans la pensée polynésienne autour de l'immensité océanique au sein de la « mer » d'îles (Hau'ofa et al., 1993 ; Vercoe & Vallée, 2015).

Renouer avec l'objet

L'ensemble du corpus d'objets est moins conséquent que dans l'ancien parcours, proposant une individualité accentuée des items exposés, tout en développant, lorsque cela était jugé pertinent, des séries typologiques ou de phases de production.

En outre, l'histoire du musée est particulièrement liée à celle du développement de la discipline archéologique en Polynésie française (Maric & Vallée, 2025b, *à paraître*)[6]. Cette particularité s'illustre par ailleurs dans la visibilité des collections archéologiques avec un espace dédié au sein du parcours.

Ce que reflète cette muséographie minimaliste, où l'objet individualisé tend à être mis en valeur esthétiquement, dépasse néanmoins une considération artistique qu'un musée d'art décontextualisé et occidental pourrait proposer. En effet, cette approche est ici mise au service d'une considération égale de tous les éléments du corpus. Elle s'inscrit dans un héritage issu de l'évolution de l'approche ethnographique dans les pratiques curatoriales. Cet aspect renvoie aux influences que les pratiques développées chez nos voisins d'Aotearoa ont apporté, marquées en outre par l'évolution du curios vers le *taonga* (trésors) déjà soulignée par James Clifford à partir de 1985, grâce notamment au tournant que l'exposition itinérante *Te Māori* représenta entre 1984 et 1986 (McCarthy : 2007, 7 citant Clifford : 1985).

En quelque sorte, cette rénovation permet à *Te Fare Iamanaha* en tant qu'institution muséale de s'inscrire dans une ère nouvelle.

Les éléments ainsi exposés matérialisent d'autres aspects importants des circuits de relations que leur matérialité et leur biographie (Appadurai, 1988) sous-tendent : échanges inter-archipéliques de biens culturels et de matériaux durant les siècles précédant le Contact, ou encore échanges inter-culturels entre Polynésiens et Occidentaux aux périodes post-Contacts, sont soulignés dans les discours de médiation associés aux objets.

L'ambition du musée de (re)devenir un lieu de rencontre renvoie aussi à la métaphore de « la plage » comme évoquée dans les travaux de Greg Dening (1980 ; 1998 ; 2004) et de Margaret Jolly (2007). En effet, cette notion renvoie à l'estran[7] comme « zone de contact », une scène sur laquelle des rencontres interculturelles ont lieu. Cet interstice entre terre et mer devient une métaphore d'interaction humaine et d'échange, des façons dont les êtres humains construisent leurs mondes et des limites qu'ils bâtissent entre eux. La plage/le ri-

6 Ces dimensions sont visibles dans les présentations suivantes, disponibles en ligne ou à venir : Tamara Maric et Marine Vallée, « From excavation to contemplation: thoughts on the muzealisation of archaeological finds in French Polynesia », Colloque Au cœur du triangle Polynésien, Cirap, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme du Pacifique, Université de la Polynésie française, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BCofLUZhdY. Voir aussi Marine Vallée, « If They Could Speak… : objects embodying voyages and cross-cultural exchanges at *Te Fare Iamanaha* — Musée de Tahiti et des Îles », Australian Wooden Boat Festival, Hobart, page consultée le 8 février 2025.

7 L'estran est la zone du littoral qui est découverte à marée basse et recouverte à marée haute.

vage est donc un espace liminal d'interactions et d'échanges, de constructions imaginaires liées à la réalité géographique et au mythe littéraire. Pour la Polynésie française, la plage est d'abord un lieu de rencontre physique. La pensée de Dening sur les écrits en tant que plages peut être élargie aux musées et à leurs expositions, ces dernières pouvant correspondre à de possibles « *beach crossing* / traversées de plages » impliquant des perspectives autochtones (Vallée 2019). Nous verrons ici que certaines des dispositions prises par le *Fare Iamanaha* au sein de sa scénographie et de ses contenus de médiation le permettent. En outre, la lecture de ces nouvelles configurations curatoriales peut aussi se faire à la lumière des propos de Conal McCarthy (2007) sur l'agentivité de l'exposition et soulever l'interrogation suivante : comment permettent-elles une expérience (re)connectée aux *ta'oa faufa'a tupuna* – trésors de l'héritage culturels ?

Ces perspectives permettent également de considérer une réciprocité dans la « traversée de plages », invoquée dans les travaux de Jolly interrogeant les biais représentationnels des rencontres entre Européens et insulaires (Jolly, 2009 : 60), par des prises de décision partagées et des pratiques de conservation propres à la Polynésie française.

Médiation écrite et outils numériques : niveaux de narration, de représentation et construction collective

La médiation numérique et interactive s'articule autour d'un audioguide (quadrilingue français, tahitien, anglais, espagnol[8]), des vidéo-projections commentées par écrit ou à l'oral, des films d'animation, et des bornes numériques tactiles.

L'ensemble des contenus de médiation – soit environ 200 textes sous forme de panneaux et cartels développés et 57 supports multimédia ont été rédigés par l'équipe scientifique du musée[9] entre 2018 et 2022. Un comité scientifique de 26 spécialistes a été réuni pour les relectures des textes et l'écriture de certains autres. Les trois académies des langues tahitienne, marquisienne et pa'umotu ont été sollicitées pour relire les contenus, corriger les noms vernaculaires et statuer des graphies spécifiques à chaque langue. Cette approche était d'une part indispensable afin de viser un niveau de connaissances à jour selon les différentes spécialités scientifiques. D'autre part, et bien que la majorité de l'équipe scientifique était polynésienne, il fallait à la fois inscrire ces écrits dans une pensée consensuelle reflétant une approche polynésienne, et établir une construction partagée de la connaissance et de ses modes de transmission.

La conception de la médiation numérique a été réalisée par l'entreprise ON SITU entre 2022 et 2023 avec l'équipe scientifique du musée. Enfin, de courtes vidéos d'animation conçues en partenariat avec Lucid Dream traitent les sujets de la navigation traditionnelle, la confection de *tapa* (étoffe d'écorce battue), et des procédés anciens du tatouage.

Le premier objectif était de trouver un discours s'adressant à la fois à un public « averti », autrement dit les visiteur·euse·s locaux·les/Polynésien·e·s ou résident·e·s de longue date, et public « novice » en matière de culture polynésienne soit les visiteur·euse·s étranger·ère·s ou métropolitain·e·s.

8 L'offre en français vise principalement les visiteur·euse·s mal-ou non-voyants et les publics francophones généralement. Langue principalement parlée, le tahitien avait initialement été prévu en format oral en accès gratuit via les audioguides. Enfin, l'anglais et l'espagnol renvoient aux autres langues les plus usitées parmi les publics touristiques en Polynésie française.

9 L'équipe scientifique du musée entre 2018 et 2023, composée de Manouche Lehartel, muséologue, Tara Hiquily, chargé de collections, Vairea Tessier, documentaliste, Dr. Tamara Maric, conservatrice, Dr. Marine Vallée, assistante de conservation, Mahinatea Gatien, assistante de conservation pour l'Herbier PAP et les collections d'histoire naturelle du musée, et Miriama Bono, directrice.

La volonté de destiner le musée avant tout aux publics polynésiens s'est traduite par la mise en avant des langues polynésiennes dans les dénominations d'objets. Ainsi sur les cartels, les noms d'objets sont inscrits en premier lieu en langue vernaculaire (lorsque l'appellation existe ou a été conservée), puis traduits en français et en anglais. Une question majeure s'est posée quant à la diffusion de la langue tahitienne, le *reo tahiti*, qui est l'une des missions des services publics culturels du pays[10] : comment mettre en avant la langue tahitienne dans les espaces consacrés aux autres archipels ayant leurs propres langues ? Pour des raisons en partie scénographiques, le choix a été fait à l'époque de se limiter à la diffusion gratuite de l'audioguide en langue tahitienne.

Dans la première section dédiée à l'environnement naturel, les projections animées servent à documenter les processus géologiques de création des îles et leur cadre géographique, comprenant la faune et la flore.

Une animation vidéo projetée résume la théorie actuelle de la formation des îles volcaniques à l'entrée et un film vidéo présente des espèces emblématiques de la faune marine. Enfin, une maquette en impression 3D de l'ensemble géographique et maritime des îles de Tahiti et l'île voisine de Mo'orea est illustrée par une projection vidéo réalisée à partir des contenus SIG (systèmes d'informations géographiques – cartographies) transmis par différents services de Polynésie française[11]. Elle reprend des données climatiques, topographiques, flore, sites archéologiques et historiques, tissu urbain et démographie actuelle. L'ensemble résume ainsi l'insertion des peuplements humains anciens et modernes dans l'environnement géographique particulier de ces îles hautes volcaniques avec système récifal. Le discours évoque les grandes transformations sociopolitiques et culturelles intervenues entre le 18e et la fin du 20e siècles suite au contact avec l'Occident, à travers celles de l'organisation spatiale. Il s'attarde en particulier sur la question du choc démographique résultant du contact des populations polynésiennes avec l'Occident[12].

La deuxième zone, dédiée aux processus de peuplement de l'Océanie ayant abouti aux îles de la Polynésie orientale, présente les collections de trois sites archéologiques majeurs, associés à une carte interactive vidéo-projetée synthétisant les phases migratoires. Cette médiation numérique facilitera les mises à jour des connaissances en fonction de l'évolution, de plus en plus rapide, des découvertes archéologiques. En effet, la carte de l'ancien musée, éditée au début des années 1980, était rapidement devenue obsolète, à la fois en termes de chronologie et des évolutions géopolitiques modernes.

Dans un espace central situé entre les zones de « peuplement » et « navigation », une plateforme circulaire avec assises est dédiée à la mythologie. Pour l'heure, le mythe de création du monde par le dieu Ta'aroa de Tahiti est illustré par une projection écrite bilingue des paroles de ce chant d'après les écrits de Teuira Henry (2000)[13], accompa-

10 La langue tahitienne est notamment citée comme « élément fondamental de l'identité culturelle », article 57 de la loi organique n° 2004-192 du 27 février 2004 portant statut d'autonomie de la Polynésie française.

11 Météo France, Service de l'aménagement et de l'urbanisme, Direction de l'environnement, Direction de la culture et du patrimoine, Institut de la statistique de Polynésie française.

12 Posée à même le sol, sans paroi murale ou cimaise, cette maquette n'est pas associée à une médiation écrite qui aurait alourdi l'esthétique du dispositif. Les médiations humaines ponctuelles proposées par l'équipe de conservation développent parfois les thématiques de cette projection, néanmoins conçue pour une approche immersive autonome des visiteur·euse·s accompagnés de l'audioguide.

13 Teuira Henry, petite-fille du Révérend Orsmond lequel élabora une encyclopédie des savoirs traditionnels transcrits auprès des derniers grand-prêtres de la religion tahitienne. Elle publia cet ouvrage en 1928 en s'inspirant des notes de son aïeul et en ajoutant ses propres enquêtes, sous la direction de l'ethnologue Te Rangi Hiroa – Peter Buck, alors directeur du Bishop Museum de Hawaii.

gnée d'une lecture en langue tahitienne sur audio-guide. Cet espace interactif multimédia est également à visée évolutive puisque dans le futur des mythes associés à d'autres îles pourront y être intégrés, par sélection ou à la suite les uns après les autres, afin d'offrir une meilleure représentation des archipels. Ce projet autour des traditions orales entend intégrer les communautés dans le choix de ces contenus, soulignant ici aussi la volonté institutionnelle d'une construction collective du discours représentationnel.

D'autres animations sont utilisées dans la section dédiée au tatouage, avec une composition graphique tirée de dessins ethnographiques illustrant cette pratique telle qu'elle fut observée par les Occidentaux aux 18e et 19e siècles (Ill. 2). En écho à l'ambition de représenter les particularités des archipels polynésiens, les recherches en iconographie ont tenté de retrouver des motifs des différentes régions, au regard des connaissances actuelles du public polynésien, qui tend à confondre les motifs du *patutiki* (tatouage marquisien) (De Bergh & Ottino-Garanger, 1998 ; Handy, 1922/1971 ; Huukena, 2011, 2016 ; Cordier & Tetahiotupa, 2019 ; Huukena, 2020) avec ceux des autres archipels, souvent inconnus. L'animation vidéo spécifie que cette création visuelle est réalisée à partir de dessins ou estampes originaux, qui révèlent parfois une certaine fantaisie, subjectivité, incompréhension voire le talent limité de leurs auteurs dans leur rendu. Peu publiés, ces contenus pourraient influencer les tendances de la pratique du tatouage contemporain. De l'autre côté de la cimaise où cette animation est projetée, des collections muséales sont accompagnées d'un film d'animation détaillant les procédés du tatouage marquisien, le mieux documenté d'un point de vue ethnographique (Steinen, 2016 ; Handy, 1971 ; de Bergh & Ottino, 1998 ; Huukena, 2011, 2016).

La dernière animation vidéo projetée est une composition tirée d'illustrations diverses (à partir d'estampes d'époque ou de photographies de sites concernés), support visuel à deux récits accessibles par l'audioguide. Il s'agit de deux événements emblématiques de l'histoire des contacts avec les Occidentaux : la prophétie de Vaita annonçant l'arrivée des premiers navires européens (Henry, 2000 : 16-17), et l'autodafé des effigies sacrées à Papetoa'i en 1815, ce dernier événement étant couramment cité comme décisif dans la conversion de la population au christianisme. Ces histoires, relatées à la première personne et s'appuyant sur les descriptions historiques (Henry 1928 ; 2000), ont été conçues par l'archéologue et historienne tahitienne Dr. Hinanui Cauchois[14]. Elles créent une rupture de récit peu avant la fin du parcours scénographique, jusqu'ici à visée exclusivement ethnographique. Cette césure vise à introduire les collections illustrant la période des « Contacts » avec l'Occident : le musée souhaitait offrir une perspective plus polynésienne qu'occidentale dans le discours sur cette période complexe, en mettant l'accent sur les grands changements qui en ont résulté pour les habitants, dans leur quotidien, leur vie matérielle et spirituelle. Cette approche ancre ainsi le musée dans son identité polynésienne et offre une perspective réflexive qui s'inscrit dans les négociations représentationnelles qui renvoient aux questionnements de Dening et Jolly évoqués en *supra*.

Les bornes numériques tactiles sont un autre système interactif important. Une borne a été placée pour chaque archipel, ainsi que pour la faune et la flore, la zone polynésienne, les thèmes des musiques, danses, jeux et sports, et enfin pour la période des Contacts, de l'évangélisation et des débuts de la colonisation. Ces outils permettent le développement de différents niveaux de narration documentaire, à la fois visuels et écrits[15].

14 Dr Hinanui Cauchois occupe depuis décembre 2023 la fonction de directrice de *Te Fare Iamanaha* – Musée de Tahiti et des Îles.

15 Ils ont été réalisés avec le studio de graphisme ON SITU.



Illustration 2. Vue de l'espace d'exposition permanente rénové et de la vidéo-projection dédiée au tatouage. © Te Fare Iamanaha – Musée de Tahiti et des îles, 2023.

Ils sont appréciés du public et esthétiquement plaisants, ce que nous développerons par la suite. Ils ont nécessité des recherches importantes, avec une documentation visuelle comprenant des photographies anciennes ou récentes, des dessins et des estampes ethnographiques. Ils permettent d'une part de montrer au public des collections qui ne sont pas conservées en Polynésie mais présentes dans d'autres musées internationaux : ainsi, les douze effigies religieuses « rescapées » des autodafés de l'archipel des Gambier, ou les coiffes et les *tapa* des îles Australes[16]. D'autre part, ces supports mettent en contexte certaines collections exposées, ce qui n'était pas toujours possible dans la médiation écrite imprimée – limitée en termes de longueur de textes. Ainsi, le *tiki* marquisien est replacé dans son usage à la fois religieux et architectural, illustré par des plans et photographies de sites archéologiques, ou encore il explicite la fonction de certains objets, tel le fragment de pelle en os de tortue qui servait à creuser les grandes fosses horticoles dans les atolls des Tuāmotu. Des chronologies y sont éditées pour chaque archipel, tentant de contrebalancer une vision encore très intégrée par le grand public, de sociétés polynésiennes qualifiées de« pré-européennes », autrement dit comme « sans histoire », ou « hors du temps » (Thomas, 1998).

Enfin, des contenus historiographiques présentent les premières sources ayant servi à bâtir les connaissances ethnographiques, la plupart publiées en langue anglaise et remontant au début du 20e siècle, et rarement connues du public.

16 Les collections ainsi mises en valeur et choisies par l'équipe de conservation illustrent certains des objets les plus connus du patrimoine polynésien dispersé conservé en métropole, en Europe ou encore aux Etats-Unis ou en Australie et Aotearoa Nouvelle-Zélande, ou *a contrario* d'autres bien moins familiers des publics locaux. Plusieurs partenariats formels (Te Papa Tongarewa – National Museum of New Zealand ; Auckland Tamaki Paenga Hira – War Memorial Museum ; musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac) ou moins formels, entre ces institutions et *Te Fare Iamanaha* existent.

Les questions de médiation se prolongent dans les espaces extérieurs, où la visite peut se poursuivre par celle du parc ethnobotanique, divisé en deux espaces.

Le jardin d'Ātea (nom d'une divinité), aménagé dans le patio situé entre la salle d'exposition permanente et la salle d'exposition temporaire, conserve les plantes basses emblématiques, tandis que le jardin ethnobotanique de Hiti, parc extérieur entourant le musée et faisant face à la mer, présente les principaux arbres ainsi que l'avifaune et la faune marine observables sur site. Rénové pour la réouverture, le patio est également associé à un parcours pédagogique afin d'offrir une continuité physique et discursive au lien que nature et culture entretiennent dans la pensée polynésienne.

Premier bilan

Les premiers retours du public

La conférence d'octobre 2023, prémices de la publication du numéro spécial de la revue *ICOFOM Study* intitulé « Héritages océaniques : Muséologie des traditions insulaires », de laquelle cet article découle a permis de dresser un bilan des six premiers mois après l'ouverture du musée et de partager quelques réactions exprimées par les visiteur·euse·s par le biais de conversations à la suite des visites guidées (réalisées par la direction et l'équipe de conservation), du livre d'or et de courriels reçus.

Les aspects positifs relevés concernent la beauté de l'ensemble architectural[17], tant dans son aspect extérieur qu'intérieur. Les premier·ère·s visiteur·euse·s, résident·e·s de Polynésie et touristes de tout âge, ont été surpris de l'apparence du nouveau musée, en le qualifiant de « vrai musée », et s'exclamant généralement en le découvrant. Deux ans après cette réouverture, cette réaction est encore fréquente.

