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WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY ?

Ben Burt
Museum of Mankind

An ethnographers' journal focussing on museum education seems a good place to raise the question of whether ethnography is really something we should be educating people in. Does our concept of 'ethnography' inform an understanding of world cultures appropriate to the end of the twentieth century? We all have some idea of the literal definition of the word as the documentation of culture, but what does this actually mean in museums and in education? I am going to consider what it has meant in the British Museum through a brief look at the origins of what is, until the end of 1997, the Museum of Mankind. As the Ethnography Department of the British Museum, this museum's own culture and organisation reflects a way of classifying world cultures which has a long and instructive history. And although the Museum of Mankind will disappear as the Department moves back into the greatest museum of global culture, it seems that Ethnography will not.

The British Museum was founded in 1753 with the private collection of Sir Hans Sloane, a scholar who had spent his life accumulating biological and geological specimens, books, manuscripts and ancient or exotic artefacts or 'artificial curiosities'. This was a period when European intellectuals were beginning to investigate the natural and cultural diversity of the regions their countrymen were exploring, trading in and colonising around the world. The artefacts which swelled the British Museum collections during the following 250 years included trophies of colonisation, military and diplomatic, commercial and spiritual, as well as the fruits of scientific research, much of it also devoted to the colonial enterprise. At first artefacts went into one all-embracing 'Department of Antiquities', which was not institutionally separated from the British Museum Natural History collections until 1883. By the 1840s some of these 'antiquities' were being referred to as 'ethnography', although I am not sure what exactly was meant by this at the time. The significance of the word becomes clearer as we look at the history of how the British Museum's collections expanded and the Department of Antiquities was subdivided according to the way nineteenth century scholars classified the history and cultures of the world. My source for this history is one of the Museum of Mankind's first publications, issued for an exhibition commemorating Sir Hans Sloane's collections when the Museum opened in 1970, by one of the Department's former curators, H. J. Braunholtz (1970).

It is actually easier to understand what ethnography was by looking first at what it was not. It was not Coins and Medals or Greek and Roman Antiquities, which formed their own Departments in 1861, nor was it Oriental Antiquities, which formed a Department in 1866. 'Oriental' itself was an interesting category, since this Department at first included the African civilisation which later had its own Department of Egyptian Antiquities. But this was a minor inconsistency considering that from this time the rest of the world, including so-called ethnography, was covered by British and Medieval Antiquities, under the curatorship of a man whose main interest was British archaeology. The first curator for Ethnography as such was appointed at the beginning of this century; the collections were separated off in a department of 'Ceramics and Ethnography' in 1921 and then incorporated in 'Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography' in 1933. You could be forgiven for thinking that the British Museum didn't really know what it meant by Ethnography, beyond realising that it was acquiring so much of it that it could no longer append it to some other field of study. When Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography formed separate departments in 1945, it became evident that ethnography did not include the ancient civilisations of Asia, nor the fine arts commissioned by the ruling elites of most contemporary Asian, North African and European peoples. On the other hand, it did include the material possessions of some ordinary peasants and townspeople within these areas, insofar as their culture was represented in the Museum's collections at all.

Perhaps the definition of 'ethnography' was after all best summarised in the legendary words of a senior official who is said once to have called it the 'rag and bone department' (Braunholtz 1970: 45). Ethnography was actually a residual or 'dustbin' category, including the majority of the known cultures of the world but excluding those of particular interest to British scholars of the time.

In terms of the anthropology of that period, museum ethnography more or less covered what were regarded as evolutionary stages of 'savagery' and 'barbarism', represented by tribal and peasant societies, as distinct from 'civilisation'. It dealt particularly with the mythical 'primitive man', used by one early Keeper of Ethnography to explain the impact of colonialism by supposing that '... he is so much the creature of habit that unfamiliar influences such as those which white men introduce into his country disturb his mental balance' (British Museum 1910: 31). However, even if we take civilisation to mean only the elite culture of societies with cities, states, class structures and so on, as distinct from the peasants and townspeople who supported them, it is still interesting to consider why 'ethnography' came to include the ancient civilisations of Mexico and Peru, or the contemporary kingdoms of Southeast Asia.

Equally interesting is the question as to why such a category of 'ethnography' has remained so firmly rooted in the organisation of a major national cultural body such as the British Museum, to the extent that it has been the subject for a large separate museum for the last quarter century. Why, when the British Museum was pressed for space in the 1960s, was Ethnography the department chosen to be exiled to a back-street in Mayfair? If the British Museum's priority had been to exhibit on one site a representative sample of world history and culture, it might perhaps have considered moving the very specialised collections of predominantly Western artefacts in Coins and Medals, Prints and Drawings, or even Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities. After all, these subjects are also represented in more specialised national museums such as the Victoria and Albert and National Gallery, and in local museums of British history and archaeology. As it was, the Bloomsbury site became a museum of those cultures conceived of as Western or Oriental and their antecedents. And why, when the whole of the British Museum's collections are once again more or less reunited in a few years' time, will Ethnography as defined institutionally more than 50 years ago continue to structure the organisation of new galleries and the Study Centre? These developments, with the Great Court scheme and its Education Centre, will involve the biggest shake-up of the Museum's organisation since the Natural History Museum was founded more than a century ago. Why has this not been recognised as an opportunity to review the Museum's institutional and intellectual structures?

