

## Who is “the Other” Now? Mediation of History in Multi-Cultural South Africa and Scandinavia of Today

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss how some museums in South Africa and Scandinavia address the task of being part of a “new” multi-cultural society, and what happens to the narrative roles of “Us” and the “Others” in museum mediation of history today. In South Africa, 14 years after the transition from apartheid to democratic policies, old museums are struggling with their identity, with their legacy and with their collections. Some museums make a powerful effort to help people regain a space and a voice in the present by accentuating the presence in the past. This makes for interesting discussions on identity, national heritage and the mediation of history in a multi-cultural society. Who was “the Other” that was not represented before and who is “the Other” today, for example in the mediation of history in a place like the Robben Island Museum, celebrating the liberation struggle with an inclusive approach but also with a very distinct cast of actors, those good and those bad – “Us” and “the Others”?

From 2005 to 2008 the exhibition *Kongospår – Traces of the Congo* – has opened its doors in national museums in Scandinavia and Finland. This exhibition’s starting point is “Why are there so many artefacts from the Congo in our collections and why are there so many traces of the Congo in Scandinavia?” It is a reflective exhibition that tries to problematize colonialism and the presence of the whites – the Scandinavians – in the history of the Congo. What is interesting is that in problematizing the gaze of the past upon “the Others” – the people of the Congo – the exhibition can also be interpreted as critically problematizing the notion of “Us” in the past. Who were the “We” who thought that we had the right to exploit the Africans or saw it as “our” mission to civilize “the Other”? But in distancing ourselves from the exploiters and colonizers of the past, and in a multi-cultural and inclusive society of today, who is allotted the narrative roles of “Us” and “the Other” – Who is “the Other” now?

## Introduction

This article will deal with the question of how some museums in Scandinavia and South Africa address the challenge of being part of a “new” multi-cultural society. In the interest of consolidating a national cultural heritage, or legitimizing a social order, the mediation of history, also in museums, has often marked out a distinct line between “Us” and “the Others”.<sup>1</sup> But in a multi-cultural setting and in societies with clearly defined policies of democracy, equality and multi-culturalism, a common and official “national identity” is no longer so easily defined. A clear example of this is the case of “the new South Africa,” after the fall of apartheid and after the democratic elections in 1994, and it has also become a reality in the European societies. Michel Azar, for example, writes: “[...] the meaning in the denotation [Swedish is] constantly [...] adrift and [can only] be defined through its excluding function: *a true Swede is the person who is not like the one who is not.*”<sup>2</sup> (my translation). This characterization offers little practical help (which is obviously the point!) in defining an identity or a cultural heritage. For instance, if we look at national museums, would this then mean that they should display “objects that are not like the objects that are not from the culture in question?”

However, perhaps it is not self evident that museums should deal with the issue of national identity and national cultural heritage at all any more? Janet Hall, from a “Third World”-point of view even questions the very idea of the museum in “Museums, myths and missionaries: redressing the past for a new South Africa”:

As stated earlier, a museum is a Eurocentric concept and as such is something which has no equivalent in traditional Africa. [...]

[...] it is generally agreed by First World nations that they are essential as a means of preserving the past, defining national identity, and giving purpose to and providing continuity in life.

Yet are any of these considered vital by a nation in the Third World?<sup>3</sup>

In the case of “the new South Africa” it is certainly relevant to ask the question if museums should really *preserve* the structures, narratives and collections of the recent past. The past should perhaps rather be contrasted to the new, and present, as it is defined and expressed in contemporary policies. Wouldn't it, however, also be interesting to turn Halls question around and ask: Is “preserving the past, defining national identity, and giving purpose to and providing continuity in life” still relevant in *Western Society* – in Europe? What role does a national museum really play in an era when “nationalism” is an ugly word, such as in Scandinavia, and the task and challenge is to promote multi-culturalism and democratic values?