De même, la mise en valeur scénographique est saluée, les objets étant ainsi redécouverts par les publics. L'ensemble de la médiation, écrite ou digitale, et ses contenus, ainsi que celui des audioguides ont également été largement appréciés. En outre, la présence d'un audioguide en langue tahitienne, mis à disposition gratuitement a aussi été louée.

Parmi les retours moins favorables exprimés, on compte en premier lieu le positionnement des cartels d'objets à l'horizontale, à 30 cm du sol, sur les plateformes basses, rendant les textes peu visibles pour les publics d'âge plus avancé. Le nombre d'éléments exposés, diminué de 970 dans l'ancienne salle d'exposition à 520 actuellement, a aussi fait l'objet, pour certains, de regrets, tandis que d'autres ont trouvé le parcours trop dense au regard des informations proposées. Ensuite, la diminution du contenu scénographique sur l'ensemble du milieu naturel a été, parfois, regrettée. Enfin, plusieurs visiteur·euse·s ont trouvé l'architecture extérieure trop moderne. Parmi ces critiques, certaines ont été émises par des personnes nostalgiques de l'ancien parcours muséographique, dont quelques-unes étaient directement impliquées dans sa conception durant les années 1970-1980.

Des questions sont fréquemment posées par le public concernant l'absence de datation présentée des objets. Ce point fait en effet partie des lacunes scientifiques majeures du patrimoine culturel matériel de Polynésie française, où les recherches archéologiques sont à la fois récentes et très rares du fait du petit nombre de chercheurs. Dans ce contexte, les analyses sur des collections du musée ont été encore plus rares. L'absence fréquente de contexte de collecte ajoute aussi souvent à ces difficultés de datation. Cependant, avec

17 L'architecture du bâtiment a été confiée à Pierre-Jean Picart et la scénographique au Studio Gardère.

l'avancée des recherches de provenance et d'analyses scientifiques, un certain nombre de datations des collections exposées pourra être proposé ces prochaines années.

La question de la médiation pédagogique – hors scolaire – reste à être développée. L'un des reproches adressés concerne le fait que ce parcours ne corresponde pas à un musée « pour les enfants ». En effet, il manque à l'établissement des espaces de médiation qui leurs soient consacrés. Depuis l'ouverture néanmoins, des enseignants stagiaires inscrits en master MEEF-PIF Médiation Scientifique et Culture au sein de l'Institut National Supérieur du Professorat et de l'Enseignement (INSPE) ont travaillé en partenariat avec le pôle conservation sur des contenus pédagogiques pour différentes classes d'âge, qui permettront de développer cet aspect[18]. La médiation pédagogique scolaire avait été conçue en amont de la réouverture, grâce à la collaboration de la Direction générale de l'éducation et des enseignements (DGEE), dont un agent est détaché un jour par semaine afin d'assurer l'encadrement des visites scolaires.

La fréquentation

Le bilan de la fréquentation à la fin de l'année 2023 a été extrêmement positif, avec plus de 56 000 visiteur·euse·s entre mars et fin décembre – alors que l'objectif initial était une fréquentation de 30 000 visiteur·euse·s.

L'une des appréhensions de l'équipe du musée était que la nouvelle salle soit « boudée » par le public polynésien qui, auparavant, se déplaçait généralement peu dans la salle d'exposition permanente – exception faite du public scolaire. Force est de constater que ce n'est pas le cas, et bien que l'on ne dispose pas de chiffres statistiques, la simple fréquentation quotidienne montre une part de visiteur·euse·s polynésien·e·s, résident·e·s ou venant d'autres pays du Pacifique tels que Hawaii, Aotearoa Nouvelle-Zélande, 'Uvea, etc. La nouvelle salle d'exposition attire les visiteur·euse·s, y compris les tours opérateurs qui, auparavant, s'arrêtaient rarement au musée.

Le prix d'entrée est également assez attractif : 1000 CFP par personne, soit 8,40 Euros[19]. A noter que la gratuité a été mise en place d'office pour les moins de 18 ans et les étudiant·e·s – comme c'était le cas auparavant – tandis qu'en 2023, ont été inclus également les associations culturelles et les personnes titulaires de la carte « handicapé ».

Sans grande surprise, l'audioguide en tahitien, bien que gratuit (les audioguides en français, anglais et espagnols coûtent 500 CFP) n'est pas pris d'assaut. Seules les personnes âgées ou d'âge moyen y ont généralement recours, ou alors il s'agit d'une initiative pédagogique pour des groupes familiaux ou des ateliers culturels : 4% de visiteur·euse·s ont choisi la langue tahitienne, pour 75,50% en français et 19,7% en anglais.

Depuis la réouverture, la fréquentation des publics scolaires s'est aussi intensifiée. Une journée leur est d'ailleurs dédiée avec des horaires adaptés au rythme scolaire, les mardis.

Sur les premiers six mois d'ouverture, l'on dénombrait un total de près de 26 500 visiteur·euse·s, dépassant largement la fréquentation de l'ancien parcours permanent.

18 La difficulté majeure pour l'établissement reste pour l'heure l'absence de poste permanent dédié à la médiation.

19 En 2025, le prix d'un billet d'entrée au cinéma à Papeete est d'environ 1150 F CFP ; et de 1600 F CFP pour l'Écomusée Fare Natura de Mo'orea.

Près de la moitié des visiteur·euse·s sont des adultes, enfants et scolaires représentent chacun 20% de ce nombre. Les étudiant·e·s, qui bénéficient également de la gratuité d'entrée, représentent un peu moins de 10% des visiteur·euse·s. Enfin, les visites guidées bimensuelles voire hebdomadaires au cours de l'hiver austral, ont comptabilisé près de 400 visiteur·euse·s sur ces premiers six mois.

Type d'entrée	Nombre visiteur·euse·s	%
Total	*54 486*	
Exposition permanente (SEP)	*33 332*	*61,1*
SEP audioguides	*6 358*	*19*
Exposition temporaire	*7 133*	*13*
Scolaires	*4 376*	*13,1*
Tours opérateurs	*3 613*	*10,8*
Manifestations	*8 868*	*16,2*

Perspectives de développement

Ce premier bilan de la réouverture du parcours permanent rénové apparaît donc plutôt positif, tout en mettant en lumière diverses interrogations et perspectives.

La première concerne la demande formulée par le nouveau gouvernement de la Polynésie française, mis en place à la suite des élections territoriales de 2023, de faire traduire la médiation écrite en langue tahitienne. La phase initiale d'implémentation de ce projet, comprenant les principaux panneaux de textes a été finalisée en janvier 2025, et pourrait à terme être suivie par la traduction des cartels, ainsi que des contenus numériques.

En parallèle, le musée s'inscrivant dans la préservation et la promotion des langues polynésiennes, il poursuivra la collaboration avec les académies des langues dont certaines sont aujourd'hui en péril, dans le cadre de l'évolution des dispositifs multimédias.

Le renouvellement des outils pédagogiques pour les visites scolaires, conçus avant l'ouverture du musée s'inscrit également dans les problématiques à traiter.

Enfin, parmi les projets futurs de l'établissement figurent les parcours adaptés aux « publics empêchés » et en particulier malvoyants. Des premières approches de visites de jeunes polyhandicapés et leurs accompagnant·e·s ont été fructueuses.

La réouverture de l'espace d'exposition permanente de la principale institution muséale de Polynésie française a certainement renouvelé l'intérêt des publics, locaux et internationaux, pour cet établissement. Au cœur de la refonte de ce programme muséographique, la représentation des cinq archipels qui composent la Polynésie française offre un discours où spécificités et traits communs s'équilibrent.

L'intensification des visites scolaires, qui constituaient auparavant les publics les plus présents dans les chiffres de fréquentation, n'a pas été l'unique effet de développement : l'ensemble des publics, adultes, enfants, locaux et internationaux ont largement redécouvert un engouement pour *Te Fare Iamanaha*. Les différents niveaux de narration, à l'aide d'outils numérique ont prouvé une attractivité grandissante auprès de toutes les tranches d'âge.

Fort de son succès, le musée demeure néanmoins conscient des évolutions qu'il se doit de poursuivre, en termes de publics empêchés et en médiation spécialisée, dans l'immédiat, ainsi que dans la représentation des collections patrimoniales qu'il conserve, écho d'une identité culturelle vive qui ne s'est pas, comme c'est le cas dans ce nouveau parcours permanent, arrêtée aux portes de la colonisation. Un projet d'extension muséographique est ainsi à l'étude.

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Part III:
Intergenerational Transmission and Island Ecologies

Tides of change: Youth, museums and heritage in the climate emergency

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Abstract

This paper explores how youth engagement with heritage in small island communities can advance climate justice through participatory museology. Drawing on the Shared Island Stories project connecting Barbados and Scotland's Outer Hebrides, it demonstrates how transnational exchanges and intergenerational knowledge-sharing empower young people as climate changemakers. Through critical pedagogy, co-curation and community-led practices, museums become active sites of resilience, challenging colonial legacies and fostering sustainable futures. The paper highlights the transformative potential of youth-led initiatives in reshaping museum roles — from custodians of history to catalysts for environmental and social justice in climate-vulnerable regions.

Keywords: youth, climate, decolonisation, Barbados, Scotland

Résumé

Les marées du changement : Jeunesse, musées et patrimoine face à l'urgence climatique. Cet article explore comment l'engagement des jeunes avec le patrimoine dans les communautés insulaires peut promouvoir la justice climatique par une muséologie participative. S'appuyant sur le projet Shared Island Stories reliant la Barbade et les Hébrides extérieures en Écosse, il montre comment les échanges transnationaux et la transmission intergénérationnelle des savoirs permettent aux jeunes de devenir des acteurs du changement climatique. Grâce à une pédagogie critique, à la co-curation et à des pratiques dirigées par les communautés, les musées deviennent des lieux actifs de résilience, remettant en question les héritages coloniaux et favorisant des avenirs durables. L'article met en lumière le potentiel transformateur des initiatives menées par les jeunes pour redéfinir le rôle des musées – de gardiens du passé à catalyseurs de justice sociale et environnementale dans des régions vulnérables au climat.

Mots-clés: jeunesse, climat, décolonisation, Barbade, Écosse

The time for action is now. As the climate emergency intensifies, young people around the world are rising up, demanding urgent change. This unprecedented mobilisation of youth-led movements has become a powerful tidal wave of force, pressuring governments and society to address the existential threat of climate change. Many small island states that are no longer classified as developing, such as Barbados, remain climate-marginalised and vulnerable, and the critical concern is the future of their environment and the planet. Many islands, including those in the Caribbean and the Pacific as well as coastal and island communities such as the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, are disproportionately impacted by the effects of the planet's ongoing climate crisis – they are all too often underrepresented (Cunningham, 2019; Kelman, 2014, 2018).

This perspective does not diminish the agency of young people but instead acknowledges their essential role in safeguarding the heritage embedded in their natural island surroundings. With access to digital resources and global networks, young people today are technologically adept, politically aware and acutely conscious of the fragile ecosystems they stand to inherit. Given the right opportunities, institutional support and resources, they are well-equipped to lead public awareness efforts, advocate for meaningful change and drive mitigation strategies to protect their collective future. In many cases, their understanding of the climate crisis surpasses that of adults, positioning them as young changemakers in shaping sustainable and resilient island communities.

Within this reality, museums and, by extension, museology must develop frameworks that are relevant, sustainable and genuinely beneficial to the context. This requires a fundamental shift in museum policy and critical practice to ensure that museums serve as safe and active spaces of engagement and advocacy, supporting young people as they safeguard history, heritage and cultural patrimony (Madgin et al., 2023). The role of museums in this context is not simply to preserve but to enable, equipping youth with the knowledge, skills and networks necessary to lead climate action within their communities (Earl et al., 2017).

This paper argues that the intergenerational transmission of heritage knowledge in small island contexts is a crucial but underexplored strategy in youth-led climate action. Drawing on empirical evidence from the *Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future* research project, we analyse how museums can act as sites of both memory and mobilisation for youth-focused climate action.

Shared Island Stories Between Scotland and the Caribbean

The European Research Council (ERC) selected and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funded *Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future* research project has placed young people at the forefront of its research into the future relationship between Scotland and the Caribbean.[1] Primarily through a transformative transnational youth exchange between Barbados and the island communities of the Outer Hebrides in Scotland, the project seeks to answer in what ways the intergenerational

1 *Shared Island Stories between Scotland and the Caribbean: Past, Present, Future* is a five-year research project coordinated by the School of Art History at the University of St Andrews. See: https://sharedislandstories.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk

transmission of Indigenous and traditional knowledge is brought to debates on climate justice, especially as they relate to the role of young people. How can the intergenerational transmission of knowledge from older people to young people be best valued as a resource for preserving memories of environmental and cultural change?

The *Future* aspect of the project has facilitated youth-based workshops in collaboration with the Barbados Museum & Historical Society (BMHS), Barbados Community College (BCC) and the community-led West Harris Trust on the Isle of Harris, Scotland, as well as collaborations with the Outer Hebrides Heritage Forum. Workshops have featured numerous invited speakers, community leaders and knowledge holders. Young people involved seek to explore the role of community heritage in sustainability, co-author a youth-focused cultural heritage resource toolkit and participate in two in-person exchanges reflecting on the shared stories between Barbados and Scotland to debate and discuss solutions to the shared challenges of the present day and future.



Figure 1: Young people participating in the first transnational youth exchange visit to Barbados, 2023 © University of St Andrews.

To facilitate this research within the context of the past, present and future, the University of St Andrews collaborated with the BMHS, establishing a collaborative framework that empowers young people through interdisciplinary inquiry. The project engages with key themes drawn from history, heritage studies, sustainable development, art history and memory studies, asking:

- Which collections from the islands tell unfinished stories of empire?
- What is the role of heritage communities in sustainable development?
- How can island community museums collaborate with NGOs, policymakers, and local organisations to advance climate action?
- How can health and well-being be understood in relation to community heritage, traditional ecological knowledge, and island life?
- What insights does this new knowledge contribute to climate justice debates, particularly regarding the role of youth?

This partnership recognises that sustainable futures depend on empowering young people to be both custodians of their heritage and active participants in addressing climate change.

Critical and philosophical underpinnings

Through a critical pedagogy approach, the anticipated outcomes of the Barbados-Scotland transnational exchange include enhancing the participating young people's social, digital and oral history skills. By engaging in reflections on the climate emergency, the project aims to empower these young changemakers to become active contributors to solutions and adaptations within their local communities. This approach aligns with respective national education strategies in Barbados and Scotland and builds on the evidence of the importance of these skills for youth empowerment and community engagement (Shor, 2012). Crucially, the importance of engaging young people in critical analysis of social, political and environmental issues will foster them to become "Youth Ambassadors" for cultural heritage and climate change in their respective schools, community groups, countries, and internationally through the conference (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2001).

Bem Wallace, a young person participating from Barbados, reflects on his experience in an internal report of the project:

> we've investigated the shared problems of both nations that are of increasing concern to the youth today, such as coastal erosion through rising sea levels; storm intensification due to climate change; economic difficulties, depopulation and inappropriate tourism development. (qtd. in Brown, 2024, p. 1)

Trouillot (2015) outlines that analysing the entanglement of silence and history is particularly relevant to museum practitioners working with histories shaped by forced migration, colonialism, and environmental vulnerability, particularly pertinent within the context of this Caribbean and Scotland research. His work highlights how dominant historical narratives have been constructed through processes of exclusion, rendering marginalised perspectives invisible. For museums engaging with these histories, the challenge is not only to present facts but also to critically examine the structures that have shaped how histories are told. For *Shared Island Stories*, young people and community knowledge holders have been key in ensuring authentic representation of historical phenomena associated with colonial legacies and confronting the enduring power imbalances embedded in historical interpretation.

Migration, as both a forced and voluntary experience, has been central to the histories of the Caribbean and Scotland. The deliberate separation from cultural roots, the imposition of colonial legal and governance systems and the entrenched binaries of empire, where the colonial centre dictated the narratives of the periphery, created lasting distortions in historical representation. History is not only what happened but also what is remembered and how it is told (Trouillot, 2015). Museums play a critical role in redressing these imbalances by shifting from passive custodians of colonial archives to active agents of historical justice (Aarons et al., 2022).

A crucial part of this redress is the amplification of previously untold stories that disrupt dominant historical narratives originating from former colonial centres. Trouillot's critique of power dynamics in historiography echoes earlier works by Frantz Fanon (1965, 1991) and C. L. R. James (1963), who identified the duality of existence imposed on colonised peoples as both marginalising and psychologically oppressive. These scholars argue that the continued mediation of history through Eurocentric frameworks perpetuates

historical silences. By acknowledging and addressing these systemic imbalances, museums can foster a more equitable representation of history that empowers local communities rather than reinforcing their marginalisation.

Through projects such as *Shared Island Stories*, the museum sector has an opportunity to move beyond its traditional role and become a catalyst for social and environmental justice. By engaging youth in critical dialogue, sharing untold stories to disrupt dominant narratives, fostering intergenerational knowledge exchange and integrating local and Indigenous perspectives, museums can help shape a future where heritage is not only preserved but also mobilised for sustainable development and climate action.

The outcomes of the youth in-person visits and participation within the transnational youth exchange programme will inform the co-development of a youth-focused toolkit. This resource, created by young people for young people, aims to catalyse robust debate and discussions among coastal and island-based youth. The ultimate goal of this initiative is to empower other young people to take tangible action within their respective communities, addressing shared climate-related challenges. By providing a platform for dialogue and empowerment, the youth-focused toolkit aspires to inspire and mobilise young people to become other young changemakers in addressing the pressing climate emergency challenges facing their local contexts.

Scotland's islands, much like those in the Caribbean, have a complex and often difficult relationship with the legacy of colonialism. Both regions share histories shaped by imperial expansion, resource extraction, and forced migration, resulting in long-term socio-economic and environmental consequences. The legacies of empire continue to shape contemporary struggles, from climate vulnerability and economic dependency to cultural marginalisation and contested heritage narratives. For instance, particularly in the Hebrides, the suppression of the Scottish Gaelic language, customs and traditional knowledge was reinforced through British Government policies, including the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act, which prohibited Scottish Gaelic in schools, contributing to language decline and cultural erosion (Withers, 2021).

The environmental, social and economic challenges these island communities face today are inextricably linked to the extractive histories of empire, which reshaped their landscapes, economies and cultural identities. In the Caribbean, British colonial rule facilitated the large-scale transformation of land for plantation economies, driven by the exploitation of enslaved peoples (Beckles, 2016). Similarly, Scotland's islands experienced the consequences of colonial economic structures, notably through the Highland Clearances where crofting communities were forcibly evicted to make way for more profitable sheep farming, leading to mass emigration and displacement (Devine, 2018). These colonial processes fundamentally altered land ownership patterns and disrupted traditional ways of life, leaving enduring wounds across both regions.