There is always a risk that long-established academic institutions will fall into a state of inertia, a chronic institutional disease not easily diagnosed by those who have established careers in an organisation. But in this case the inertia also seems to be intellectual, representing a British or Western vested interest in a particular view of the world which allows us to avoid certain difficult questions about the politics of culture, particularly the relationship between the First World and those aptly described by Eric Wolfe in the title of his book as the 'people without history' (Wolfe 1982). Wolfe's point is that the West denies the history of the peoples it has colonised. In Britain both academic and popular culture reflect a persistent wilful ignorance of history which somehow suspends certain societies in an exotic world beyond the processes which we recognise in our own past. In anthropology or ethnography a good example of this is the literary conceit of the 'ethnographic present', by which people are described in the present tense as doing things at some ideal historical moment which they actually did (and maybe ceased to do) decades or generations ago. For education, a simple example is the National History Curriculum for Key Stage 3, which introduces 'the history of peoples who lived in North

America before the coming of Europeans' as an option for 'the study of a past non-European society'. The Non-statutory Guidance for this study unit gave examples of topics (political organisation, religion, etc) which included no reference at all to the history of colonisation of Native Americans beyond suggesting the study of 'how this way of life has changed' (Department for Education 1988, 1995). In short, even in the history curriculum, Native Americans are treated as a 'people without history'.

Ethnography museums are often in danger of compounding this attitude, for both good and bad reasons. To pursue the example of Native Americans, they are represented in collections of objects which are mostly obsolete, often very old, which tell us little about the way these people live today, for the good reason that most contemporary Native American material culture is hardly different from the rest of North America and hence not very useful to illustrate whatever else is still distinctive about their culture. However, the fact that many Native peoples have retained cultural distinctiveness under American colonisation, in some cases for several centuries and at great cost, deserves pointing out to the majority of Europeans, or Americans, who hardly realise the fact. The politics of this cultural situation is about the deliberate suppression and wilful misrepresentation of Native culture by the majority, through a form of racism which has important implications for their land rights and civil rights, as well as the alternatives they have to offer to American and even British historical perspectives and cultural values, wherein may lie their educational interest.

If we cannot represent the distinctive Native American culture of the present through artefacts, we might think about using words and pictures to put the culture of the past in the context of their present-day experience. If this is beyond us, perhaps we should consider whether to exhibit Native American culture at all. 'After all, if British culture were exhibited to confirm an impression by Native Americans, who were equally ignorant about us, that our history had ceased in a nineteenth century of quaint Dickensian images, we might feel we were being misrepresented. And even if an exhibition on our past was clearly related to our present, would we want it to show British Islanders living in cultural isolation, barely affected by the peoples they had colonised around the world? How would such an exhibition explain the culture we share today, and what would it say about the history of those immigrant populations who make such an important contribution to this culture? Native Americans have also shared a history with peoples of other origins and cultures, Europeans and Africans in particular, who have affected their lives for hundreds of years, in most cases long before they actually colonised them. So why do we exhibit Native American culture with so little reference to this history?

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Let's consider some alternatives. What if Native American culture were represented in museum departments of American history? One objection might be that this would relegate it to a footnote in a department dominated by European culture, but don't museums usually give special emphasis to cultural themes deemed of particular interest? For instance, the fine arts patronised by the upper classes of various societies commonly receive representation out of all proportion to the size of their population, as witnessed by so many Western fine art museums. If a North American museum department really wanted to do justice to the history and culture of the continent, its agenda might include altering public perceptions by privileging minority cultures to counter the dominant influence of the WASPs.

We might think about doing something similar for other regions of the world too. What about an African department which included ancient Egyptians, Arabs, white Afrikaans and Indian East Africans as well Black Africans? Of course, this would be equally problematic, raising all sorts of questions about relationships with other cultural regions such as the Mediterranean or the Arab World which are even more complex than those within North America. But perhaps it is time we seriously addressed such questions, and considered what unites and distinguishes people in terms of a late twentieth century understanding of world history and culture. A conceptual and institutional structure which took account of the historical relationships between the cultures of the world would surely be an improvement on categories deriving from nineteenth century theories of cultural evolution. Do museums really have to carry a nineteenth century concept of ethnography into the twenty-first century?

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