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- 1 See for instance Axelsson, Cecilia *Afrikafararna. Historieförmedling och historiebruk på Svenska Emigrantinstitutet och Kalmar läns museum*. Unpublished licentiate's thesis, Växjö University, Sweden (2006). or Ajagán-Lester, Luis. *De Andra. Afrikaner i svenska pedagogiska texter (1768-1965)*. Höskoleförlaget vid Lärarhögskolan i Stockholm, Stockholm (2000). See also for instance Coombes, Annie E *History After Apartheid. Visual culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* Duke University Press, Durham and London (2003),
  - 2 Azar, Michael “Det symboliska objektet” i *Den koloniala bumerangen. Från schibbolet till körkort i svenskhet*. Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, Stockholm/Stehag (2006)
  - 3 Hall, Janet “Museums, myths and missionaries: redressing the past for a new South Africa” In *Museum, media, message* (ed) Eilian Hooper-Greenhill, Routledge, London and New York (1995)

Although it might be true that *preserving* a historical national identity is not relevant in South Africa, *defining a new one* is, however, seen by many as of vital and pressing importance, if this nation should have any kind of future. This is a challenge that different museums in South Africa have addressed in different ways, which I shall return to later on in this article. Perhaps this is also the challenge for European national museums? This new challenge does, not, however, take us any further from the problem of *how to* define this identity. But perhaps the narrative patterns that have been used before are still of use? Is it perhaps only the line-up in the (hi)story that has been recast? In a multi-cultural and inclusive society of today, who is allotted the narrative roles of “Us” and “the Other” – Who is “the Other” now?

### “Us” and “The Others” in Scandinavia? – The Exhibition *Kongospår*

Exploring the question of how national and other museums in Scandinavia address the issues connected to the overriding goal of multi-culturalism can really, in my opinion, best be done with a comprehensive and integrative approach of exploring the museum exhibition as a process of mediation, where aspects of production, mediation, *and* reception and deliberation are considered in the light of each other. It is then possible to say something about how the museum both intends to and really does address certain issues, and about how this seems to work in the meeting with the public.<sup>4</sup> When discussing the particular issue of how museums in Europe address challenges of multi-culturalism and “the Other” in the process of promoting, or discussing, a national identity, it is obviously interesting to look at exhibitions that explicitly deal with meetings and contacts between “Us” and “Others”. *Kongospår* is such an exhibition.<sup>5</sup>

From 2005 to 2007 the exhibition *Kongospår* – Traces of the Congo – has visited four museums of, perhaps, national stature in Scandinavia and Finland. One of these is, for example, the National Museum in Copenhagen and another The Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, one of the Swedish state’s four museums for world culture. *Kongospår* is produced by a team of professional museologists, ethnologists and archivists. It consists of a core exhibition that has been moved between the Nordic countries and where the local host-museum adds, or leads the visitor to, its own artefacts and traces from the Congo. Because the exhibition explores the traces of contacts between Scandinavia and the (Belgian) Congo this exhibition is of much interest when discussing perspectives on migration, mediation of cultures and people in contact, perspectives of ‘Us’ and ‘the Others’, and on using museum exhibitions to mediate a message of tolerance, understanding and multi-culturalism. My observations are chiefly from the exhibition at the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark.

In the National Museum *Kongospår* was shown in two rooms that led in to the permanent collections of the museum of artefacts from Africa and other parts of the world. The first two rooms were dimly lit and the walls were black. The carpet was deep red. There were glass-fronted display-cases in the walls and there were also low display-cases in a row in the floor,

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4 See my paper for the first NaMu conference: Setting the Frames in Norrköping – *Exploring the museum – a comprehensive approach*, accessible from the NaMu homepage.