Today both regions grapple with climate change-related threats, including rising sea levels, intensified storms, coastal erosion, and loss of biodiversity. Scotland's Outer Hebrides, for instance, are experiencing accelerated coastal erosion due to storm surges and rising sea levels, threatening archaeological sites and traditional crofts (Gomez et al., 2014). Similarly, Caribbean islands such as Barbados face increasing vulnerabilities to hurricanes and extreme weather events, exacerbated by historical land mismanagement and contemporary urban development (Pelling & Uitto, 2001). These environmental challenges

underscore the urgent need for community-led conservation efforts integrating Indigenous and local knowledge systems into sustainable heritage management strategies.

For the young people participating in Scotland, the *Shared Island Stories* project provided a safe space to scrutinise Scotland's role within the empire, not only as a colonial power within the United Kingdom but also as a region that experienced cultural suppression, economic hardship, and forced emigration. The connections between Scottish and Caribbean histories are evident in the forced migration of Scots to the Caribbean both as indentured servants in the 17th century and later as plantation overseers and owners (Mullen, 2021). The role of Scots in shaping the Caribbean economy through institutions like the Glasgow-based West Indies merchants highlights the entangled nature of these histories (Devine, 2015).

Recognising these shared histories allows for a more nuanced understanding of colonial legacies and their ongoing impact on cultural identity and resilience in island communities. The project fosters a transnational dialogue where youth can reclaim and reinterpret their heritage, challenging dominant narratives and co-developing new models of cultural preservation and climate adaptation. By placing young people at the heart of these discussions, the project encourages them to critically engage with their histories while developing innovative solutions for sustainable futures.

In order to create an environment that allows for the exploration and achievement of the research goals, it was necessary to define a framework to create a safe space for young people to engage critically with their past, present and future whilst feeling empowered and supported. Therefore, the following were acknowledged as guiding principles for the project:

> **Constructive Learning**: Encouraging students to take an active role in directing their own participation in the research fosters deeper engagement, enhances knowledge retention and ensures that the project remains relevant to both participants and their peers.[2]
>
> **Community of Practice**: Aligning with contemporary museology, the project embodies the aim of integrating community voices, especially youth voices, into decision-making processes. Museums must not simply serve communities but work collaboratively with them, ensuring inclusivity, multivocality, and shared authority in shaping narratives (Simon, 2010; Janes & Sandell, 2019).[3]

2 The constructivist theory is based around the idea that learners are active participants in their learning journey; knowledge is constructed based on experiences. As events occur, each person reflects on their experience and incorporates the new ideas with their prior knowledge. Learners develop schemas to organize acquired knowledge. This model was entrenched in learning theories by Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Gagne, and Bruner. The theory of constructivist learning is vital to understanding how students learn. The idea that students actively construct knowledge is central to constructivism. Students add (or build) their new experiences on top of their current foundation of understanding. As Woolfolk (1993) stated, "learning is active mental work, not passive reception of teaching" (p. 485).

3 In developing our strategic and operational model, considerations of a community of curatorial practice were embedded within the project framework. In keeping with the evolving paradigm of museums as responsible social actors as they seek to better engage with community concerns and global challenges, this model is intended to provide new opportunities for the Caribbean region's museums and communities to co-curate previously unarticulated national and regional narratives. These experiences of working together to establish content, and to share images and artefacts, allowed for a community of curatorial practice approach. This curatorial framework, originally developed by Natalie McGuire (2015), is derived from the Lave & Wenger (1991) concept of a community of practice, which speaks to a social theory of learning through "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98).

Community Co-curation: Young people were encouraged to contribute freely to curate project outputs through an open and respectful process. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, participants explore how human histories are made tangible and relevant in the present (Hall & McGuire-Batson, 2020).

The Socially Responsible and Responsive Museum: In a 21st-century context, particularly within climate-vulnerable island contexts, museums cannot remain passive bystanders of history. They must function as active social spaces that address the needs of their communities, particularly for underrepresented and vulnerable groups (Simon, 2010).

Community Activism (**Inclusiveness, Multivocality**): Most importantly, it is necessary to ensure that support is in place to encourage, enable and promote the voices of the young people so that the project maintains its momentum and sustainability beyond the scope of the workshops. It is not enough to merely provide the tools or even assist with developing the toolkits; the goal is that the organisations would continue to support the work of the young people beyond the boundaries of the project and provide them with a safe space of reflection, development and continued capacity building.

This approach is fundamental in decolonising Euro-centric understandings of museums and promoting polyvocal perspectives that amplify the diverse narratives and experiences of underrepresented and marginalised communities (Onciul et al., 2017).

Developing a learning model

This section explores how these project activities illuminate youth engagement through the lens of participatory museology. The youth exchange's learning approach was structured around a series of key thematic areas reflecting the shared historical, environmental and socio-political challenges island communities face. These themes provided a framework for discussion, research and collaboration: [4]

1. Changing landscapes and the environment;
2. The interaction between coastlines and communities;
3. The impact of World Heritage designations and other forms of heritage recognition on the communities which hold them;
4. The legacies of colonialism on island communities within the Caribbean and Scottish Hebridean contexts; and
5. the benefits and costs of regional integration across "national" boundaries for communities within those regional groupings.[5]

Young people were encouraged to explore these themes within their own contexts, examining long-term effects on their communities while engaging in critical analysis and discussion with their peers. Rather than receiving uniform learning materials, participants were empowered to explore topics independently, fostering a broader and more inclusive range of perspectives. This pedagogical model promoted equity by accommodating

4 The full outline with facilitators' notes included is provided in Appendix 1.

5 National here is defined as "national identity" rather than political demarcations of nations – therefore Scottish rather than from the United Kingdom.

diverse learning styles, age groups, and gender perspectives. The selection process for programme participation prioritised accessibility, requiring parental consent, valid travel documentation and a demonstrated interest in history, heritage, climate action and Scottish Gaelic (only in Scotland). Instead of traditional interviews, applicants submitted short video introductions, reflecting contemporary digital communication practices and ensuring a more comfortable, youth-friendly and inclusive application process.



Figure 2. Young person participating in a flora and fauna workshop at the Temple Collective, Isle of Harris, 2024. © University of St Andrews.

Shortlisted young people engaged in a series of interactive workshops, field visits and collaborative discussions designed to immerse them in local heritage and environmental challenges. Assignments were structured flexibly, accommodating a range of learning styles: written reflections, artistic responses and community projects allowed participants to express their findings in ways that aligned with their strengths and interests. This approach built capacity and reinforced peer collaboration, ensuring that the young people could support and learn from one another.

The project, therefore, found ways to encourage and recognise youth climate action during the workshop period. Activities completed and/or developed by the young people included completion of nominations to the UNESCO Geoheritage Survey of Caribbean States to nominate sites of significance, initiating postgraduate research on the adaptive use of sargassum seaweed, developing a community activity to encourage people to come together to find ways to repurpose household items either for art or new functions and raising public awareness about sustainable living whilst raising funds to support climate action initiatives. In Scotland, young people were encouraged to document at-risk intangible cultural heritage practices unique to the Outer Hebrides, including tweed weaving, Scottish Gaelic language and subsistence farming known as crofting.

Project observations/outcomes

This section considers how the challenges encountered during implementation offer broader insights for climate-focused museological practice. Young people have demonstrated significant time investment, going beyond the original expected voluntary hours contribution, geared toward making a meaningful, sustainable difference. They have also continued to work with BMHS to seek new ways to mitigate climate vulnerability and encourage sustainable living. The project has thus far supported the development of young changemakers who have expressed appreciation for the programme's offerings.



Strengthened Cultural Identity: Students expressed a heightened connection to their cultural heritage, facilitated by the project's approach to examining history and heritage from a deeply personal perspective.

Expanded Historical and Heritage Awareness: Participants gained a more nuanced understanding of Caribbean and Scottish histories, recognising history as an evolving and contested field rather than a static record of events.

Sustained Engagement with Heritage and Climate Action: Many participants have continued to engage in heritage-related programmes, including a summer theatre internship and practicum at the museum. This extension of the partnership has reinforced their commitment to climate action and heritage preservation.

Figure 3. Facilitators and young people group photo on the Isle of Harris, 2024. © University of St Andrews.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to museological global debates by demonstrating how youth-led, transnational heritage initiatives can advance decolonial and climate-responsive practices within museum spaces.

The *Shared Island Stories* project has demonstrated the transformative power of youth engagement in addressing the intersecting challenges of heritage preservation and climate action. The collaboration between young people in Barbados and Scotland has facilitated an exchange of ideas, revealing the entangled histories of both island contexts while fostering innovative, locally driven solutions for a shared sustainable future. This aligns with existing research on youth agency in climate action, highlighting young people's essential role in advocating for environmental sustainability and driving policy change (Haynes & Tanner, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2018).

A critical long-term impact of the project, beyond the immediate empowerment of its participants, is the anticipated development of a youth-focused cultural heritage resource toolkit. Designed *for* young people *by* young people, particularly in climate-vulnerable communities, this toolkit will serve as a model for other regions to establish their own workshop series, transnational exchange programmes, or museum hubs dedicated to climate action and heritage preservation. Research indicates that when young people are given access to meaningful participation and decision-making structures, they are more likely to develop lasting commitments to civic engagement and sustainability.

In response to the success of the project and the evident need for sustained institutional support, the BMHS has committed to establishing a climate action hub. This initiative will provide tangible, long-term benefits by offering young people continued access to mentorship, resources, and a structured environment for climate activism. Such museum-led initiatives resonate with the broader movement towards climate-conscious museology, which advocates for museums to move beyond preservation and actively contribute to environmental and social justice (McGhie, 2019). The museum's climate action hub will ensure that the momentum generated by *Shared Island Stories* extends beyond the project's initial framework, fostering a new generation of youth leaders dedicated to heritage protection and climate resilience with an island focus.

Shared Island Stories stands as a testament to the evolving role of museums as spaces of learning, activism, and community engagement. By positioning young people at the heart of climate action and heritage preservation, museums can serve as catalysts for sustainable change, ensuring that island communities' histories, cultures, and environments are safeguarded and actively mobilised for a just and resilient future. This aligns with calls for museums to become more inclusive and responsive institutions that amplify diverse voices and empower communities in the face of the climate emergency (Janes & Sandell, 2019; Sandell, 2016).

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APPENDIX 1

SEMINAR WORKSHOP OUTLINES

Proposed Experiential Learning Activities for the Scotland (Harris Island) and Barbados Youth

The below table is a brief outline for suggested activities and/or workshops which was developed to provide learning experiences for the student groups to collaborate in constructive learning and exploratory exercises with the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a guiding or overarching theme:

Activity/Workshop	Action Items	SDGs
Landscape and Environment Interactive Tour of the Scotland District in Barbados and of a similar site in Harris Island followed by an online session where students compare and discuss their experiences with guidance from the facilitators.	Research and observe the landscape and note the following: ● How it is similar to or differs from Harris Island in terms of: ○ geography, ○ climate vulnerability, ○ sustainable land practice, ○ relationship between people and the land ***Assignment**: Choose one (or more) of the highlighted SDGs and create a short documentary on how the two islands are currently managing (or not) the challenges associated with these goals and what young people can do to help.*	

Activity/Workshop	Action Items	SDGs
1. *Under the Sea: Coasts and Communities* A look at the marine life around the islands and how it is affected by land-based activity-from pollution to oil drilling to overfishing etc. and how the sea in turn affects land-based life-webinar	Discussion will look at the history each island shares with the sea which surrounds it and how the land and people have shaped one another. We will also discuss the challenges associated with the relevant SDGs ***Assignment**: Each student will design a creative visual art piece which shows our relationship to the sea (can be art, theatre, film, poetry, sculpture, mixed media, etc.) Anything that can be photographed or filmed is eligible …* ***Facilitators Notes:** Gives the participant the freedom to express their own artist style, so either physical art, performance,-fantastic, this will be particularly good for a potential virtual exhibition*	
The Real HBG - Historic Bridgetown and Its Garrison Unmasked Interactive exercise in Historic Bridgetown and Its Garrison (HBG) Workshop/webinar and mapping exercise–with discussion of feudal sites in Harris and any of the six Scottish world heritage properties or two pending nominations for comparison	Introduction to the context of HBG as: • a World Heritage Property • a centre of the triangular trade/transatlantic slave trade • an economic focal point for the monarchy and the process of colonisation Discussion on the Property today as: • the fiscal economic political centre of Barbados • a heritage tourism centre • a centre for social and political protest and activism ***Assignment**: After the webinar introduction each student will choose a particular aspect of our history to complete an interactive map of related sites which explain the way how colonial history has shaped the island as they know it and how we can decolonialise the spaces we now inhabit especially in relation to the values represented by the SDGs. At the end of the exercise, we will merge the maps* ***Facilitators Notes:** Calanais Standing Stones on Lewis Island used for comparison [https://www.visitscotland.com/info/see-do/calanais-standing-stones-and-visitor-centre-p253191]*	

Activity/Workshop	Action Items	SDGs
The Industrial Heritage of Barbados: The Story of Sugar and Rum Field trip to some of the sites in the serial nomination and a webinar with short videos on newton and some of the other sites with exploration of feudal sites in Harris for comparison	Look at how the histories of Barbados and Scotland are tied together around the history of the exploitation of people and agricultural production particularly sugar and rum and tourism ***Assignment**: Each student will write a creative piece which explores our long term relationship with colonialism and the effects of living in a post-colonial society (can be any form of text either fictional or non-fictional but must use language as the mode of exploration) pieces will be uploaded anonymously for comments from the group…and then discussed in a feedback session* ***Facilitators Notes: F**or Scotland, Harris Tweed, Gin, Seaweed, farming, leading into the highland clearances where many Scots were forced to flee or become indentured servants across the Caribbean due to debts-introducing the Barbados tartan as well, and the sargassum seaweed issue, so lots of commonalities there*	
One Love: Shared Future Partnering for improved quality of life for all Webinar	A critical look at the Political Economic Partnerships and Unions in which both Islands have participated and the costs and benefits of the associations. Each student must prepare an international partnership in which their country has been involved in the past of is still currently involved in and present briefly on the organisation's history and benefits and disadvantages of membership for their island concluding with a recommendation for or against continued or reinstated membership –in the context of all the other SDGs especially four and five ***Facilitators Notes:** For Scotland EU/Brexit and Scottish Independence*	

Reactivating traditional environmental knowledge to increase plant awareness

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) and plant awareness disparity, or "plant blindness," in the context of the Cayman Islands. It examines how TEK may be reactivated to enhance nature-connectedness and pro-environmental behaviours. Drawing from archival and ethnographic research, the study suggests that bioculturally grounded interventions can restore human-plant relationships. It proposes implications for museology in promoting biocultural diversity and sustainability, offering insights into addressing biodiversity loss and climate change through localized, culturally relevant methods rooted in the revitalization of TEK.

Keywords: plant awareness, traditional environmental knowledge, Cayman Islands, biocultural diversity

Résumé

Réactivation des savoirs environnementaux traditionnels pour renforcer la conscience des plantes. Cet article examine le lien entre les savoirs environnementaux traditionnels (SET) et le déficit de conscience des plantes, ou « cécité végétale », dans le contexte des îles Caïmans. Il explore comment la réactivation des SET peut renforcer la connexion à la nature et favoriser des comportements écoresponsables. À partir de recherches archivistiques et ethnographiques, l'étude propose des interventions bioculturelles pour restaurer les relations humains-plantes. Elle suggère également des pistes muséologiques pour promouvoir la diversité bioculturelle et la durabilité. Cette recherche propose des approches culturellement ancrées pour répondre aux défis de la perte de biodiversité et du changement climatique.

Mots-clés : conscience des plantes, savoirs environnementaux traditionnels, îles Caïmans, diversité bioculturelle

Around the world, the growing distance between people and plants has coincided with a global increase in "plant awareness disparity" or "plant blindness" – the inability to notice, understand and appreciate the plants in one's own environment. Plants make up the majority of life on Earth and are foundational to life-giving and sustaining processes (Jose et al., 2019). It is not possible to facilitate sustainable development, conserve biological diversity, or build resiliency to climate change without increasing awareness, understanding, and appreciation of plants (Sanders, 2019). This article provides an overview of ongoing research in the Cayman Islands exploring the relationship between traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) and plant (non)awareness, the interlinkages between plant awareness, nature-connectedness and sustainable behaviours, and the potential role of TEK in efforts to increase plant awareness with implications for biocultural heritage and museology.

The Caymanian context

Until recently, the Cayman Islands were considered "among the most isolated, unknown, and unchanging countries in the British Empire" (Craton, 2003, p.1). Initially dubbed "Las Tortugas", the tiny archipelago defied permanent human settlement until the 18th century. The so-called "Drake Manuscript" produced in the 1590s describes islands upon which "nobody lives because there is no fresh water and also because the soil does not produce any goods except a great number of caymans and turtles which live in the sea as well as the land" (*Histoire Naturelle*, 1996, p. 216). In the centuries that followed, the islands were settled by a diverse mix of sailors, soldiers, enslaved people, planters, and privateers (Sainsbury, 1889).

Distanced from the mainland and overlooked by the motherland, the Caymanian people cultivated a unique repository of traditional environmental knowledge (TEK), which was essential to human survival on the islands well into the 20th century. As children, Caymanians played with "gigs" made from cherry (*Myrcianthes fragrans*) and were disciplined with the sharp sting of a strawberry switch (*Eugenia axillaris*). They learned not to shelter beneath the shade of the toxic manchineel tree (*Hippomane mancinella*) and to beware the itch of maiden plum (*Comocladia dentata*). They cured their ills with plants like headache bush (*Morisonia cynophallophora*) and tea banker (*Pectis caymanensis*). They roofed their houses with silver thatch (*Coccothrinax proctorii*) and framed their walls with sturdy ironwood (*Chionanthus caymanensis*). They built lithe catboats and ocean-going schooners from mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*) and Spanish elm (*Cordia gerascanthus*). Indeed, for the majority of our history, circumstance necessitated that Caymanians be aware of the plants around them and knowledgeable about their unique attributes and uses. As one elderly Caymanian put it in an archival interview: "We lived from the ocean, and the land. That's how we survived. That's how we came to where we is" (Ebanks, 1990). In the space of approximately 60 years, however, the Cayman Islands has experienced a rapid and significant socio-economic, geopolitical, and technological transformation. The country's population has grown by approximately 739% since the 1960s (ESO, 2022), and residents now rely almost exclusively on imported food, fuel and goods (ESO, 2023).



Figure 1. The Rankine Heritage House at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park highlights Caymanian TEK through the plants presented in the traditional sand yard, including Silver Thatch in the foreground.
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Traditional environmental knowledge (TEK)

Although there is no universally accepted definition of TEK (Johnson, 1992), TEK is generally understood to comprise the ways in which knowledge, beliefs, traditions, practices, institutions, and worldviews are developed and sustained through repeated encounters with the natural environment by a specific people in a specific place (e.g., Gomez-Baggethun et al., 2013; Kimmerer, 2002). Once viewed as little more than a folkloric vestige of bygone eras (Gomez-Baggethun et al., 2013), TEK is increasingly understood in terms that reject binary "original plentitude and subsequent loss" understandings of cultural knowledge (Rigney, 2005) and recognised as dynamic, adaptive, communal, experiential and anti-essentialist (Reid, 2014). The co-production that is central to the composition and transmission of TEK within and between generations contributes to both its "socio-cultural importance" (Ruddle, 2000, p. 277) and its credibility and validity as a source of information as to "how humans should live and prosper in particular environments" (Chambers & Gillespie, 2001, p.235). Despite the long-standing power imbalance between traditional and scientific ways of knowing nature, TEK is steadily acknowledged across a variety of fields, disciplines and sectors for its potential to offer "not only important biological insights but a cultural framework for environmental problem solving that incorporates human values" (Kimmerer, 2002, p. 434). TEK is both distinct from and complementary to scientific ways of knowing nature; these ways of knowing are not hierarchical to one another, nor are they inherently oppositional. While both have inherent limitations, both offer important opportunities to better understand, appreciate and safeguard our natural world (Johnson, 1992). Indeed, the scientific community's initial recognition of TEK's potential for detecting, understanding and responding to environmental change occurred in parallel with a growing acknowledgement of the role of human activity in driving biodiversity loss and climate change. Further, the loss and degradation of biological diversity is interconnected with and correlates to the loss and degradation of cultural diversity (see Aswani et al., 2018; ISE, 1988).

Up until recently in the Cayman Islands' history, an intimate knowledge of the islands' flora was essential for human survival. Plants were woven into the social fabric, underpinning every aspect of daily life. As one elderly Caymanian explained in an archival interview: "Everything was bush, bush, bush in those days. Even in washing clothes they had special bushes they washed clothes with" (Ebanks, 1988). But times have changed. The swift and sweeping pace of socioeconomic development in the Cayman Islands has been coupled with significant land-use conversion. Over 43% of land in the Cayman Islands is now human modified (ESO, 2024), which includes a loss of more than 70% of the mangroves on the west side of Grand Cayman since 1976 (OAG, 2023). Mirroring trends seen in traditional communities around the world, as Caymanians' direct reliance on the natural world has lessened, there has been a concurrent decrease in human awareness, understanding and appreciation of plants, interrupting the culturally based processes that produce and sustain TEK (Aswani et al., 2018). Concurrently, there has been a global increase in "plant blindness" (Wandersee & Schussler, 1999) – the inability to notice, understand and appreciate the plants in one's own environment (Wandersee & Schussler, 2001).

Plant blindness

Despite the prevalence of plants and their importance to sustaining planetary processes, humans are susceptible to plant blindness, or what later authors have termed "plant awareness disparity" (Parsley, 2020). Though linked to human physiology, by which human attention is captured differently by plants (Balas & Momsen, 2014), there is growing consensus within the literature that the tendency to overlook plants is neither innate nor inevitable and that cultural factors play a decisive role in whether persons are aware of plants (Balding & Williams, 2016; Stagg & Dillon, 2022). Since the initial development of the theory of plant blindness, a small but growing body of research has emerged to explore its components (Parsley et al., 2022), the biological and cultural bases of plant blindness (e.g., Achurra, 2022; Balas & Momsen, 2014; Balding & Williams, 2016; Stagg & Dillon, 2022), and methodologies for increasing plant awareness (e.g. Hiatt et al., 2021; Fančovičová & Prokop, 2011; Pany & Heidinger, 2015 and 2017; Pany et al., 2019). While several studies have suggested focusing on useful and/or culturally significant plants as a method for increasing plant awareness (e.g. Borsos et al., 2021; Cooper, 2008; Zarger & Stepp, 2004), the relationship between a person's traditional knowledge and how they perceive, understand and value plants has not been substantively explored. Though circumstance necessitated that Caymanians be aware of the plants around them and knowledgeable about their unique attributes and uses, homogenising forces have significantly impacted Caymanians' direct reliance on, access to and cultural relationship with the living environment of their islands. As another elderly Caymanian explained in their archival interview: "They [previous generations] were blessed with wisdom. I don't think we come up to it today. And why we don't come up to it, is because we don't have to. We don't have to" (Ebanks, 1990).

The real-world consequences of plant awareness disparity are serious and pervasive. Plant blindness has been shown to manifest in diverse ways across various demographics, including deficits in school curricula that embody a bias towards animals (Frisch et al., 2010), the inability of students and teachers to recognise and identify plants (Bebbington, 2010; Borsos et al., 2021; Kaasinen, 2019), apathy and disinterest toward plants as living beings (Stroud et al., 2022), and a lack of understanding about the vital roles plants play in sustaining life on Earth (Mercan et al., 2024). To quote Howard Thomas et al.: "Sustainability in an era of plant blindness is unsustainable" (2020, p. 50). The "inability to visually and conceptually distinguish and interpret a botanical world that has been stripped of meaning" (Lewis-Jones, 2016, p. 1) is a serious impediment to sustainable development, climate resiliency, and the conservation of biocultural diversity. The concept of biocultural diversity emerged from the Declaration of Belém, produced at the First International Congress of Ethnobiology, and highlighted the increasing recognition that the loss and degradation of biological diversity is interconnected with and correlated to the loss and degradation of cultural diversity (International Society of Ethnobiology, 1988). Indeed, though they contribute the least to the ongoing crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution, small islands like the Cayman Islands are both disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of global environmental change (Robinson, 2020) and hold "a disproportionately large amount of the world's threatened biodiversity" (Churchyard et al., 2016, p. 1678). The Cayman Islands' remarkable repository of biodiversity is imperilled not just by environmental crises playing out on the global scale but also by local tensions that pit socioeconomic development against sustainable practices (see Cayman News Service, 2024). At the global and local scale, unsustainable practices and the related loss of biocultural diversity have foundations in the growing human-nature disconnect

and the resulting increase in plant blindness. Increasing plant awareness, therefore, is an essential though overlooked element of efforts to safeguard cultural identity, facilitate sustainable development, build resilience to climate change, and sustain biocultural diversity. These efforts require the development of interventions that increase plant awareness while restoring connections between humans and the more-than-human world.

Sustainability through connection

Indeed, many of the efforts to increase awareness, understanding and appreciation of plants are underpinned by this very assumption – that doing so will have the effect of increasing nature-connectedness and result in pro-environmental behaviours. As noted by Stagg et al. (2024), however, few studies to date related to plant (non)awareness have made explicit connections to relevant psychological concepts that link awareness, understanding and appreciation of plants to human interest, values, behaviour and connectedness to nature. Much of the literature exploring plant (non)awareness to date remains focused on measuring knowledge and identification of plants and recommending ways to address knowledge gaps through formal educational programming (e.g. Achurra, 2022; Borsos, et al., 2021; Hooykaas et al., 2019; Stroud et al., 2022), despite growing evidence that activities focused on plant species knowledge and identification do not necessarily result in human-nature connectedness (Lumber et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that knowledge-based efforts should also encompass "senses, beauty, emotions, meaning and compassion" (Richardson et al., 2020, p. 390) and that formal education has a negative correlation with plant awareness (Voeks & Leony, 2004). Cultural or personal experiences are decisive factors in determining students' favourite plants (Nyberg et al., 2019) and culturally relevant content "plays a critical and beneficial role in memory, perception, and decision-making" (Renninger & Hidi, 2022, p. 27). It is, therefore, imperative that efforts to enhance nature connectedness through plant awareness be grounded in relevant psychological concepts and rooted in the local and cultural context. In this context, the value of TEK as a methodology for moderating people-plant connections is clear: As *content*, TEK includes place-based, culturally relevant insights about the natural world that can be reactivated in alignment with the pathways of nature connectedness. Recognising the limits of TEK as content (i.e., where plants have no local, common names or traditional uses), TEK as *practice* is active



Figure 2. A presentation by the author at a local high school as part of its 'Heritage Day' programming attempts to highlight cultural connections to native medicinal plants. © Hannah Reid Ford, 2024.

noticing, offering opportunities for the active co-creation of new and culturally relevant appreciation, meanings, feelings and compassion related to the natural world.

Ongoing research I'm conducting in the Cayman Islands as part of a PhD by research programme through the University of Kent aims to connect the distinct but interrelated areas of TEK, plant (non)awareness, nature connectedness and pro-environmental behaviours. This connection is vital in order to better understand: a) how plant awareness disparity affects present-day Caymanians; b) how the presence of Caymanian TEK in individuals or groups is related to levels of plant (non)awareness; c) how plant awareness in the Cayman Islands has changed since the 1950s; and d) opportunities for reactivating TEK as a mediator for enhancing plant awareness and increasing nature-connectedness and pro-environmental behaviours. Grounded in a biocultural approach, this research programme encompasses archival research with a primary emphasis on oral history records held by the Cayman Islands National Archives, semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled holders of Caymanian TEK, and nationally representative surveys, and it will culminate in the development and testing of interventions designed to increase TEK and plant awareness in participants. This research programme aims to explore the ways in which plant (non)awareness may be linked to theories regarding values, attention, interest and behaviour change, with particular regard for how TEK may be operationalised as a pathway for enhancing nature-connectedness through biocultural revitalisation. In doing so, this research aims to contribute new insights to the fields of ethnobiology, psychology and education while producing tangible programmes and processes designed to address complex challenges of sustainable development in the 21st century.

Implications for museology

Around the world, museums, galleries, herbaria and botanical gardens are remarkable repositories of biocultural heritage that stand poised to play a pivotal role in sustaining TEK, articulating biocultural connections and cultivating plant awareness. Indeed, several recent large-scale exhibitions have intentionally put plants at the forefront of the visitor experience, drawing "on a range of ideas from recent research to ancient knowledge to make apparent … the many ways in which human life is entangled with the vegetal" (Jacobs, 2020). Museology in the 21st century is uniquely positioned to foster plant-aware biocultural identities through the interpretation of tangible and intangible artefacts through a biocultural lens that makes explicit the implicit and embodied connections between people, plants and place. The following suggestions are, therefore, intended as starting points for approaching the curation of exhibitions and development of programmes through a biocultural lens that brings human-plant relations to the fore. This list is by no means exhaustive, and it is important to note that biocultural diversity relates to the culturally specific practices that shape and are shaped by highly localised biodiversity (Cocks & Wiersum, 2014).

a) Consider exploring opportunities for making explicit the plant-based origins of cultural artefacts. As facets of plant blindness include overlooking the importance of plants to daily affairs and failing to see, take notice of or focus attention on plants in daily life (Wandersee & Schussler, 1999), making the plant-based origins of culturally significant artefacts explicit can help draw attention to the traditional importance of plants in the development of human cultures. How can the role of plants be brought to the forefront?

b) Consider exploring opportunities for identifying, understanding and incorporating Indigenous peoples and local communities' (IPLCs) names of plants and places. Significant TEK is codified in local and traditional names for plants and places and, further, "when these folk names are lost or replaced by borrowed names, the TEK encoded in these names are also lost" (Hidayati et al., 2022). While it is important to utilise scientific nomenclature for universality, there is a tendency to overlook or subjugate "ethnotaxa" – the cultural groupings of biological entities and the distinct local or common names for those entities (Mattalia et al., 2023). How can the status of ethnotaxa be elevated?

c) Consider exploring the concept of "cultural keystone species" (CKS) within the context of the local community. The CKS concept was defined by Ann Garibaldi and Nancy Turner in 2004 as "culturally salient species that shape in a major way the cultural identity of a people, as reflected in the fundamental roles these species have in diet, materials, medicine, and/or spiritual practices" (p. 4). Over the last two decades, the CKS concept has appeared steadily in the literature (Mattalia et al., 2023), with growing calls for appropriate operationalisation to increase conservation "that meets the needs of both people and nature" (Reyes-Garcia et al., 2023, p. 5). Rather than a list of species, the value of the CKS concept emerges from the understanding of CKS as "ongoing *relationship(s)* between the cultural and the ecological, which are intimately tied to language, knowledge, practices, and places in ways that are deeply interconnected" (Lukawiecki et al., 2023, p. 1). How can these relationships be explored?

d) Consider how programmatic approaches can be utilised as pathways for nature connectedness and plant awareness through the exploration of tangible and intangible biocultural heritage. The growing shift in museology towards community participatory approaches offers opportunities to reclaim identity, voice and vision from the homogenising global forces that are undermining cultural relationships with the natural world (Brown, 2023). Increasing plant awareness at the local level is critical to safeguarding global biocultural diversity. Through community-informed design, institutions of museology can "become curators of future stories, or agents of change" (Urquhart, 2023, p. 160). How can community participatory approaches in programming nurture nature connectedness and increase plant awareness?

Conclusion

When the Drake Manuscript was produced, the Cayman Islands was one of the few places in the Caribbean void of human settlement. During the country's short human history, Caymanians have developed a culturally unique ontology of connection with the natural environment that precedes concepts such as conservation or environmentalism, which are often understood as imported constructs (Reid, 2014). Caymanians relied on their cultur-

ally specific TEK to make a home where no other humans had dared to before. Within the space of 60 years, however, the Cayman Islands has transformed from the "islands time forgot" (Maloney, 1950) to a luxury tourism destination and offshore financial centre. While most current-day Caymanians no longer have to rely on their natural environment to meet their basic, daily needs, the continued importance of plants to human survival has not lessened. Against the backdrop of a complex and interconnected nexus of geopolitical uncertainty, socioeconomic inequality, environmental degradation and climate change, plants continue to be powerful allies for the wellbeing of people everywhere (Kumar et al., 2021). Efforts to increase sustainable development, climate resiliency and biological diversity can only be successful if they are matched by efforts that aim to increase awareness, understanding and appreciation of plants through the conscious cultivation of biocultural connection. Increasing plant awareness at the local level is critical to safeguarding global biocultural diversity and such efforts must consciously – and conscientiously – bridge the divide between traditional and scientific ways of knowing nature in order to effectively safeguard biocultural diversity. As both content and practice, the active revitalisation of TEK offers the opportunity to "come up to" the old wisdoms that sustained previous generations of Caymanians for centuries. By embodying the centralism of nature within human perception, TEK offers a unique pathway for cultivating connections between people and nature to revitalise biocultural diversity, in particular through increasing awareness, understanding and appreciation of plants. As repositories of global biocultural heritage, museums and other related institutions are well-placed to conserve both biological and cultural diversity through the exploration and promotion of opportunities for cultivating the co-production of "sustainability" grounded in biocultural sensitivities.

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The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding: Small step for museology, giant leap for local community

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Abstract

The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding on Murter Island, Croatia, stands as a beacon of maritime heritage preservation. This ethnographic museum not only showcases the rich tradition of wooden shipbuilding in Betina but also embodies the principles of an ecomuseum by actively engaging the local community in the preservation and dissemination of their intangible cultural heritage. This article explores the museum's establishment, its collections, community involvement, and its role in sustaining traditional shipbuilding and sailing practices.

Keywords: Betina Museum, wooden shipbuilding, ecomuseum, maritime heritage, community engagement

Résumé

Le musée Bettina de la construction navale en bois : Un petit pas pour la muséologie, un bond de géant pour la communauté locale. Le Musée de la construction navale en bois de Betina, situé sur l'île de Murter en Croatie, se présente comme un phare de la préservation du patrimoine maritime. Ce musée ethnographique ne se contente pas de mettre en valeur la riche tradition de la construction navale en bois à Betina ; il incarne également les principes de l'écomusée en impliquant activement la communauté locale dans la sauvegarde et la transmission de son patrimoine culturel immatériel. Cet article explore la création du musée, ses collections, l'implication de la communauté, ainsi que son rôle dans la pérennisation des pratiques traditionnelles de construction navale et de navigation.

Mots-clés : musée de Betina, construction navale en bois, écomusée, patrimoine maritime, participation communautaire

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Maritime heritage is an integral part of Croatia's cultural identity, particularly in coastal communities where shipbuilding and fishing have shaped local economies and ways of life. The village of Betina, located on Murter Island in the Adriatic Sea, is renowned for its long-standing tradition of wooden shipbuilding. In recognition of the need to preserve this heritage, the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding (or in Croatian: *Muzej betinske drvene brodogradnje*) was established.

As highlighted by TravelMag, which listed the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding among the 20 best maritime museums in Europe in 2023, the museum

> offers a peek into the life of the village past and present. All items on display were donated by locals, who are also involved in the programme of events … among other boat models, visitors become particularly familiar with the local trademark *gajeta* (officially recognised as intangible cultural heritage in Croatia). The harbour serves as an outdoor section of the museum. (TravelMag, 2023)

This endorsement underscores the museum's innovative approach to heritage preservation, blending traditional exhibits with community participation, the reason why the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding was among the winners of the prestigious European Museum of the Year Award (Category: The Silletto Prize for Community Participation and Engagement) in 2018 and the Europa Nostra Awards for heritage (Category: Education, Training and Awareness-Raising) in 2019. As the last Europa Nostra jury concluded, "The project reinforces the central notion of the sea as a vital component of European heritage and reinforces community links with it. It also highlights the centrality of all aspects of maritime culture in daily life in the region".

> The initial thrust of the project came from the community itself, and it was subsequently developed by professionals so as to preserve and transmit maritime cultural traditions. This has led to the creation of an econo-museum which promotes ecological awareness and the sustainable use of resources in response to the mounting pressures and challenges of a developing tourist industry in the region. (European Heritage Awards/Europa Nostra Awards, 2019)

In this article, we will first check out how the Croatian island museology/museologies do fit into global wonderings, and, after, we will use the case study of the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding that almost perfectly fits many goals set by this call. We will show when and how the interest for Croatian island museologies started as well as how the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding ended up as its flagship, pushing forward an inclusive approach and eco-museological based activities. After that, we will focus on its direct or indirect classification as an ecomuseum (with an extra note on the Croatian museum legislation) and the inconsistencies of its eco-museology approach, no matter how we support the museum's efforts.

We will then offer insight into collections of the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding as well as the role of the Betina's *gajeta* and the NGO associations and how what started as a community idea ended as a museological project. And soon after it expanded toward an open-air museum space (with a granted concession to use an old harbour as national maritime property or as a mooring area for presenting traditional wooden boats as museum exhibition space, which is a significant breakthrough). None of this would be possible without local community engagement and its activities.

Research on Croatian island museologies

The Republic of Croatia has 1244 islands (all in the Adriatic Sea, its east side), which are geographically divided into 78 islands (i.e. area larger than 1 sq. km), 525 islets and 641 cliffs and reefs. In total, the islands cover about 3259 sq. km, or 5.8% of the Croatian territory. The total length of the Croatian sea coastline is 6176 km, of which the island's coastline creates 4398 km (71%). Out of 78 islands, 50 are permanently inhabited (although numbers vary), with people living in 344 (by majority small) settlements. A great majority of Croatian year-round settled islands are not far away from the mainland, possible to reach if weather conditions are not extreme within a one-hour ride by ferry or other types of passenger vessels, while three islands are connected with the mainland by road bridges too. The last data, if compared to some other archipelagos of European countries (e.g. Greece, UK [foremost Scotland], Portugal and Spain with their islands in the Atlantic Ocean) and by excluding so called overseas territories in the Atlantic or the Pacific Ocean (islands under governance of the UK, France or the Netherlands) and all independent islands states in all three big oceans, may make it sound like Croatian islands are practically a mainland, with no specific issues. But no matter how close any island is to the mainland, even if connected with a bridge it remains an isolated mass of land, especially in extreme weather conditions. Organising overall museum work (but as well as overall life in general) is not the same whether an island is less than one hour away from a mainland by ferry or if it is several hundreds or thousands of kilometres away from the nearest significantly big landmass. But some challenges remain the same, or at least similar where (permanent or temporary) isolation comes first.

If we look more closely at museum/heritage data, there are 12 museums with (some sort of) permanent exhibitions on Croatian islands. Many of these museums were established via local municipalities with small but often quite complex collections (foremost a mix of ethnographical, historical and archaeological materials) representing regional features. More precisely there are museums accredited by the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia[1] on the islands of Cres, Lošinj (two museums), Pag, Murter, Brač, Vis, Hvar (three museums) and Korčula (two museums). Furthermore, there are several heritage interpretation centres on Croatian islands that started to pop up within the last five to seven years. While interesting, considering how heritage is safeguarded and transmitted within diverse communities, they do not completely fulfil ideas and missions of museum/museological work. The notion of heritage interpretation (Tilden, 1977) and heritage interpretation centres is very recent in Croatia and so is still developing. Many misunderstandings still exist, such as whether heritage interpretation centres or visitors' centres could take over or play the same (or a similar) role performed by museums, even though the former do not have a collection of museum/heritage objects. However, here we limit our focus to established museums.

My starting research interests about the east Adriatic coast (Croatian islands) and its heritage could be tracked all the way back to 2002 when I defended my museology study master's thesis at the University of Zagreb (Croatia) about a network of four Croatian lighthouses representing not only (possibly) a new Croatian national museum, but (equally importantly) showcasing development of museological practices (within their proposed permanent exhibitions) over time. Croatian islands museology had been (here and there)

1 In Croatia the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, together with the Museum Documentation Centre, is in charge of the register of accredited museums, which are in compliance with the Croatian Museum Act and its By-laws.

part of the European funded project "Launching (g)local level heritage entrepreneurship: strategies and tools to unite forces, safeguard the place, mobilize cultural values, deliver the experience" (2012 – 2014) with the University of the Aegean, Greece, as overall project leader as well as very recently within the EU-funded project "Towards a European Heritage Interpretation Curriculum – TEHIC[2]" (2022 – 2025), led by the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. While both projects were very useful, none have a specific focus on an island (or oceanic) museology. However, they significantly helped, or empowered, the addressed theme in my research on islander's museology in Croatia. Other attempts to get bigger research funds for the Adriatic museology, or for establishment of the Croatian islands' museums and heritage network, have so far failed to receive funding either as an EU project or a national one. Still, even irregular research work over the last 15+ years gives us enough insights to recognise the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding as significantly different.

Other museums on Croatian islands were established before the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding, some already in 1910 (Cres Museum) when some of today's Croatian islands were part of the Kingdom of Italy (today the Italian Republic), and all of them are, by profile of collections, complex museums which represent either city or regional heritage, so by type a city or a regional/homeland museum, while the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding belongs to a type of specific museums devoted to one particular element or process (wooden shipbuilding) which is an intangible heritage, indeed something completely different from all other museums on Croatian islands. In addition, all other museums do have permanent exhibitions organised in a 'traditional' way while the Betina Museum has its interior permanent exhibition as well as an outdoor (open-air) collection and demonstration of skills by still active and operating shipbuilders rather than museum-employed -trained (for demonstration only) staff. Finally, only the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding is established by a community initiative (bottom-up approach) while all others start to exist by decision from their city or county council, as a top-down initiative.

The establishment of the Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding

Betina is a small, historical village of around 800 permanent inhabitants, today basically oriented toward tourism. The village of Betina is located at the island of Murter, only a few kilometres away from a drawbridge which connects the island and the mainland. The island of Murter is among the larger of Croatian islands, and closest to the mainland of the city of Šibenik's archipelago, thus it has been populated since the time of the Illyrians. Furthermore, remains of the Roman settlements scattered around the island testify to its occupation during the period of the Roman Empire.

The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding was inaugurated on 14th August 2015, following an initiative by the local association *Betinska gajeta 1740*. The association, named after the iconic Betina *gajeta* (a traditional wooden boat present in this part of the Adriatic Sea; a small wooden boat 5–8 meters long, 2–2.60 meters wide), aimed to preserve and transmit knowledge of traditional wooden shipbuilding. The museum's narrative is deeply rooted in the historical context of Betina's shipbuilding; Betina citizens have a several centuries long tradition of making wooden ships which served local demands, such as assisting agriculture in a nearby archipelago or for small-scale trade. This tradition and unique craftsmanship gradually started to be less important in many Adriatic, as well as Mediterranean, villages in the first half of the 20th century. Due to economic changes, it practically disappeared in

2 More at: https://tehic.eu/

the 1970's and 1980's when mass tourism became the main source of income in many small Mediterranean villages, the Adriatic Sea shores included. Accordingly, the museum's narrative is relying not only on historical sources but also on the testimonies of shipbuilders and its villagers, as well as today's situation, a realistic 21st century setting.

From the beginning, the project of a museum was a community endeavour. Starting in 2013 (or 2011, depending on diverse interpretations) as the process of collecting artefacts and recording stories began, the entire community responded to the museum project. We could easily say the museum was born from and developed with the community. This collective/community energy was the first, and so crucially instrumental in shaping the museum's permanent exhibition, and it continues to drive its activities.

Ecomuseology approach

According to its classification by Croatian museum standards, the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding belongs to ethnographic museums because it collects knowledge about the way of life on Murter Island and describes local customs related to wooden shipbuilding, as well as agriculture, fishing and shellfish farming. However, it more closely embodies the principles of an ecomuseum, emphasizing the relationship between the museum and its environment and involving the community in directly preserving their own cultural heritage. Plus, the focal point of the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding is foremost an intangible heritage, a process of planning and producing of wooden ships, as well as active use of this heritage through the art of sailing with Latin and lug sails (yet another intangible heritage recognised element).

There are many definitions of ecomuseums and/or ecomuseum principles, starting with those done by Georges Henri Rivière in the 1970s all the way to very contemporary ones. All of them make contributions toward understanding of ecomuseum practices and theories, focusing more on this or that diverse segment. A quick look at selected ecomuseum bibliography (EU-LAC-MUSEUMS – *Museums and Community*, n.d.) could be very helpful. In this article I use the definition formulated in 2004, "An ecomuseum is a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for sustainable development. An ecomuseum is based on a community agreement" (Murtas & Davis, 2009, p. 151) or "An ecomuseum is an instrument of heritage management by which communities direct their own development in a dynamic way" (Babić, Vatan Kaptan & Masriera Esquerra, 2019, p. 11) both characterized by a focus on local identity and genius loci (sense of place). The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding exemplifies these approaches by integrating the museum into the cultural, historical and social fabric of Betina village and its inhabitants.

Collections and the Betina gajeta

The museum currently holds 494 artefacts (which classifies it among small museums, even by Croatian standards, but important by influence) divided into eight main collections:

- Shipbuilding Tools
- Boat Equipment
- Models
- Clothing Items
- Household Inventory
- Traditional Economy

- Archival Documents
- Photographs

A special part of the permanent exhibition is dedicated to the technical knowledge of building wooden boats, the wood processing process and drawing boat lines. One of the museum's main missions is to preserve knowledge of the art of building the Betina *gajeta* – the most recognizable type of wooden boat on Murter Island (Barešin, Bilić & Šikić Čubrić, 2023).

The Betina *gajeta* is a pinnacle of Betina shipbuilders' craftsmanship. Recognizing its cultural significance, the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia included the art of building the Betina *gajeta* in the Register of Cultural goods/assets as intangible cultural heritage of Croatia in 2015 (Deranja Crnokić & Hrovatin, 2023). In 2023, another traditional skill – the art of sailing with Latin and lug sails – was added to the register, encompassing the skill of managing traditional boats by harnessing the wind's power, as a whole range of knowledge related to the use of traditional sailing and techniques of building sailboats, the skill of making and maintaining sails, social practices, terminology, and customs.

Open-air museum, community engagement and activities

The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding is highly active within the local community, acting as an initiator of various ideas and initiatives, as a partner, a collaborator, and (it could be said) a friend (*Muzej betinske drvene brodogradnje*, n.d.). Together with heritage associations from Murter Island, the museum works to preserve the island's cultural and natural heritage beyond shipbuilding, strengthening local identity and fostering mutual friendship through joint projects and programs.

Part of the local harbour, with moored wooden boats (*gajetas*, *lajas*, *kaićs*, and *leuts*) constituting today an extension of the main building permanent exhibition, create a unique sort of an open-air museum. In 2019, the museum was granted a concession to use old harbour maritime property as a mooring area for presenting traditional wooden boats as museum exhibits, which are at the same time operating in daily use by their owners. This "floating museum" features 45 wooden boats[3], arranged by type and representativeness, forming an integral part of the museum's open-air experience.

3 According to data in early 2025.



Figure 1. Old port of Betina, now an open-air space of the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding reserved for traditional wooden boats only. On the far left are interpretation panels about the Museum, in the centre the monument (a boy with gajeta) about the Betina shipbuilders. Photo credit © D. Babić; April 2025.

Boat owners who moor their vessels here commit to maintaining them in the traditional spirit, participating in social events and festivities and raising sails on special occasions such as the traditional summer regatta, thereby enhancing maritime heritage events on the island. One intangible indicator of how strong a connection exists between the museum and local community is an anecdote from two years ago when a local resident ran from the old port to the museum to inform the museum director that a plastic boat was anchored in the port area managed by the museum, a space devoted to wooden ships only. While measuring impacts of how and to what extent the local community is involved in operational running of the museum (by interviews, polls, etc.) and how strongly it feels the museum belongs to them, it seems to us the last (anecdotal) example demonstrates it more strongly than any other type of evaluation. The same could be said for a case (or now indeed cases) with the monument named "Monument to the Betina Shipbuilders – A Boy with Gajeta" situated near the Betina Old port, which is regularly cleaned up from dust or seagull droppings by unknown, unidentified local citizens. While polls, interviews and many other scientifically based and planned methodological research could demonstrate a level of local community engagement (which is desirable, not to get us wrong here) we firmly believe these two examples make the case even more strongly, not by saying yes or no or scaling impact but by actions, and at the same time not asking for credit for taking the action. Exactly as we all are doing when we care about something dear to us, here what the citizens of Betina care about is their identity, their tradition and basically who they are. And here yet another portion must be apostrophized, as the monument "Monument to the Betina Shipbuilders – A Boy with Gajeta" is foremost focused on a young boy – that is, a future shipbuilder not an existing one, and certainly not previous ones now passed away. A respect / thankful message to all of them is largely incorporated in the monument but the main message is directed toward future wooden shipbuilders, making it a strong statement of how the community sees itself and where the core of its future is set, as well as a mission and furthermore a vision of the museum and what it wants to reach by its influence.

The Museum has been involved in many significant restoration projects, such as the renovation of Betina's *gajeta* named *Marija* in 2021. Funded through the European Union's European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, the project aimed to preserve the original lines and old construction while at the same time documenting the entire restoration process. The *gajeta Marija* now serves as an educational museum boat, teaching children and youth about diverse maritime skills. Similarly, the *gajeta Cicibela* holds a special place in the museum's narrative. Built in 1931, *Cicibela* is a perfect example of 'old' Betina shipbuilding. Its restoration in 2011 was a catalyst for establishing the *Betinska gajeta 1740* association and indirectly inspired the creation of the museum itself. Furthermore, *Cicibela* is the only *gajeta* in Croatia listed as a movable cultural asset by the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia (Deranja Crnokić & Hrovatin, 2023).

Preservation of intangible cultural heritage: educational and cultural programs

The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding places significant emphasis on preserving not only physical artefacts but also intangible cultural heritage such as skills, knowledge, and oral histories. After all, the Museum is about artefacts but what is mainly protected is a process, knowledge and skills of local traditional wooden shipbuilding.

The Museum actively records stories and testimonies from shipbuilders and locals, recognizing that narratives, along with historical sources, are the most important elements in preserving knowledge, skills, and the cultural heritage of the island. This approach ensures the continuity of traditions and fosters a deeper connection between the community and their heritage, where the museum acts as the main mediator. Throughout recent years, The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding organized numerous educational and cultural programs to engage the public and promote maritime and other local heritage. To name just a few:

- Exhibitions: Showcased works of artists inspired by Betina's maritime culture, such as Neven Zoričić's paintings and/or Marko Ramljak's graphics
- Workshops: Hosted activities like knot-tying workshops led by local experts
- Lectures: Featured talks by academics like Prof. Robert Mohović on the future of traditional wooden boats and Prof. Irena Radić Rossi on submerged ships in the Murter's aquatorium
- Publications: released "The Story of the Little Shipbuilder," a bilingual children's book introducing young readers to the world of Betina *gajeta* and sailing
- Collaborations: Partnered with local cultural organizations for events like "Betina *Gajeta* Days" and participated in international associations such as the Association of Mediterranean Maritime Museums (AMMM) and ICOM (International Council of Museums).

All these programs aim to provide visitors as well as the local community with new insights into maritime heritage and enrich the cultural life of Murter Island and especially Betina villagers. But they reflect something much more valuable, the synergy of actions performed by the museum which fits the interests and actions of a local community.

The museum as an agent of sustainable development

By preserving traditional crafts and promoting sustainable cultural tourism, the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding contributes to the sustainable development of the local community. The museum's initiatives align with the principles outlined in UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which underlines community involvement and the transmission of heritage to future generations (UNESCO, 2003).

Moreover, the museum's activities support other types of the local economy[4] by attracting visitors and directly or indirectly creating diverse opportunities for local artisans and craftsmen, not necessarily only local shipbuilders (where the focus remains on theirs, so to say business as the core heritage identity). To paraphrase many authors within the field of heritage and tourism we could say heritage tourism can be a catalyst for economic development, particularly when it involves local communities, which is by far the case here, in the village of Betina, compounded by the establishment of the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding actions and activities.

It is worthwhile to note that all small shipyards in Betina are privately owned and so not officially part of the museum but here, the more than 50-year-old statement by one of protagonists of the ecomuseum, Hugues de Varine-Bohan, applies:

> Any movable or unmovable object within the community's perimeter is physiologically part of the museum. This introduces the idea of a kind of cultural property right which has nothing to do with legal ownership. Accordingly, it is not the function of the museum as such to make acquisitions, since everything existing within its geographical area is already at its disposal. (1973, p. 244)

This idea is not only valid but fully supported by local shipbuilders. Their small shipyards are a museum place in a way, since all outsiders (guests and tourists) could visit and step into shipyards (upon appointment) even during regular working/shipbuilding process.

The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding is at a crossroads. Wooden ships, which represent the tradition and the core identity of Betina, are at first sight the most suitable way to demonstrate ideas of a sustainable development, especially if we are looking at several hundred years of tradition of the village and its shipbuilding. But the impact of tourism (and mass tourism foremost) is very strong, almost devastating the usual historical economic balance of the community (shipbuilding) compared to the renting of apartments for seasonal (summer) tourists.

A role model?

Presenting a permanent exhibition (indoor and outdoor) and activities, the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding might sound to some readers like we are speaking about the perfect project, the model which could be used at any other place with the same results. But we all know, as far as we are discussing societal roles of museums, "one model fits all" does not work, simply because there are no two spots in the world which have completely equal context. To start with, natural settings and how humans in the past have changed (or adapted) to that environment, all differ. Unquestionably there are many (seemingly)

4 The main local economy today, in practically all Croatian Adriatic Sea coastal villages and small cities, is seasonal (summer) tourism.

similar villages to Betina on the east Adriatic coast, on shores of the Adriatic Sea and indeed the Mediterranean Sea, but only a few of those have wooden shipbuilding as the main economic activity for a long period of time. If we add diverse political and social organisation throughout history as well as some cultural differences or attitudes, the characteristic ways of thinking of a person or group, or a spark ignited by creating a museum as a means of solving recognised local problems, we will quickly end up recognising that no one equivalent site exists. The copy/paste model does not work, yet we could still learn a lot from any case study, mostly about things which worked perfectly (or very well) as well as from imperfect parts, and we could adapt accumulated knowledge into our own projects, finetuning them toward our own community ingenuity.

The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding, not only by preserving but foremost because of the stimulating continuation of traditional crafts, must be cherished, no question about it, especially because it reflects how the local community sees its identity and what is their desirable present and projected future development(s). At the same time, today Betina is fully dependant on tourism as far as we are discussing real economic products and their impact[5]. This last is not equally represented all year around, going so high from early or mid-June to the end of September, while in other parts of a year the tourism influence remains relatively unimportant. This creates a huge imbalance in how to organise/use (or adapt) local infrastructure, the needs of locals vs. summer seasons (when five times more people stay in Betina). All this opens a big question: where and how could or must a local museum position itself. If tourist income nowadays is the main revenue for a local community, then tourism has the supremacy and everything else is in a background, at least if economic-based analysis only is followed.

But the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding proves this is wrong. If interests of the local community are at the first place a museum (or any heritage action) will look at how to mitigate an economic reality imposed by global trends vs. what is the best for a local community. And the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding is successfully doing that. The museum is not against the local community, but always affirming it, perfectly reflecting its desires. Somebody could say, fine, but what will happen if a political position of the municipality (which up to now has strongly supported the Museum) changes? We see this as a minor risk because no political party goes against what is fully supported by the majority of a local community. Others would maybe emphasise whether or not the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding attracted new, young wooden shipbuilders by its actions. It has not done so directly (at least we cannot present a proof for it, aside from significantly more interest for possessing a wooden boat and so increased orders), but indirectly it has given hope to sons (and daughters) of existing shipbuilders that continuation of family work and tradition do make sense, and it is prised by the entire local community. Betina as a village, and so the Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding, do not suffer directly from climate changes (except for unpredicted extreme weather conditions, as it is now), such that it will not be soon inundated by the sea, even under the most extreme realistic projections. Discussion on the sustainability of fiberglass boats vs. wooden boats is legitimised too, since for some people fiberglass boats are more sustainable because they last longer without need for repair. While this may be true in specific cases, it is certainly not in general, if waste management and all other issues are included.

5 Avoiding this kind of scenario had been impossible, since it was a global trend started with mass tourism decades ago, in which a small local community cannot have notable influence.

All in all, the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding could be an inspirational role model for many others which have (a similar) situation and challenges. For instance, it inspired the municipality of Kostrena, Croatia, a mainland destination in the north of the Croatian Adriatic, to start its own museum/interpretation centre about seamen, and the story of Kostrena is famous within Croatia, Europe and beyond. The influence is certainly present, not as a copy/paste model but as inspiration. With intention all Croatian Adriatic museums will also follow the Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding working hours, not to be closed half the year due to a low tourism season, but to be open year round.

Conclusion

The Betina Museum of Wooden Shipbuilding serves as a model for integrating heritage preservation with community engagement and sustainable development. Through its shipbuilding tools, boat equipment, ethnographic, and other collections, its restoration projects, educational programs, and open-air area and exhibitions, the museum not only safeguards the maritime heritage of Betina but also fosters a living connection between the past and present.

As the museum continues to evolve, it remains committed to its mission of preserving traditional knowledge and skills, ensuring that the art of wooden shipbuilding and sailing continues to thrive in Betina. The collective efforts of the museum, the *Betinska gajeta* 1740 Association, and the broad community exemplify the enduring value of cultural heritage in shaping identity and fostering communal bonds. All of these are so desperately needed today, in any part of the world.

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Layered legacies: Building the future on the knowledge of the past

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Abstract

This article explores the Croatian Coral Centre Zlarin (CCCZ) as a case study in ecological museology, tracing how coral serves as both ecological organism and cultural symbol. It examines the co-creative museum process engaging local traditions, global trade histories, and sustainability discourse. Through contemporary art, archival research, and community dialogue, the CCCZ reframes coral harvesting's history as a platform for climate action, cultural memory, and participatory heritage-making. Emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration, the article positions museums as transformative civic spaces where the past fosters ecological awareness, socio-cultural resilience, and new futures grounded in inherited knowledge and community solidarity.

Keywords: coral heritage, ecological museology, community engagement sustainability

Resumé

Héritages en strates : Construire l'avenir à partir des savoirs du passé. Cet article examine le Centre Croate du Corail de Zlarin (CCCZ) comme étude de cas en muséologie écologique, en analysant comment le corail incarne à la fois un organisme écologique et un symbole culturel. Il explore le processus muséal co-créatif mobilisant traditions locales, histoire du commerce mondial et discours sur la durabilité. Grâce à l'art contemporain, à la recherche archivistique et au dialogue communautaire, le CCCZ transforme l'histoire de la récolte du corail en un levier d'action climatique, de mémoire culturelle et de patrimoine participatif. L'article positionne les musées comme espaces civiques transformateurs où le passé nourrit conscience écologique et résilience communautaire.

Mots-clés : Patrimoine corallien, muséologie écologique, engagement communautaire, durabilité

Corals are currently at the forefront of numerous biological studies and ecological debates, highlighting the urgent need to address rising seawater temperatures, pollution, and biodiversity loss to ensure the survival of these vital underwater habitats. Croatian Coral Centre Zlarin (CCCZ) started as a grassroots initiative of a local heritage organisation to present the history of coral harvesting on the island of Zlarin.

The initial vision of the co-design process was to communicate local knowledge, questioning the common understanding of traditions and exploring the role of emotion in the process of museum design (Mazzanti et al, 2021). Building on interdisciplinary collaboration, the project development process explored the issues of pressing ecological and climate challenges together with the possibilities of using a museum to revitalise the island's cultural and economic fabric.

This article integrates concepts from heritage studies, museum theory and sustainability, examining CCCZ as a case study on how museums and heritage institutions can serve as platforms for ecological awareness, cultural preservation, and community action.

The context of project development

Red coral serves as a metaphorical bridge between natural and cultural heritage, embodying the intersection of ecology, history, and human endeavours. As a living organism, it is both fragile and resilient. Simultaneously, in its processed form, it holds profound cultural significance worldwide and is cherished for its beautiful colour, symbolic value, and value as a status symbol. The article seeks to illuminate the implicit tensions in the process of co-creating CCCZ. In this process, the exhibition of traditional coral harvesting and its tools shifts towards a centre where "art, science, and environmental advocacy converge to address the challenges of climate change" (Katurić et al., 2023, p. 153).

The museum design process explored how the historical practice of coral harvesting on the island, intertwined with its influence on the volatile dynamics of global trade and 20th-century technological evolution, local labour, cultural traditions, and maritime expertise could all be leveraged as tools to reshape environmental perspectives – specifically, how these elements converge to transcend conventional approaches to interpretation centres by utilising contemporary art as a medium to communicate environmental protection issues and thus creating meaningful spaces that foster connection and collaboration among diverse groups and communities, both locally and internationally.

This process builds on the notion that "heritage is conceptualized as a dynamic process that bridges traditions with contemporary challenges" (Borrelli et al., 2022). Coral itself serves as a metaphorical bridge between natural and cultural heritage, embodying both fragility and resilience. This duality reflects broader theoretical discussions on the interconnectedness of cultural and natural heritage systems (Borrelli et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2023).

In this process, museums are framed as transformative spaces that mediate between historical knowledge and contemporary societal issues. The work emphasises socially engaged museum practice, streaming from contemporary discussions that view museums not as mere repositories of objects, but as active participants in shaping public discourse (McCarthy, 2015, 2018; Karp et al., 2006). This aligns with post-critical museology, which emphasises the role of museums in fostering dialogue and inspiring action (Dewdney et al., 2012; Graham, 2015).

At the Centre, observing the past serves to bring together the old collective knowledge of the islanders, then renew it in cooperation with the local community. The process focused specifically on the questions of what community is and where the community stands, evolving around the questions of the definition of the community by the community itself as well as by the curators (Brown, 2019; Brown, 2023). A community-based museum can be a tool to contribute to "the development of a territory or a community since it contains a story about its past, and with it a vision about its present and even certain expectations about its future" (Brown et al., 2023, p. 93). The process began from the notion that the grass-roots understanding should be given the opportunity to inform and affect policy; however, there were several grass-roots initiatives with competing interpretations of the key concepts. The idea of the process was thus to identify and give voice to all of them, balancing their often antagonistic understandings of Zlarin's heritage.

At the very beginning of the process, the envisaged development was a large-scale museum with exhibited ethnographic artifacts used in coral harvesting. Throughout the process of project development, which lasted over a decade, the concept was completely transformed. The first steps were related to identifying the stakeholders on the island, moving beyond the usual suspects towards NGOs and individuals working in contemporary cultural production and environmental protection. In parallel, an analysis of the territorial aspects of the entire island was conducted in an attempt to move beyond the concepts of traditional, closed museums towards the idea of a museum as a catalyst for change (new museology). The third block of activities was directed towards archival research and building networks with the faculty of science and marine biologists to explore the tension between coral harvesting and environmental protection.

However, when working with the discourse of sustainability, we must reflect on the process of Zlarin's co-creation, taking into account the complex network of influences and authorities that has allowed transactions of certain items and ideas in both physical and conceptual spaces. We must accept that today's normative concept of sustainability falls into this category. Further work on the topic should involve an analysis of the "fieldwork *agencements*" concept borrowed from post-Deleuzian assemblage theory in order to discern the networks of human and non-human actors involved in gathering and circulating material objects and anthropological data. (Bennett et al., 2017).

The rise and decline of coral harvesting on Zlarin

For centuries, red coral (*Corallium rubrum*) was a widely traded commodity across oceans and continents; in the early modern period, it was a precious good that facilitated the growth of intercontinental commerce between Europe and Africa, Asia, and later, the early United States, during the early stages of globalisation (Iwasaki, 2021).

Across societies and cultures worldwide, the appreciation of coral stemmed not only from its vivid colour and smooth, polished surface – which symbolised status and wealth – but also from its attributed apotropaic powers, the charmed ability to turn away harm. Its shape, reminiscent of petrified wood, confused early scientists; only in the 17th century was it classified with certainty as an animal (Smith, McClure et al., 2007). Growing out of reach in the dark depths, precious red coral quickly became a powerful apotropaic object. Belief in its abilities to ward off harm, evil, and misfortune made it part of various cultural and religious traditions.

Esteemed as one of Buddhism's "seven precious materials" and valued for its diverse uses, ranging from mystical practices to signifying social status, coral was highly coveted in Asia. Although the coral trade between Asia and Europe stems from ancient times – when, according to Pliny, it was sold in India in exchange for precious gems and diamonds (Trivellato, 2009) – expanding connections with the Asian continent and the rise in trade volumes from the 17th century onward allowed merchants to capitalise on this demand, as coral was one of the rare goods from Europe for which there was consistent demand. Coral functioned as a medium of exchange and payment in Asia, facilitating the flow of goods to the West, including silk, printed floral textiles, diamonds, musk, and porcelain – it connected distant cultures and played a significant role in energising Euro-Asiatic trade networks (Raveaux, 2023).

In her *Coral Lives: Literature, Labor, and the Making of America* (2023), Michele Currie Navakas traces coral's symbolic, economic, and ecological significance in 19th-century Europe and North America, linking it to broader themes of labour, race, and environmental transformations. She also investigates coral through the lens of its deep cultural and economic significance in African contexts. Vibrant coral beads were highly prized in certain African societies, where they were associated with status, spirituality, and ceremonial practices, and were often exchanged for enslaved persons, becoming a critical link in the triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, particularly during the transatlantic slave trade.

The first entry points into the discussion on the coral museum on Zlarin were focused around the topic of coral harvesting and trade. This remained the prominent topic in the museum, serving as a lens through which to further interpret the histories of labour.

However, the key contemporary issue related to coral is the question of sustainability and – more broadly – our relationship with the sea and its resources. This was a key discussion in the museum design process. Not so long ago, corals were harvested using primitive tools that had a relatively small negative impact on the underwater environment. Additionally, life on land did not exert as strong a pressure on undersea life as it does today. Various industries, tourism, global warming, and overfishing have placed corals in a dramatic position, the consequences of which will resonate on land; the topic of corals is key to the eco-museum approach in Zlarin. This is why it is crucial to re-examine the possibility for humans and the sea to coexist. In this sense, we can view the island as a laboratory (Pungetti, 2012). How we live alongside the sea, how we care for the balance of its ecosystem, and what past experiences and perspectives can teach us about this – these are the fundamental questions that emerge from the intent of the Centre's exhibition. These discussions were central to the co-creation process, explored with diverse stakeholders and questioned through multiple lenses of local community actors, the scientific community, artists, and museologists.

In the Adriatic Sea, most known coral habitats stretch from the Kvarner islands to the Bay of Kotor in Montenegro, with sites outside the Šibenik archipelago (especially around the island of Žirje) historically being among the most productive (Basioli, 1984).

According to some sources, the coral harvesting tradition on the island predates Venetian rule over the Dalmatian coast in the early 15th century, dating to the 13th century. However, the first reliable written records of coral harvesting date to the 17th century, mentioning the arrival of foreign crews who came to harvest in the area; by this time, they were

already actively harvesting rather than searching for coral sites, indicating that the main productive spots were already well known at the time (Stulli, 1982).

Under Venetian rule, coral harvesting on the entire Dalmatian coast was marked by many regulations and was only allowed for those who obtained licenses, with one-tenth of the catch paid to the treasury and with the obligation to sell all coral harvested on the Venetian market. Until the mid-18th century, boats were crewed by Italians but were eventually replaced by Zlarinians in the 19th century, who proved themselves the most skilled harvesters in the Adriatic region (Lorini, 1903). Among them, the Beban and Makale families rose to prominence, gradually expanding their fleets and influence as they sailed and harvested across the Adriatic. In search of coral caches, they often ventured to harvesting grounds as far as the Ionian Sea (Basioli, 1984).

Italian demand for raw coral from Zlarin severely diminished after the surprising discovery of sub-fossil coral deposits in the Sicily Channel near Sciacca in 1875. For years to come, the coral market was saturated with the abundant supply found in the banks – the yield came to an extraordinary 18,000 tons, amounting to approximately 90% of all the red coral harvested along the Italian coastline over the 150 years prior to its discovery (Nozomu, 2021). Furthermore, the two world wars negatively impacted trade.

Efforts to revive harvesting activities to their former scope met with limited success. Alongside the traditional wooden tool – the *inženj* – diving equipment was gradually introduced from the 1920's onward (Basioli, 1984; Perić, 1939). Felicije Vukov and Frane Rossini were the first on Zlarin to use diving equipment for coral harvesting (Dean, 2004); they used special suits with a supply of air from the surface. At the time, diving crews mostly consisted of six people. Aside from rowers, the cook, and the captain, two-four people worked the air pump, depending on the depth of the dive. As the development of diving equipment progressed, coral diving became simpler, and it was no longer necessary to assemble large teams to do it; motorboats and the general advancement of technology cut the time required to detect and reach coral diving sites (Curavić, 2021). Organised coral harvesting was declining, but divers continued to work individually, creating a new environmental issue. Using diving tanks, larger quantities of coral could be collected more easily, leading to the devastation of the seabed. As coral grows relatively slowly and is difficult to regenerate, this had a negative impact on the entire coralligenous habitat – a marine ecosystem home to coral and many other symbiotic species. National regulations were introduced to limit coral harvesting; in 2023 the government bought back fishing licenses from coral harvesters to put an end to coral extraction (Pravilnik o obavljanju gospodarskog ribolova na moru ronjenjem, 2023). However, the threat of illegal harvesting persists.

Navigating depths and horizons

The people of Zlarin were renowned as skilled seafarers, venturing far beyond the outer edges of the Adriatic archipelago. Sailing required an intimate understanding of weather patterns to avoid the sudden, deadly storms that can strike on the open sea. Equally critical was their mastery of the winds, which they used to optimise sailing speed and cover great distances. During daylight, Zlarinians relied on landmarks for navigation, creating cognitive maps (Kale, 2021), but much of their time at sea was spent under the darkness of night, when they guided their boats solely by the stars. Celestial navigation, a vital skill for seafarers since antiquity, enabled them to traverse vast distances and pinpoint their

positions. Without instruments, the human hand was sufficient for star measurements: the width of the middle finger on an outstretched arm represented approximately 2° on the celestial sphere; the width of a fist, about 8°; the span between a fully spread thumb and index finger, roughly 15°; and the distance between the tips of an outstretched thumb and little finger, about 22°. These simple yet effective navigation techniques were refined over the centuries through cultural and regional adaptations, allowing seafarers to conquer the open seas with precision (Bilić, 2005; Fernandez-Velasco et al., 2023).

The history of coral harvesting is one of hard labour, but marked with cooperation, interconnected communities, and an immense knowledge of nature and respect/fear for its power. Departures required advance preparation. During this time, nets were woven and all necessary supplies were readied. Several boats, fully crewed with groups of five–seven men and equipped, were docked side by side and stocked with enough provisions for roughly one month. When embarking on their expeditions, they sailed in early May until September, returning to the island to resupply their provisions – first around mid-July, then again in late August, before finally returning in late September. The boats would set out before dawn when the sea was calm (Perić, 1939). The device used to extract coral was the *inženj*, a heavy contraption consisting of two wooden pieces arranged in the configuration of a St. Andrew's cross. For the tool to sink more efficiently, a stone weighing roughly 50 kilograms was hung at its central point, and large nets (*borsuni*) were attached at the ends of four arms spanning around four meters (Lorini, 1903). When they reached the designated location, harvesters would lower the device from the boat into the sea with a strong rope. When the rope became taut, it signalled that the device had caught onto something. The device was then alternately raised and lowered, requiring precise timing to take advantage of the optimal moment when the hanging net fringes spread and could snag the coral. This process often involved circling the location for several hours and manoeuvring in different directions. The coral would break off and become entangled in the nets, seaweed, and fragments of rocks. The heavily loaded *inženj* was then hauled back to the surface, where the coral and debris were removed from the nets (Basioli, 1984).

Managing the harvesting process with this tool required coordinated teamwork and the guidance of an experienced leader (often the ship's owner) whose knowledge of sea currents was crucial to navigating the boat. The entire crew collaborated to drag the heavy tool, dredging the seabed to break off coral branches and ensnare them in the nets. This technique was detrimental to both harvesters and marine ecosystems; it was extremely physically demanding, causing exhaustion, frequent muscle tear injuries, and damage to coral habitats. Its efficiency was also limited, as many broken branches remained in the sea with only a fraction of the catch making it to the surface.

Extracting the coral was a demanding and intensive process, but locating their habitats in the depths of the sea was equally complex. Just as coral polyps grow and expand on the foundation of their predecessors, coral harvesters have relied for centuries on wisdom and techniques handed down through older generations. A successful venture was a testimony to the value of knowledge from the past – it was grounded in the continuity of its transfer over generations and the result of collective contributions over time.

To locate productive spots, harvesters ventured into distant horizons armed only with rudimentary tools, meticulously mapping an immense area. First, they used the *klavicalo* – a dried hollow gourd anchored with a thin rope – to mark locations where coral might be found. To gain a better understanding of the underwater terrain – the shape of rocks,

their slopes and depth – a lead weight was lowered to the seabed and slowly dragged along. Points where the weight suddenly sank deeper indicated slopes where coral was likely to grow. These points were then further investigated using a *ruzunata*, a heavy rock with a single net attached to it, which was dragged along the cliffs. If broken branches were found tangled in the net when it was pulled back onboard, it confirmed the presence of coral and a *pošta* – a harvesting spot – was established. To identify and memorise the exact positions of coral reefs in open waters, they relied on distinctive features and markers on land – natural landmarks, known as *sinjali* (signals) – such as mountains, rocks, or other distinctive features that eased orientation. Crews of harvesters exchanged insight on these spots and were always in search of new ones, as, once exploited, areas remained barren for a long time due to coral's very slow regeneration rate.

Petar Lorini, Croatian scholar and an islander himself, born on the island of Sali in 1850, remains a relevant historical resource for understanding the Adriatic's maritime heritage. His insights into maritime practices in the Adriatic (1903) documented the challenges faced by harvesters as they contended with shifting economic and environmental conditions in the late 19th century. At that time, according to Lorini, only three coral harvesters remained active. Lorini strongly advocated for the continuation of the practice, warning that the harvesters' unique skills and knowledge of hidden coral-rich locations might become irretrievably lost. He underscored the critical importance of preserving this knowledge, traditionally passed down through oral tradition or private sketches.

Similarly, some decades later, in a 1939 article, historian and ethnographer Jelka Perić states that the irreplaceable knowledge of coral cliff locations is at risk of being lost due to the fact that it was mostly Zlarinians who harvested in the Adriatic area, meaning the knowledge was kept local and private, and that some of it had already been lost with the passing of the older generations. However, she notes that some of the harvesters keep "special markings" in their books. One such unique book was discovered by chance while gathering materials for the Centre's exhibition. The author of the manuscript is Felicije Vukov, a renowned coral harvester from Zlarin who returned to the island after years spent sailing the seas. On Zlarin, he underwent the full evolution from an old-school coral harvester to managing a company with professional divers; he also led the local cooperative for coral extraction and processing (Curavić, 2021). In his notebook, Vukov meticulously recorded underwater locations rich in coral, providing precise descriptions. He cherished this notebook until his passing, after which it was entrusted to a professional diver, Slobodan Bone Macura, who subsequently donated it to the Centre, where it is now displayed.

Fear and faith

The belief in coral's supernatural powers, shared by many societies and cultures worldwide, finds its counterpart in local traditions where it intertwines with idiosyncratic protective practices and beliefs. The ground floor section of the Centre presents the cultural and spiritual aspects of seafaring and homecoming through a wide display of votive and superstitious practices, beliefs, and customs that evolved as an antidote to the uncertainty of life at sea.

The day a ship set sail was important, filled with superstitious rituals and religious practices. Ceremonial departures of boats were usually held on Sunday afternoons after mass, and men who were about to sail attended church to take confession in preparation for the dangerous journey ahead. The priest would bless the boats while the whole village

attended the ceremony. After that, the crowd would disband, leaving only the wives of the harvesters to say their goodbyes. The wife of the owner of the boat would urinate on the ropes for good luck and a bountiful catch. When the men finally sailed off, they threw tiny stones into the sea behind them to ward off "evil eyes" that might be following them from the shore (Perić, 1939). The harvesters' return from sea was a joyful event; a crowd would gather on the shore eager to greet the harvesters and to admire their catch. The largest, most beautiful branches were gifted to the church as a sign of devotion to patron saints St. Nicholas or St. Fortunato, and they decorate the local churches to this day. A colourful, surrealist painting by local artist Ante Gregov, displayed among other objects in the section, serves as a kaleidoscopic portrayal of anecdotes, superstitions, and votive practices specific to Zlarin.

Solidarity

The solidarity within island communities, born from their shared reliance on the sea, isolation, and scarcity of resources, fostered unique codes of conduct shaped by the rhythms and challenges of island life. In his 1862 notes, D'Erco mentions the solidarity among coral harvesters. While boats would typically set out in a pair, out of consideration, the two crews would coordinate in advance to avoid conflicts, ensure they did not harvest from the same locations, and help the others untangle the nets, he writes. Coral harvesters occasionally had disagreements with fishermen, who accused them of scaring away fish with their heavy tools and damaging the seabed; some even called for a ban on coral harvesting from the authorities. However, they did cooperate in everyday life – fishermen would often inform coral harvesters if they accidentally found a coral branch in their nets, aware that the discovery of a new location could benefit the entire village.

However, collaboration and solidarity were not limited only to the open sea.

In 1931, the Coral and Sponge Cooperative was formed on Zlarin. The members consisted of local harvesters and sponge divers from the neighbouring island of Krapanj, brought together by the common goal of improving the plummeting local economy and attracting much-needed government funding to improve their working and living conditions. The Cooperative emphasised the need for training in coral processing to increase profits and elevate coral production in the area.

In June of 1933, the efforts of the Cooperative materialised, and a new coral processing workshop was opened in Zlarin, marking a promising step toward local production. During World War II, the Italian occupiers repurposed the building of the coral processing facility, locally known as *Kažerma*, into a *carabinieri* (police) station. It served this purpose from 1941 to 1943, during which time the Partisans and their family members were imprisoned there and tortured – sometimes to death. For a while, the building was mostly abandoned and served as a gathering space for the island community, where locals preserved their traditions through self-organised cultural and artistic activities. Today, the building houses CCCZ, which continues to function as a social condenser, fostering interaction and promoting a sense of community (Davis, 2023). Moving beyond the location of the centre, the cooperative approach used in its development enhanced the relevance and impact of the museum (Weil, 2025). Furthermore, the process allowed different understandings of what contemporary museums should be and how the sustainability discourse is part of broader narratives (Soares, 2021; Gomez et al., 2024; Davis, 2023).

Migrations and summer holidays

A large section of the Centre is dedicated to the history of migrations and sociodemographic dualities that shaped life on the island. Examining the factors behind the 20th-century wave of migration, the exhibits capture stories, testimonies, photographs, letters, and a rare poetic art documentary of Ante Viculin, highlighting the complexity of expatriate life and the long reach of Zlarin's global diaspora. Despite challenges and homesickness, migrants adapted to life abroad, shaping new communities; materials showcase diverse communities of expatriates and present the experiences, challenges, and contributions they made to both their adopted homes and the island of Zlarin.

In the past, all maritime activities – fishing, coral harvesting, sailing, and later migration – were primarily the domain of men. Women, on the other hand, remained on the island, raising children, forming strong bonds, helping each other sustain entire households, and led lives separate from their husbands who seldom returned. The women who stayed on the island became aware of their strength, as they were forced to take on jobs that were once performed by men, such as building houses and maintaining vineyards and olive groves (Bežić & Rihtman-Auguštin, 1982). Managing property and having the power to make decisions strengthened their authority within the community, so the women of Zlarin appeared to be more emancipated than women in other similar Dalmatian communities (Muraj, 1999).

Through cause-and-effect relationships, the unfortunate period of migration provided financial injections that contributed to the early development of tourism. Throughout the decades, expatriates sent contributions that significantly aided the development of the island and improved the community's quality of life, providing funds to build needed infrastructure on the island, such as electrification and connection to the mainland power grid, the purchase of a telephone exchange board, the construction of a water supply system, the paving of streets, the construction of a cultural centre with a cinema projector, and modernising the local clinic. The already well-known Zlarin also served as the filming location for the movie *Princess of Coral*, a German-Yugoslav co-production starring the famous Ita Rina (*Princess of Coral*, 2017). The film celebrates a romantic vision of the Mediterranean, the same vision that Zlarin has offered as part of its tourist promotion throughout the 20th century and into the present day.

The island fell into a monoculture of tourism, and this industry took away some of the elements that once characterised it: harmonious traditional architecture, clean and rich sea, and a peaceful daily life. Through the Centre's exhibitions, the local community is encouraged to rethink the island's future beyond its tourist image. Positive practices were already being introduced, particularly those that Marina Viculin, curator and art historian, sought to implement in the daily lives of Zlarin's inhabitants through numerous artistic actions and collaborations. One such project was a workshop on collecting wild herbs with the help of scientists and artists, in which the local community participated. The project resulted in a book listing the herbs and a cookbook, which remains as a written monument to Zlarin's cuisine (Viculin, 2022). The Centre itself continues projects with both the scientific and local communities, promoting work to identify traditional water sources and water management models or introducing plastic-free policies in all aspects of island life, which resonates with the current discussion on the museum landscape (Pastore, 2020).

Building the future on the knowledge (and labour) of the past

Coral exists in a dual state – it is alive in its ecological role, yet it is culturally appreciated in its petrified, harvested form. This duality bridges the past, present, and future, connecting ancient practices and traditions with contemporary conservation efforts.

The correlation between the natural processes of coral growth and human ingenuity underscores how adaptation and progress are deeply rooted in cumulative endeavours. In this light, technological advancements at our disposal today should be seen as an evolution of the accumulated knowledge of the past. Understanding the past is not merely a scholarly pursuit; it can also be seen as a foundation upon which to more fully master the tools and technologies of the present and the future.

Disregard for heritage and detachment from the environmental and social context of our surroundings, reinforced with an overreliance on technology, proves to be detrimental for individuals, as well as for society at large.

The spatial and exhibition design of CCCZ reflects a merging of the traditional and the contemporary: housed in a historic building, it showcases historical narratives and traditional sustainable practices by juxtaposing them. The concept blends traditional exhibit formats with innovative ones through art and technology to create a dynamic, thought-provoking setting, inviting its visitors to reflect on their individual heritage and position within current ecological circumstances.

This is particularly relevant to environmental protection, as our ancestors thrived by observing and living in harmony with nature – not merely to survive but to enhance and secure their yields and resources. Their success depended on working in solidarity with each other and on understanding nature's rhythms, limits, and strengths. Revitalising and understanding traditional knowledge is therefore a vital step toward fostering a more sustainable future – one where environmental protection is not seen as a cause of scarcity, but as a pathway to ensuring abundance. Achieving this vision, however, requires a cultural shift – one that embraces curiosity and views time as a continuum, connecting the past, present, and future, allowing for post-growth understandings of development (Savini, 2024).

This is encouraged in a poetic way at the end of the exhibition in the Centre. The visitor activates a mobile coral sculpture with their breath, causing it to begin "breathing" itself. This is not just an ecological lesson; it is an invitation to adopt a new perspective on the world around us – one that is interconnected, non-dual, and dependent on every individual that composes it. If such a mindset guides every one of our actions, there is hope for the island, for the sea, and for the planet.

Conclusion

The concept of sustainability is central to this work. It is explored not only in terms of environmental conservation but also as a socio-cultural principle that ensures the continuity of traditions and equitable resource management, underscoring the importance of community participation in heritage preservation. This participatory model aligns with systemic perspectives in heritage studies, which emphasise the interconnectedness of cultural networks and social systems (Fouseki, 2022). It also works with the concepts of the post-growth perspective in understanding what development is and what to strive for when we discuss local development.

Furthermore, the work incorporates critical reflections on the role of technology in heritage preservation. While technological innovations offer new possibilities for interpreting and engaging with heritage, they must be balanced with respect for traditional knowledge systems. The CCCZ exemplifies this balance by blending historical narratives with modern technologies to create immersive experiences that connect visitors with ecological and cultural themes.

This work situates CCCZ within broader discussions on museum studies and heritage theory. By drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, it highlights the potential of museums to act as catalysts for ecological awareness, cultural revitalisation, and community empowerment.

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Micromuseology in Lesvos: Reflecting on large ideas through "small places"

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Abstract

This article examines three grassroots museums on Lesvos to propose a theory of micromuseology, highlighting how small-scale, community-led institutions preserve personal and collective memory, support intergenerational learning, and foster cultural sustainability. These museums — focused on resin collection, refugee heritage, and local folklore — offer intimate, emotionally resonant experiences, rooted in gift economies and personal storytelling. Despite lacking professional standards, they function as vital spaces of identity and resilience, particularly in the absence of official narratives. The author argues these micro-museums challenge dominant museological paradigms and demand a rethinking of what museums are and whom they serve.

Keywords: micromuseology, community memory, Lesvos, cultural sustainability, grassroots museums

Resumé

Micromuséologie à Lesbos : Réflexions sur de grandes idées à travers de « petits lieux ». Cet article explore trois musées communautaires de Lesbos pour développer une théorie de la micromuséologie, soulignant comment ces institutions locales et modestes préservent la mémoire collective et individuelle, favorisent l'apprentissage intergénérationnel et soutiennent la durabilité culturelle. Les musées, consacrés à la résine, à la mémoire des réfugiés et au folklore local, offrent des expériences intimes et émotionnelles, fondées sur des dons et des récits personnels. Bien qu'amateurs, ils sont essentiels à l'identité communautaire. L'auteure affirme qu'ils remettent en cause les paradigmes muséologiques dominants et invitent à repenser la mission et le public des musées.

Mots-clés : micromuséologie, mémoire communautaire, Lesbos, durabilité culturelle, musées de proximité

Novelist and museum founder Orhan Pamuk, in his "Modern Manifesto for Museums", published and enacted in his Museum of Innocence in Istanbul (2012), highlights the values that he considers important and exciting about museums today. He proposes moving away from the model of the encyclopaedic art museum (e.g., Louvre, MET, the British Museum), and instead focusing on museums that are small, centred on individuals and their stories and "support people in turning their own small homes and stories into 'exhibition' spaces" (para. 8). It is through these spaces that he believes memories can be transmitted and meanings can be created for individuals and communities alike (Pamuk, 2014). This seems to be exactly what has been happening for years on the island of Lesvos (Greece) and in other parts of the country and the world. Numerous small museums are being created by individuals and/or small groups of people who share a similar belief in the need to preserve their personal and community memories and stories and share them with others, thus "displaying the depths of our humanity" (Pamuk, 2014, para. 1).

In this paper, I would like to focus on three such examples of grass-roots community institutions in Lesvos: the Resin Museum in Ambeliko, a small local community initiative focusing on the traditional techniques of resin collection and the relation of the village people to the forest next to their village; the Folklore Museum of Sykamnia, an initiative of the local women to preserve the memories of their community and salvage the material remains of the past; and the Museum of Refugee Memory in Skala Loutron, a small institution aiming to commemorate one of the most traumatic moments in the island's history, the forced exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1922-1923 as a result of the Convention of Lausanne.[1] I would like to use these cases to argue that these institutions – small-scale, personalized and grassroots – are important agents of transmission of intergenerational knowledge, memories and beliefs, which are all essential for the survival and continuance of the communities, their cultural practices and values. It is exactly these practices and values that played, and continue to play, a vital role in shaping sustainable practices for generations.

However, in this paper I chose to discuss these grass-roots museums beyond the lens of "community museology" as such, a perspective that has attracted increased attention the last several decades (see Brown, 2019). I would like to argue that these small institutions offer their own museological perspectives, their own *micromuseologies*, that is, a specific way of constructing museum meaning in a personal yet community defined manner (for the term see Candlin, 2016, and discussion below). Furthermore, I would like to argue that these *micromuseums* provide important insights into what a museum is and how it can support its community, in ways that are complicated and much more nuanced than we might initially think, based on their level of professionalization, their location or small scale (see also Brown, 2019, p. 6). My aim is not to romanticize these institutions – which all aim to become professional, as per interviews conducted with their founders – but to argue that by researching small institutions like these we might reach deeper into what museums are and for whom, and to reconfigure practices and beliefs regarding their present and future (see also Weil et al., 2024).

1 The "Convention concerning the exchange of Greek and Turkey populations" was signed in Lausanne on January 30, 1923, by the governments of Greece and Turkey and affected 1,6 million people: almost 1,2 millions of Greek Orthodox people from Asia Minor, Eastern Trace, the Pontic Alps and the Caucasus as well as almost 400,000 Muslims from Greece were forced to leave their homelands and become refugees.

After a brief presentation of the island of Lesvos, where the case studies are located, and its museums, I will discuss the idea of micromuseology and how the study of these small institutions can (re-)shape our understanding of museums and museology at large. Then, I will focus on each of the case studies to identify those elements that provide new insights into the understanding of museums, before discussing their possible input into contemporary discourses and suggesting some ideas for further research.

The island of Lesvos and its museums

Lesvos is a Greek island located in the north-east part of the Aegean Sea. It is the third biggest island of the country, and it is characterized by rich biodiversity, unique natural landscapes and diverse cultural heritage. Furthermore, it has a long history of movements of populations, as it is located at the crossroads between Europe and Asia and has been at the forefront of major historical events that have affected the synthesis of the local population as well as their understanding of identity and community. The most relevant of these events was the 1922-1923 exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey. Recent research by the University of the Aegean (Despotelli, 2020) recorded 61 museums and collections, with more than 35 established by individuals or small community groups, demonstrating the islanders' commitment to preserving memory and identity through grassroots museology.

Although a more detailed categorization and study of these museums and collections is required, their number alone makes clear how important the local people consider museums to be. Each of these institutions serves as an important catalyst for the creation and dissemination of knowledge, values and memories, while fostering the island's cultural and natural resilience. Therefore, the community museums of the island serve as platforms for preserving and sharing traditional knowledge related to the land and the stories of its people. It is usually elderly members of the community who have created these museums as efforts to preserve the memory of their past and the values of "their people" and to transfer these to younger generations. Thus, they aim to support the future of their communities, which they understand as closely linked to their past, but also hold onto things and ideas that give them their special place and/or event-defined identity.

Micromuseology: Looking at the "large picture" through small places

The idea of micromuseology was introduced by Fiona Candlin (2016) in her book of the same title. Candlin starts with the assumption that studying small institutions, established and operating outside the norms of large-scale, professional ones, can have an impact on re-defining museology. She describes these institutions as follows:

> small, independent, single-subject museums … collections that are variously run by trusts, businesses, special interest groups, and private individuals, and are open to the public; that concentrate on types of objects, themes, or individuals, that fall outside of the traditional academic compass, occupy a low level in the hierarchy of traditional academic classificatory tables, or that take a non-scholarly approach to subjects that could be encompassed by academe; and, finally, are small insofar as they have relatively low visitor numbers and/or modest incomes and/or occupy a physical limited space. (2016, p. 12)

Gregory and Robinson (2018) also focused on micromuseums, adding more categories to the ones Candlin had included in her research. They argue that artists' museums are also important examples of micromuseology, and these institutions serve both as museums and as artworks. They focus on what they call "critical caring", and they consider the micro-institutions they study as opportunities to re-evaluate, re-imagine and re-invent the museum.

While Candlin and Gregory & Robinson do not focus on local history micromuseums, their characteristics and approaches resonate with small history or ethnography museums as well, echoing the microhistorical insights of Ginzburg (1993). The term microhistory does not refer to anecdotal and, therefore, not credible history but to the importance of looking at different scales and understanding the "big picture" through in-depth analysis and appreciation of the smaller parts of it, or asking "large questions in small places", as Candlin puts it (2016, p. 19).

Very importantly, all authors agree that micromuseums elicit strong emotional and spiritual responses from visitors, whether these are members of the community or not. They encourage strong relationships with individuals who eventually become donors or participants in these institutions – the idea of gift-giving is inherent in the establishment of these museums, although they do not necessarily follow professional standards in terms of caring for the collections or curating them; their relationship to the works held in the collections calls for a reconsideration or re-evaluation of curatorial practices and professional training in general. They are meeting places, holding areas for relics of relatives and friends who have passed away, and they offer visual pleasure and pride. They provide insights into the world that are individualized, subjective, informal and emotional. Can these ideas transform museology, and if so, how? How can the knowledge and expertise generated by and in these small institutions introduce new ideas and/or allow for new perspectives in debates that are very pertinent in museology today? Can they be agents of resilience and cultural sustainability? How do these institutions fit into the new definition of the museum introduced in 2022 that emphasizes inclusivity, diversity and sustainability and connects all these with the participation of communities?[2]

To propose some answers to the above questions, we are now going to turn to each of the case studies selected for this discussion and try to elaborate on their stories and ideas to discern some of their main museological principles. The information provided is based on multiple visits to these museums as well as interviews and informal discussions with the main people involved in their creation and management.[3]

The Resin Museum in Ambeliko

The museum was established in 1994 and, as I write these lines, it is going through re-display with the assistance of the local Ephorate of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. My discussion here will focus on the museum as it was established before the decision to re-display and before professional interpretation is unveiled. The museum collection consisted of three sections, each one in a respective room inside the auxiliary building next to the village

2 See ICOM definition: https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/

3 Thanks are due to all participants in these discussions for their openness and sharing hearts. I would also like to acknowledge the support given by Chryssoula Sardi, Ph.D. researcher at the Department of Cultural Technology and Communication for recording and transcribing the interview with Stratis Kakabouras, as well as Eleftheria Alexandri and Leonidas Eleftheriadis, post-graduate students in the Department of History and Anthropology of the University of the Aegean for recording and transcribing interviews with the members of the women's association in Sykamnia.

church: the folklore collection, religious collection and resin collection. The collections were all assembled by the local priest, Stratis Kakabouras, who is still the soul of the effort. He started collecting as he was studying the village archives in the 1990s, when he realized that the resin collection was what "made their village different than the others" (S. Kakabouras, personal communication, February 2024). The aim of the museum remains to present and share the history of the community, to promote the study of the collection and underline the importance of resin as part of the revival of the local co-op that the village hopes will bring prosperity and make younger people decide to stay.

There seems to be a close connection here between the past and the present: the museum does not just aim to encourage memory building but to become a starting point for developing anew the relationship between the village people and the forest next to it. This was a decision based on a combination of financial, identity and memory reasons that somehow seem to blend when talking to Stratis.

The collection started as Stratis was working on the archive of the village: he realized that his family members were involved in the collection of the resin and the co-op and invited them, along with members of nearby communities who had also participated in this line of work, to donate all relevant objects they could find for the making of a local museum. This archive – which is now with the local Ephorate of Antiquities –initiated the request for gifts that formed the collection. This relation of giving, of community effort to create the museum, has multiple aspects to consider. Stratis, when discussing the beginnings of the museum, talks with special emphasis of the joint efforts made by members of the community:

> We did not get into a completed museum. We were adding objects as we were going; we did not have the money to finish the making of the museum in a short period of time; we collected whatever we could find; most of the objects are gifts, most of the participants (in this effort) were also donors.[4] (S. Kakabouras, personal communication, February 2024)

In another moment, he reflects on the process of building the museum space:

> We built the museum with our own hands! The people here helped: some offering volunteer work, some others offering financial support. To start this museum was a risk for us, for the church. … The members of the board of the church did not agree with the museum idea: they said that the museum is a "male goat", i.e., it does not make milk! (S. Kakabouras, personal communication, February 2024)

However, there were others who believed in this idea and supported it. Stratis refers with great emotion to the day back in 1993 he received an envelope with money sent from a member of the village diaspora in Australia that allowed him to pay a debt to the contractor for the museum building.

Emotions run very high when it comes both to those who have created the museum and to those who visit it. Apart from his own emotions, Stratis mentions different incidents that are very indicative of the same sentiment:

4 All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

> A few years ago, a man from the village who now lives in Australia was visiting; I asked him to take me to the forest and show to me a place that I had heard was full of very productive pine trees; we went there together, and the man remembered … and he sat down and started crying. (S. Kakabouras, personal communication, February 2024)

This is an indication of why he believes that museums like the one that he has created are very important:

> It safeguards memories; if memories are lost, then history is lost. If history is lost, then the future is lost. Memory is the life of human beings. … Whatever stays in our souls from the past does not fly away; it comes back again, and we feel nostalgia for it. (S. Kakabouras, personal communication, February 2024)

This is the purpose of the museum, then: to facilitate the members of the community, whether they live there or come from other parts of the world, to relate to their past, to express their nostalgia and, through that process, to gain strength for the future.

The Museum of Refugee Memory in Skala Loutron

In another village of Lesvos, the Museum of Refugee Memory was established in 2003. It was the initiative of a local cultural group called "The Dolphin", created in 1990 mostly by local fishermen and members of their families who are descendants of the Greek Asia Minor refugees who settled in the area after the 1922 exchange of populations. The Museum is just one of the activities of this group and forms part of their wish to "retrace their roots and to encourage/empower Asia Minor memories and identity" (S. Valachis, personal communication, 2008). It is housed in the old, now disused, school of the village. The Skala (meaning port in the local dialect) on which the museum is now located was the uninhabited piece of land that provided the inhabitants of the small village of Loutra up the hill access to the sea until 1931. It was only then that 25 two-room houses were built to provide shelter for 25 families that had arrived in Lesvos as refugees in 1922, mainly from the ancient town of Phokaia on the coast across the sea, as a result of what is usually called the "Asia Minor catastrophe" – the expulsion of the Greek orthodox population who lived in Asia Minor by Neo-Turks and the subsequent exchange of populations in 1923 as a result of the Convention of Lausanne. The refugee identity is still very strong even though there is hardly anyone still alive who experienced the events.

The contents of the museum were also assembled through donations from the community.[5] The creator of this museum, Stratos Valachis, a now-retired schoolteacher who has left the village but continues to be involved in the museum, claims that the idea for this museum came to him when visiting the city of Kavala in northern Greece and saw a similar museum established there by the descendants of the 1922 refugee community (S. Valachis, personal communication, 2008). Then, a series of donations started coming: objects that families had kept as heirlooms were taken out of the closets and deposited in the museum for safekeeping. All pieces of exhibition furniture are made by local carpenters and craftspeople; the arrangement and care of the collections is the work of Stratos and a group of local women, members of "The Dolphin" and volunteers to the Museum.

5 Donations keep coming to the Museum from members of the community and also visitors and friends who were inspired by their visit and entrusted their valuable heirlooms to the museum team for safeguarding and displaying (D. Papachryssos, personal communication, January 2025).

They take care of the space the same way that they care for their own homes; the rooms are spotless, although packed with artefacts, and when new acquisitions come, they are treated with care and respect, as if they were their own personal property. Central exhibits in this museum are two maps that are displayed in a prominent position and are also active and "interactive" in a very special way: on each of these maps the villages where Greeks from Asia Minor lived before their forced migration are marked, with the larger one providing an overview of the whole of Asia Minor and the smaller one focusing on Lesvos and the opposite coast. Every time a visitor identifies a village that he/she knows of or he/she comes from that is not on the map, the museum team notes the name and then reaches out to a central archive/library in Athens to verify the information. If it is verified, then they carefully add the name of the village on the map, which becomes a live element of display.



Figure 1: The Museum of Refugee Memory in Skala Loutron. January 2025. Photo: Alexandra Bounia
© Courtesy of the Society of Asia Minor Refugees of Skala Loutron

Visiting the museum is usually a very emotional experience for both visitors and guides. The tour is usually given by one of the members of the founding team, and it is based on the account of personal memories and emotions. It is not uncommon for visitors to remember their own family histories and for emotional exchanges to take place between the guide/s and the visitors. In this case, it is the special identity of the people of the village and the protection of precious memories that are fading as generations pass that are at the core of the effort of the museum. Not surprisingly, the aim of all people involved is to retain the interest of younger generations. For that purpose, they organize events every summer, they publish memoirs, and they involve the younger generation, giving them tasks to perform like documenting the collections or using their skills to enhance the "home-made" displays. It was one of my students on such a mission who took me to the museum the very first time I visited it.

One of the most interesting elements of this museum is the empathy it shows to the "Others". Unlike other institutions, this small museum dedicates a part of its display to relics left by the Muslim people who had to leave the island of Lesvos and go to Asia Minor as per the exchange of populations. When asked about this showcase and how it relates to their community, the response of the guides is clear and loud: "They are also people like us, who suffered and had to leave their place of birth; these are objects that belonged to them. We found them, and we could not throw them away. They are their memory." (Anonymous, personal communication, 2011; emphasis in original). In some cases, they are gifts given to the local people by their Muslim friends when they had to leave the island – a testimony of the peaceful co-existence of the communities before politics and war got in the way (D. Papachryssos, personal communication, January 2025). That is one more reason, therefore, to treasure and showcase them.

This is exactly the purpose of this museum: to safeguard the memory of the community, celebrate the past and keep memories, connections and stories alive. These are all personal stories that are made tangible and real through the objects in the collection. Every object testifies to each donor's participation in history and what needs to be remembered for the generations to come.[6]

The Folklore Museum of Sykamnia

Situated in the main village (and not on the respective Skala) amidst an increasing number of deserted and ruined houses, this local museum housed in the basement of the old village school appears to engage in a very traditional idea of the folklore museum. Its displays represent the idea of local traditions embodied in folkloric material culture, such as traditional costumes, rugs, domestic linen and cooking utensils. It was established in 2002 by the local Association of Women to "save the traditions and the memory of our village", according to the president of the association and active soul of the museum to this day, Marianthi Tsakou (personal communication, 2018a). The women themselves – mostly homemakers – began to collect all the objects in 2000. The collection consists of objects that were either donated to the museum by their owners – persuaded by the women – or they were "rescued" by the women as their owners either had passed away and their descendants had no interest in them or had simply abandoned these "old things" in their now-empty homes (personal communication, 2018a). As Marianthi claims, expressing a relationship of love and care for these traces of the past: "We took them, we, the women of the Association, we washed them, we ironed them, and we put them here, we rescued and protected them" (personal communication, 2018b).

6 This case study is also discussed in detail in Witcomb and Bounia, 2019.

The objects in this museum come with a range of personal stories and family connections. Their provenance and the relationship to the donors and the families of the village are meticulously recorded by the women of the association in their hand-written book. They also have many stories to tell when asked about them, such as the old wedding gown, now in one of the few cases of the museum, consisting of two parts, each donated by a different family, that happily co-exist to exemplify the now lost traditions of the village – a common past even if not a single wedding. The presentation of the collection is organized in a scenography of village "rooms" conceived by the women themselves, including the bedroom/office of Stratis Myrivilis, the famous Greek author born in this village, which also features in his novels.



Figure 2: The Folk Art Museum of Sykamnia. November 2023. Photo: Alexandra Bounia © Courtesy of the Women's Association of Sykamnia

The women serve as the keepers of the museum, in more than one meaning of the word. As they take visitors around, they eagerly share with them their stories, memories and feelings of nostalgia for a lost, idyllic past. They talk about gender roles, the structure of society, traditions that have been lost and others that are still alive, and tools and techniques. They occasionally offer the local name of an object, and they consistently refer to the donor/s, the creator/s or the user/s of artefacts. Their stories are nostalgic but also selective; they avoid anything controversial. If visitors enquire after specific objects that have difficult connections to people or events (such as the "trauma" of refugees), there is usually a brief reference to that, and very quickly the discussion returns to the "ideal past" the museum serves as a commemoration for. This is the place where a close-knit, family-centred past is to be remembered. This is a place where the women of the village are extending their homemaking skills to make a home for the whole community and keep them connected.[7]

The number of objects on display is overwhelming, even for the women of the association. Some of these objects were removed and stored away during a recent (2023) effort, in collaboration with the University of the Aegean, to create labels for some of the objects. However, the numbers remain large, and many of the objects – for instance, the embroideries – are folded and stored in drawers of furniture on display in the museum – a form of visible storage. The number of objects on display serves as visual reference to individuals and stories, and, therefore, removing them from display is a difficult decision to make. It affects the visibility of certain families and stories, and it may create feelings of bitterness in donors who might come and not see their objects on display. The removal of artworks, thus, was only for objects with no clear provenance in terms of the individuals and the families that had donated them. Otherwise, cluttering is part of the museum's identity.

Therefore, this is more than a "folklore" or ethnographic museum; it is a repository of community memories, a "home" for all objects that can ignite these memories and can serve the community's coherence and future. There is no space for disputes here, the same way that difficult topics should be avoided around the family dinner table. And the "mothers" of the village are there to make sure that this is how it stays.

Reflections on island micromuseologies

The three museums briefly presented above share some common elements and fit exactly the definition of micromuseums as discussed previously. They are all created through the initiative of one individual and the support of a few others who realised this person's vision. They all focus in what they consider their characteristic element that sets them apart from the "others" – in the case of Ambeliko their co-existence with the forest and their ability to live through this relationship; in the case of Skala Loutron their identity as refugees who have suffered when they left their "homeland" to create a new one in Lesbos; in the case of Sykamnia, their small personal and family stories culminating in the "big" story of the famous author, the offspring of the village. They are all small in terms of the space they occupy and their budget, while their visitor numbers remain low, despite occasional efforts for the opposite. They are independent in the sense that they may collaborate with institutions such as the local Ephorate of Antiquities (Ambeliko) or the University of the Aegean (Sykamnia), but they retain ownership over their stories and objects. They are not professionally run, and their standards of collection care are different from those of professional institutions in terms of prioritisation – for instance, relative humidity and temperature are not of prime

7 For a discussion of this museum and what remains "unsaid", see Bounia et al., 2021.

concern, whereas cleanliness, associated with family and community pride, is very important. They are focusing on a specific topic and, although this can be considered quite general (the history and ethnography of a particular village and/or a group of people), it is indeed niche in academic terms and quite repetitive if one considers the artefacts included in the collections. They all share the same range of artefacts, such as textiles, clothes, cutlery and dinnerware, professional tools and personal items.

Taking a closer look at these micro-institutions brings to the fore several quite interesting topics. These are all institutions that aim to look closely at human beings in their individuality. Unlike larger institutions that display objects to represent wider groups and communities in a summative or holistic way, these micromuseums mention specific individuals by name. There is a feeling of intimacy, of getting close to real people or looking into personal belongings, getting into the heart of their existence. All three institutions share this intimate, personal character in their displays as well as in the stories that are presented during their tour. Is this what Pamuk calls "the depth of our humanity" (2014, para. 1)? Is intimacy, a key feeling also recognised in the cases discussed by Gregory and Robinson (2018), a valuable asset for a museum? If museums are supposed to be open for all and serving society at large, does having these small intimate experiences in these micromuseums mean that these institutions, despite their grass-root beginnings, are exclusive in a way?

The ideas of inclusion and exclusion are very much at play in these micro-institutions. They are open to visitors (upon appointment usually during the winter), they aim to attract tourists (during the summer) and, thus, support the economy of their place. But they also want to share their ideas and values with others. Their operation during the summer as well as their activation with programs and other events relates also to their prime audience: their local community, the diaspora, their children and grandchildren who are going to come to the village in the summer to spend their holidays and connect to their roots. However, when it comes to representation, they seem to be quite excluding. Those who are not part of the village or who have not been through similar experiences or share similar memories or simply have not shared objects with the museum are not represented. They remain outside the story, thus perpetuating forms of exclusion and not addressing internal divides.

In this sense, these small institutions are not different from larger ones, which are also excluding and usually present carefully crafted unifying stories. Only in this case, things are reversed. Whereas in larger institutions it is the "big history" and its heroes that are represented and individual stories of ordinary people are excluded – as per the Authorised Heritage Discourse (see Smith, 2006) – in the case of these micromuseums, the focus is on exactly these people, on the personal and family histories, on how big events affected ordinary lives. The heroes in this case are all the people who went through these experiences and their lives are recorded through the collections and displays. At the same time, these institutions cover gaps in the stories told by bigger ones. There is not yet in Greece a national museum presenting and discussing the stories of the refugees – past or present;[8] and even if there was, would it reflect this specific community's memories, ideas and experiences? Would it be *their* museum?

8 There are numerous similar micromuseums made by local associations in different parts of Greece that refer to the refugees of 1922 and their experiences; during 2022 (commemorating the centenary of the 1922 events) temporary exhibitions were organized by different institutions, among them the National Historical Museum in Athens (https://www.nhmuseum.gr/en/exhibitions/temporary-exhibitions/item/17609-apo-ti-megali-sti-sygxroni-ellada-meros-v-oi-prosfyges). However, there is no museum dedicated to refugees historically; the need for such a museum was discussed during the international conference CoMuseum in December 2024.

All three institutions rely heavily on affect (Smith et al., 2018). This is encouraged through three common characteristics: the subjectivity of the collection and interpretation; their small-scale, which encourages intimacy; and the fact that these institutions are relatable and relevant as they look at individuals closely and present their micro-histories. The material encounters available in these museums, the stories told during the tours, the scale and content of the displays, provide access to experiences and involuntary memories (Witcomb, 2013), which in turn create strong emotions shared by both visitors and museum teams alike (see also Varutti, 2020).

Therefore, all three micromuseums are nostalgic, sentimental and nationalistic (see Lowenthal, 1985 and Wetherell et al., 2018, p. 7), as their starting point is place, their place, their village, and the ideas of "us" versus the "others" are central in their practice of meaning-making.

On the other hand, what is special about these museums is their relationship with the people who have made them and are represented by them. It is this relationship that gives each of them their unique and individual character, which remains individual even though their contents might look very similar. Furthermore, they all share a value-led approach. The objects are just the starting point for the community to share ideas, intangible heritage, values and beliefs. Furthermore, intergenerational learning and sharing that often goes beyond the immediate community is at the heart of all three efforts. The museum founders insist that this is not for them, but for the next generations who need this connection with their past to build their future.

Stylianou-Lambert et al. (2014) have argued that museums are important pillars of cultural sustainability as they support heritage preservation, cultural skills and knowledge, memory and identity, cultural diversity and promote intercultural and intergenerational dialogue. From a similar perspective, Soini and Birkeland (2014) argued that cultural sustainability can be organized around seven storylines: heritage, cultural vitality, economic viability, diversity, locality, eco-cultural resilience and eco-cultural civilization. The emphasis on promoting and preserving cultural capital for future generations is a basic parameter of cultural sustainability along with preserving social, economic and environmental sustainability. Museums that collect, preserve and present tangible and intangible heritage of local people and communities, of individuals and families, and pass on knowledge and skills to future generations are essential instruments of cultural sustainability. And this is exactly what these local island museums are doing in Lesvos.

Although the museum founders interviewed for this research would not necessarily consider themselves to be engaged in critical museology, their approach is political in broad terms. All three institutions are examples of how communities or individuals take the lead in memory making. They are not leaving this task to others, and they do not wait for the State or the local authorities to take the lead, but they personally engage with memorialisation processes. They do not put their trust in the authorities who do not seem to understand their special character or support it (D. Papachryssos, personal communication, 2025). Isn't this a critique to established and formal memory making institutions? Isn't it a call to look more closely at the stories of the ordinary people instead of the big narratives of the past?

Similarly, this paper is an effort to argue that, from a museological perspective, we need to look at these small institutions more closely. Despite their modest scale and non-professional origins, they offer alternative forms of memory-making. Going beyond trends, blockbust-

er exhibitions and tourist attractions, these small institutions challenge dominant museological narratives. They provide micro-histories and opportunities to use micromuseologies to reflect on how museums can better pursue their purpose to preserve humanity (Pamuk, 2012) and the truths of ordinary people. They deserve to be further explored.

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In this issue we follow the invisible paths in the water currents that connect one island to another around the world.
To rethink islandness means defining these regions not as isolated lands with “empty” water-spaces between them, but as one vast interlinked space punctuated by occasional landmasses. Island-thinking turns perceptions upside down to openness.



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