5 *Kongospår* was produced by Riksställningar in cooperation with Etnografiska museet/Statens museer för världskultur in Sweden, and other ethnographical museums in the Nordic countries. It has been shown at Etnografiska Museet Stockholm (Nov 19, 2005 – April 17, 2006), Kulturernas Museum Helsingfors, Finland (May 08, 2006 – Oct 08, 2006), Nationalmuseet Köpenhamn, Danmark (Nov 04, 2006 – March 18, 2007) and Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo University (April 27, 2007 – Nov 18, 2007), and is presently on its way to Världskulturmuseet in Gothenburg, Sweden.

leading the visitor from one room to the next. Two high-school girls that visited the exhibition described it as “mystic” and “sad”.<sup>6</sup>

A large amount of artefacts were displayed in the cases and there were also many photos, and lots of texts to read. In the second room there were two films projected on the wall – one of a street-corner in Kinshasa today, showing commotion and traffic, in colour. The other (contrasting?) screen showed old black-and-white-films taken by colonial masters and missionaries depicting everything from traditional dances by medicine men, mass-baptisms and school gymnastics, to military parades, and “life in the village” etc. It was possible to sit down in a chair, put on some headphones and listen to Congolese people that live in Scandinavia today, to a Scandinavian who was the son of missionaries and had grown up in the Congo, and others, talk about their lives. There was also a large amount of reading material about the Congo available. In the adjacent rooms were very large display-cases with the museum’s own collections from Africa. In these cases were hundreds, if not thousands, of artefacts arranged thematically, but without texts or contextualization.

The starting point of *Kongospår* is “Why are there so many artefacts from the Congo in our collections and why are there so many traces of the Congo in Scandinavia?” The idea is to use the objects as stepping-boards. The objects that are found in homes and public places such as restaurants etc, throughout Scandinavia, together with letters and recounts from trips and longer stays in the Congo, become traces of meetings and contacts, evidence of networks that tie Scandinavia and the Congo together.

The gaze in the exhibition – in display-cases, in excerpts from letters and diaries, in texts and books about the Congo – is the gaze of the Scandinavians upon the Congo. The museum visitor ‘sees’ the Congo from the eyes of Scandinavian sailors, military men, missionaries, explorers, and, museum staff. Congolese people could be heard only in the headphones. When visiting the exhibition with a group of high-school students, some of them said that when they came to the headphones these were already occupied. The students then moved on to the next room and “didn’t have the strength” to go back later. These students did thus not have the opportunity to take part of a change of perspective from the Scandinavian point of view to the Congolese. The traditional patterns of “Us” and “Them” were not really problematized.

The exhibition can in one way be described as a didactic one. There are a lot of texts that explain the objects and put them in a context. But it is also a reflective exhibition that tries to problematize colonialism and the presence of the whites – the Scandinavians – in the history of the Congo by asking the question “what are the stories behind these objects?” There is however little of a “grand narrative” expressed explicitly in the exhibition and the visitors must thus work actively to piece together the back-drop of the concept of (and the effects of) colonialism, against which all the artefacts, and the texts connected to them, collectively make sense. One of the producers of the exhibition said in an interview: “[As a producer] I have chosen the topic but I don’t have the priority of interpretation. I do however offer facts. I offer a point of departure, a start, a provocation, a push! Then one hands [the initiative] over to the visitor and hopes..!”<sup>7</sup> (my translation) The challenge for the visitor is thus to not get lost in all the artefacts but to see beyond them to what they represent and want to mediate collectively – to make meaning of the exhibition. It is up to the visitor to “get the message” of the exhibition, even though it might not be explicit.

The exhibition is reflective in the way that it broadens the question of how these objects from the Congo ended up in Scandinavia to include the collections in the museums that host the exhibition: “How come there are so many objects from the Congo in the museum

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6 Interview with high-school students, Malmö (2007-03-23).

7 Notes from interview with exhibition producer, Stockholm (Sep 10, 2007).

archives? Who collected them? And by what means? How did museums depict and mediate the people and stories from the Congo in the past?”

### “Us” and “the Others” – Then and Now

*Kongospår* is not only about the past, however. In the press material of Riksställningar the exhibition was presented with the following words:

Today Nordic soldiers patrol the Congo again – like they also did in UN-uniforms in the 1960s. In our media the Congo again return with stories of conflict and war.

And we still have a common history with the Congo. The Nordic countries have become the home of many hundreds of Congolese, which now contribute to our society and our history. There are traces everywhere. Both here and there.<sup>8</sup> (my translation)

There is thus an effort to follow the networks and processes that tie the two geographical places of Scandinavia and the Congo together, from history to the present. This is done by including recent footage, current products and interviews with contemporary people who are connected to both places in one way or another. The exhibition can thus be described as an effort to address issues of multi-culturalism by, in a didactic way if you will, pointing out and open up for discussion, how the connections and contacts have a long history and how it is only to expect that they should continue, in our era of globalization, multi-culturalism and exchange on both a cultural, social, political and economical level. There is also, one can expect, an idea that the museums are in fact promoting understanding and tolerance simply by trying to mediate something of the history and culture of the Congo to the people in Scandinavia, and by problematizing “our” role in the colonial history.

Important questions raised by the exhibition (which, from a didactic point of view, might actually have benefited from being asked more explicitly in the exhibition) are, of course: “What is the difference between the *historical* contacts between the Congo and Scandinavia, and the *present* ones? Is there really any difference at all?” Asking these questions is also asking questions about “We” or “Us” and “the Others”. As the exhibitions shows, the missionaries and the colonialists of the past that subordinated the people of the Congo, and made it possible to extract from the country riches and objects that now in some cases have become museum artefacts, certainly saw themselves as “We” and the Congolese as “the Other”. The same goes for the museum staff, that in the past displayed the objects and mediated the culture of the Congo as something exotic, different and with an undertone of superiority. But what about now? According to the producer, *Kongospår* is also about how we look upon these “enlightened” missionaries, clad in white, on the black-and white footage and photos from the Congo, in relation to ourselves.<sup>9</sup> This, in my opinion, thus makes it interesting to ask: Is it possible that the “We” of the past suddenly, in the bright lights of self-reflection, and in the effort to perhaps distance ourselves from the unequal, undemocratic, and intolerant, can become “the ‘new’ Others” in this present-day way of looking at and mediating history?

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8 Press material, home page of Riksställningar (2007-10-30).

9 Interview with exhibition producer, Stockholm (Sep 10, 2007).

## New Ways of Addressing Old Issues – The South African challenge

In South Africa, 14 years after the transition from apartheid to democracy, old museums are still struggling with their identity, with their legacy and with their collections.<sup>10</sup> In apartheid South Africa “the Other” in the mediation of history and culture in the national institutions was “unproblematic” in the sense that the mediation of history often followed the same colonial and apartheid patterns that were the official policy of the country. Now, after the transition into a new paradigm of policies, different museums deal with this legacy in different ways. For example, in the museum in the Castle of Good Hope, the castle which Jan van Riebeck had built in the 1600s, the issue of rethinking the mediation of history seems to be avoided almost completely. Histories told here are about the colonial masters and from a colonial point of view. “The Other” is present in the form of the slaves, or not incorporated in the stories at all, only implicitly as the ones whom it was necessary to build a stronghold for to subdue. Although the mediation of history cannot explicitly follow apartheid patterns any more it is easy to incorporate the history mediated here in the old tradition in which The Castle and the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria are landmarks. In the Voortrekker Monument it is described how the Boers, the descendants of the Dutch in the Cape province, in ox-carts trekked in to the interior of the country to colonize it, and how they endured hardships and in bloody battles defeated the black tribes that came in their way. The Voortrekker Monument for a long time played a significant part in the triumphant cult that during the apartheid-era celebrated the supremacy of the white population over the black.<sup>11</sup> But even in the Voortrekker Monument history has had to be renegotiated and told in a different, and more nuanced, way. Perhaps shortly the same phenomenon as could be discerned in *Kongospår* will take precedence here as well: the “We of today” (whites, blacks and ‘coloreds’ – “everyone”) look upon the “We of yesterday” (whites) as “the Other”.

A recently opened museum, The Origins Centre in Johannesburg – “A museum in Africa for the People of the World” – makes a very distinct effort to address the gap in history that was left unaddressed in the old history-writings; the times before 1652 when the Europeans came to southern Africa. Using such diverse methods as the results of dna-testing and biological explanations, the archaeological findings of cave paintings, old rites and traditions – social and cultural models of explanation – the effort is to *regain* the history that was silenced during the colonial and apartheid eras. It also comes across as an effort to prove not only that there were people, such as the Khoi and the San, there long before the whites came to the area, that deserve rehabilitation, but also that the origins of all of man-kind is to be found in Southern Africa. It is a powerful effort to regain a space and a voice in the present by accentuating the presence in the past. In a sense the table is turned here and history and heritage is now mediated by the people with the longest recorded history in this part of the world. Here, it is almost as if the role of “the Other” is now played by the white colonial masters and also, in a sense, by the whites of today.

## Master Narrative vs. Proliferation of Voices

The people of South Africa that once were “the Others”, now, after many years of struggle, find themselves with an opportunity to make their voices heard. The District Six museum commemorates the multicultural community of District Six in Cape Town that was virtually

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10 Section about museums in South Africa based on observations, guided tours and visits to the museums in question, during a research trip in South Africa (May 28 to June 18, 2007).

11 See for instance Coombes, Annie E “Translating the Past: Apartheid Monuments in Postapartheid South Africa”, in *History After Apartheid. Visual culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. Duke University Press, Durham and London (2003).

eradicated by the apartheid regime. The museum is a place for memory and healing and the museum guards itself carefully against any interference from the government even today. The story in the museum is told by a proliferation of voices. Anyone with a claim to this history and with a need to express his or her memories is invited to take part in the conversation that is the memory of District Six.

In stark contrast to this approach are some of the views expressed in the discussion on how best to preserve the legacy of the prison on Robben Island. The general idea is to let this place function as a national rallying point and a center for education in democracy for the future. But how is this best done? Annie E Coombes, for example, asks if the prison should be “untouched” or “retouched” to better serve as a museum?<sup>12</sup> Coombes also cites mr Ahmed Kathrada, one of the “freedom fighters” who was incarcerated for political reasons on Robben Island, and who now functions as a guide there. He said:

I’ve suggested that a group of us who’ve been on the island should independently record things so that in the end we can have a uniform story to tell. [...] it is important to present to the public one message of our Robben Island experience.<sup>13</sup>

What mr Kathrada is suggesting is that a master narrative is formed out of the stories of a number of ex-prisoners. To him it is important, in the name of unity and nation-building, that only one story is told in the museum. In this case, the particular people who would contribute to the story would, one can suspect, be the ANC-members who were incarcerated for their political standpoint, not just anyone of the thousands of prisoners who spent years suffering on the island. Most importantly, the question is if members of other parties than the ANC would be asked to contribute to the story.

To return to the discussion of “Us” and “the Others” the above might be interpreted as different examples of the same phenomenon: in a new political and social setting it is important to (re)claim a history and make one’s voice heard. In the struggle for space and political power it is important to form a solid group which share common interests, and to define the boundaries against those who do not. The rewriting of history in South Africa has obviously very much to do with present day politics. And museums, as the above examples show, are certainly important actors in the process of recasting the line-up in the reconstructed history of the new nation. Only, in this new era where the overriding principle is multiculturalism, and the political goals are equality and unity, the markers are perhaps more political than they are national, cultural or racial. At least seemingly so.

The most interesting example, finally, of a museum’s approach to the challenges of renegotiating history and cultural heritage in a South African museum is perhaps the Iziko South African National Gallery of Art in Cape Town. The visitor is welcomed into a great hall with display-cases of artefacts and art objects on the floor, and significant pieces of South African art on the walls. But some frames are empty – there are “gaps in the collection.” This exhibition shows the problems of the legacies and collections of South African museums very clearly, where pieces by black or ‘colored’ artists were never obtained by the museum. Nowadays the museum, as the exhibition points out, has no funding to repair this damage and fill the blatant gaps. “If the task is to present the national legacy of South African art, how are we best to do this, considering the circumstances?”, the museum asks the visitors quite frankly. What is really asked is: “Who should be part of the national heritage and who can never be?” The question is if the people who were “the Others” before will ever really have a chance of becoming part of “Us”, due to economical and perhaps also other reasons.

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12 Coombes (2003) p 71.

13 Coombes (2003) p 100.

## Who Are “We” Now?

The purpose of this paper was to show different examples of how museums, some of which enjoy a national stature, in both Scandinavia and South Africa, have dealt with the challenges of multi-culturalism and, more specifically, the question of identity-formation and cultural heritage – in defining “Ourselves” by means of defining “the Other”. In a new political and social context, where multi-culturalism, rather than nationalism is the official principle, histories have to be renegotiated and museum collections problematized. I believe all of the museum exhibitions described above are examples of this.

The South African examples clearly show how the old distinction between “Us” and “the Others” in the official history and in the museums, was based on racial markers, where the whites were the “We” and the blacks and ‘coloreds’ were “the Others”. Those who have won the struggle and are now in political and, perhaps, economical power also won the right to rewrite and tell history from their point of view. This means that there are examples, for instance the District Six museum and The Origins Center, of how the tables are turned completely around and the “We” of yesterday are now the “Others” of today. There is also an interesting example (Iziko South African National Gallery of Art) of how the issue is not solved by the museum, but the problem pointed out, and then handed over to the visitors.

In *Kongospår*, the Scandinavian exhibition, one of the aims was to discuss and problematize the “Us” of the past in relation to the “Us” now. This might make the visitor think about structures and power-relations in colonial times, which also play a significant part in how the world functions today, and our own part in those power-relations. It is also possible to see how, in the process of distancing ourselves politically and ideologically today from the “Us” of yesterday, we run the risk of giving in to a sort of “historical colonialism”. The idea would then be that the “Us of today” are much more ‘enlightened’ than the “Us of yesterday” and therefore the “Us of yesterday” represent what we are not. They become the new “Others”. I believe this approach to the issue could be discerned in several museums in South Africa. In a society where multi-culturalism, and reconciliation as the case is in South Africa, has replaced nationalism as the overriding official ideological principle, and when group identity can no longer be formed under the notion of a (seemingly) homogenous nation, it seems as if one (politically correct?) way to address the issue of how to define “ourselves” in contrast to “the Others” is to use the historical notion of “We” as the contrasting party – “the Other”. If this is a current trend, and after trying to answer the question: “Who is ‘the Other’ now?” we might also reflect upon the problem: “Who, then, might ‘the Other’ be tomorrow”?

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### ***Interviews***

Interview with high-school students, Malmö (2007-03-23), authors archive.

Notes from interview with exhibition producer, Stockholm (Sep 10, 2007), authors archive.

### ***Internet***

Press material, Riksutställningar, <http://www.riksutstallningar.se> (2007-10-30).

### ***Exhibitions and Museums***

*Kongospår* was produced by Riksutställningar in cooperation with Etnografiska museet/Statens museer för världskultur in Sweden, and other ethnographical museums in the Nordic countries. It has been shown at Etnografiska Museet Stockholm (Nov 19, 2005 – April 17, 2006), Kulturernas Museum Helsingfors, Finland (May 08, 2006 – Oct 08, 2006), Nationalmuseet Köpenhamn, Danmark (Nov 04, 2006 – March 18, 2007) and Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo University (April 27, 2007 – Nov 18, 2007), and can presently be visited at Världskulturmuseet in Gothenburg, Sweden.

South African museums (visited May 28 to June 18, 2007):

The Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town

District Six Museum, Cape Town

Iziko South African National Gallery of Art in Cape Town

Origins Center, Johannesburg

Robben Island Museum, Cape Town

Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria