The focus of these discussions was threefold: concern with the problem of attracting a larger and more diverse public, proving the museums' capacity as a serious educational resource and, in the case of the ethnographic collections, as a serious 'scientific' resource. While the existence of such debates cannot be taken as a measure of the efficacy of any resultant policies, it does give a clear sense of the self-appointed role of museums within the State's educational programme at this moment.

1902 was a significant year in other respects since it marked the renewal of concerted strategies by both contending parliamentary parties to promote the concept of a homogeneous national identity and unity within Britain. Imperialism was one of the dominant ideologies mobilised to this end. The Empire was to provide the panacea for all ills, the answer to unemployment with better living conditions for the working classes and an expanded overseas market for surplus goods. Through the policy of what was euphemistically referred to as 'social imperialism', all classes could be comfortably incorporated into a programme of expansionist economic policy in the colonies coupled with the promise of social reforms at home. It was in this context that museums and in particular the ethnographic sections, attempted to negotiate a position of relative autonomy, guided by a code of professional and supposedly disinterested ethics, while at the same time proposing themselves as useful tools in the service of the colonial administration.

The degree to which the museum as a site of the production of scientific knowledge and as the custodian of cultural property can claim a position of relative autonomy from the vagaries of party politics and State intervention, is an issue central to an understanding of the ethnographic collection's actual and possible role today.

I

The specific roles assigned to ethnographic collections in the discourses on museums and education produced from within the more catholic membership of the Museums Association needs to be seen in relation to another site producing knowledges of the colonial subject. Between 1900 and 1910 Britain hosted a number of National and International, Trade and Colonial exhibitions. Designated as both 'scientific demonstration' and 'popular entertainment', these 'spectacles' were the physical embodiment of different and sometimes conflicting imperial ideologies.
Fig. 1. Plan showing the extensive site and attractions at the Franco-British Exhibition at the White City, 1908. (A. D. Brooks and F. A. Fletcher, *British Exhibitions and their Postcards*, privately printed, 1973, pp. 36 and 37.)
Particularly relevant here is the fact that these extremely popular and well-attended events, held on massive purpose-built exhibition sites, nationwide, often mobilised the same heady rhetoric of education and national coherence which was to become the hallmark of the museum's appeal to the public at this time. While it is beyond the scope of this article to deal in detail with these events, they are an important element in gauging and comprehending the terms on which the ethnographic curators sought to define their domain and to establish their distinctive contribution to the national education programme after the 1902 initiative. In the face of the much greater popularity of the International and Colonial Exhibition, such a differentiation was only expedient.8

The obstacles that faced museum ethnographic curators in their efforts to acquire the same mass audience as the Exhibitions without relinquishing any academic credibility, are exemplified through contemporary debates concerning the problems posed by the museum building. Through the internal organisation and classification, in conjunction with the inevitable restrictions imposed by the architecture itself, the museum guided its public through its collections in a specific though not always linear narrative, encouraging implicit, if not explicit, associations. In view of ethnographic curators’ claims to the popular (albeit ‘scientific’) accessibility of the presentation inside the building, it is significant that the external ‘shell’ — in the case of the larger municipal and national collections — was the ‘temple’ type. The imposing and distancing connotations of this type of public building were fully appreciated by many contemporary curators and resulted in a series of novel architectural schemes which were designed to overcome this obstacle.9

The Colonial exhibitions were notable for precisely the absence of such a monolithic structure and an apparent lack of rigorously imposed control over the viewing space. This semblance of endless choice and unrestricted freedom was an important factor in the effectiveness of these exhibitions in obtaining a broad basis of consent for the imperial project. Through the rhetoric of ‘learning through pleasure’, the exhibitions achieved the sort of popular appeal that the museums could only dream of. Far more successfully than the museum, whose exhibits could only signify the colonised subject, the exhibitions literally captured these potentially dangerous subjects and reproduced them in a ‘safe’, contained and yet accessible and supposedly open environment.

This usually meant constructing mock ‘villages’ stocked with items that were purportedly characteristic and representative of a particular culture. Often peopled by troupes of professional performers from different African societies, Ceylon or other participants from Ireland and Scotland, these ‘villages’ were always favourites for press attention. Railway and other transport networks within the exhibition grounds had the effect, reinforced by the text in the guidebooks, of allowing the visitor to travel metaphorically from one country to another without ever having to leave the site.10 Consequently, they cultivated at one and the same time, both a sense of the availability and the containability of those societies represented. The ‘villages’ successfully fostered a feeling of geographical proximity, while the sense of ‘spectacle’ was calculated to preserve the cultural divide.11 The possibility of possession as well as a sense of being an active participant at an ‘event’ rather than simply a passive observer were other aspects of the Exhibition that were lacking in the museum experience. The vicarious tourism on offer was available to all who passed the turnstile at the entrance to the exhibition site, providing they had the sixpenny fee that allowed them access to the so-called ‘villages’.

The ensuing competition for the same broad public necessitated the implementation of certain policies in order for the ethnographic curators, in their capacity as museum administrators, to distinguish their appeal from that of the Exhibition. Such strategies served not only to differentiate the two institutions but, more importantly, to legitimise the museum as the domain of the ‘authentic’ educational experience in the face of the 1902 initiative.

The debate around the use of ‘curio’ and ‘curiosity’ as generic terms for ethnographic material is a case in point. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century these terms were a bone of contention amongst museum officials and early acknowledged by them as one of the major hindrances to any effective educational use of ethnographic material. As evidence of the severity of the problem, the journal of the Museums Association published the following comments by an early visitor to the Liverpool County Museum’s ethnographic rooms.12 The visitor contended that one of the main troubles lay in the unfortunate fact that the public ‘. . . regard it as a storehouse of curiosities arranged to please and amuse. Certainly there are curiosities in every museum . . . though the fact may be insisted that their original and foremost purpose is to educate’.13 The solution advised by the influential body of the League of Empire in 1904 was the ‘orderly arrangement and the transformation of mere curios into objects of scientific interest by appropriate classification’.14

An early guide from the Horniman Museum in London provides a colourful illustration of the eclectic display policy that the Association was up against. Prior to the Museum’s transference into the hands of the London County Council in 1901, descriptions of the Ethnographic Gallery focussed on the slave trade or social groups like the Dahomeyans or the Zulu, both of whom were identified in the popular consciousness as aggressive African fighters with a penchant for human sacrifice and gratuitous violence.15 Prior to entering the ‘African and Japanese Room’ the visitor would have passed through the Annex where a collection of ‘deities’ from
China, India, Scandinavia and Peru were on offer, together with a Bhuddist shrine and 'a Chinese banner fixed on the wall, as also a 'skeleton in the cupboard, the bones and ligatures all shown and named; it is labelled: — "the framework on which beauty is founded'. Glass table cases in one room contained Swiss, African, Eskimaux (sic.) Indian, Japanese and Chinese ivory carvings and a collection of Meerschaum pipes, while on top of such cases, 'are ranged glass Jars, containing Snakes, Lizards, Chameleons and a strange looking spiny lizard from Australia, together with a chicken with four legs and four wings but only one head, hatched at Surrey Mount' (the Museum's earlier name). The visit culminated with a walk through the 'Zoological Saloon' and a meeting with the much publicised Russian bears, Jumbo and Alice and the Sal monkey, Nellie!

II

The debates in the Museums Association over the classification of ethnographic material were considerably more complex and comprehensive than the resultant displays. The proposals revolved around the choice between a geographical or a typological organisation and the relevance of either for different types of anthropological museum. The general consensus delegated the former as the responsibility of the national collections and the latter as that of the local museums. The material at hand was broadly recognised as falling into the two categories of a biological unit and a cultural unit. Ideally, since 'Man's physical evolution and anatomical structure related directly with all his activities', race and culture were assumed to be 'intimately connected'. The objective for the curator was to demonstrate the relationship between the two.

Sub-divisions according to tribe and nation, however, provoked discussion that provides us with a particular insight into the function of ethnographic collections in Britain. In this case, colonies as a category acquired the status of a homogeneous 'nation', as part of the British Empire. Evidently, by this definition 'nation' was too large a grouping to be practically implemented in a museum! Nevertheless, the fact that a territorial possession of the British Empire had no recognised status as a nation outside of the Empire as a whole, had particular ramifications for any colony represented in the displays.
Clearly, material culture from these countries functioned primarily as signifiers of British sovereignty. Above all, in this search for the perfect classification system, there was the certainty that somewhere there existed a ‘natural’ grouping. Since culture was seen to vary according to geographical and regional factors and since environmental factors created regional affinities within the same groups, the ‘natural’ choice was thought to rest with a geographical classification. This was the arrangement selected by most large British collections.

The other system advocated for smaller local collections was morphological or typological; the most exemplary, then as now, being the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. The theoretical premise that the past could be found in the present was explicitly laid out here by inclusion of archaeological exhibits (mainly weapons and implements) from the Stone, Bronze and Early Iron Ages, alongside typological ‘series’ of material culture from various colonies. It was this type of organisation that was thought to illustrate more specifically the evolutionary nature of man. It concentrated on series of objects from all over the world, grouped according to function and divided into small exhibition groups with the aim of suggesting an evolutionary progression, by placing those forms classified as more ‘natural’ and organic at the beginning of the series culminating in more ‘complex’ and specialised forms. A feature of Pitt Rivers’ collection which set it apart from others originally the property of one collector (such as Frederick J. Horniman), was that it was widely acknowledged as being ‘no mere miscellaneous jumble of curiosities, but an orderly illustration of human history; and its contents have not been picked up haphazard from dealers’ shops, but carefully selected at first hand with rare industry and judgement.\(^19\) The classification system employed was the touchstone of the collection, and it was this aspect that recommended it as a model for so many other museums.

This comparative and evolutionary system of classification, which placed the value of anthropology as ‘tracing the gradual growth of our complex systems and customs from the primitive ways of our progenitors’ through the use of material culture from extant peoples (all of whom were colonised), was the chosen taxonomy throughout this period.\(^20\) Despite academic anthropology’s increasing disenchantment with evolutionary theory at this time, it remained the most prevalent means of displaying ethnographic material. Even where this was not necessarily the case in museums, it is clear that this principle had acquired a considerable currency amongst many members of the museum public. In 1902 for example, the British Museum erected an exhibition in the pre-historic room to demonstrate the use of tools and weapons prior to the use of metals. A review of the exhibition in The Standard, drew the readers’ attention to the ethnographic galleries, ‘which should be visited, in order to study perishable objects still in use among races in a stage of culture corresponding more or less closely to that of the prehistoric races by whom the objects in this (the prehistoric room) were made.’\(^21\) It is important to recognise that, whether intended by the British Museum or not, it is symptomatic of the conjuncture that existed in the ‘public’ consciousness that the reviewer was able to make such a comparison between the two rooms.

### III

Moreover, there is also evidence that the evolutionary paradigm served as a direct means of promoting support for that concept of class unity which was so essential to the ideology of social imperialism. Although the primary objective of the Oxford museum was to facilitate academic research, Pitt Rivers was no newcomer to the conception of the museum as an institution with a broad educational role, appealing to a diverse public. Indeed he actually saw himself as one of the main progenitors of this initiative. The early history of the collection included a short sojourn in 1897 at the Bethnal Green Museum in London’s East End. It is not insignificant that it was located in an area of social deprivation and class conflict. In line with other similar institutions during the 1870s, the exhibits were used as an aid in the task of ‘improving the masses’. Pitt Rivers’ own intentions towards the working classes were quite explicitly set out in relation to the use of his collection. His lecture to the Society of Arts in 1891 makes it clear that not only was it important that the schema of the display conform to a ‘scientific’ classification, but that it was designed to educate ‘the masses’ to accept the existing social order.\(^22\)

The masses are ignorant . . . the knowledge they lack is the knowledge of history. This lays them open to the designs of demagogues and agitators, who strive to make them break with the past . . . in drastic changes that have not the sanction of experience.\(^23\)

In the light of this statement, the persistent preoccupation with evolutionary theory takes on new and more explicitly political overtones. Through its tangible exposition in the physical arrangement of ethnographic collections, it was a paradigm which emphasised the inevitability and indispensibility of the existing social order and its attendant inequalities, while also stressing the need for a slow move towards technological advancement.\(^24\)

Where Pitt Rivers is explicit in his political affiliations in relation to class interests (while still maintaining that science was essentially ‘objective’ and non-partisan), later uses of evolutionary theory were less overtly concerned with social control. Nevertheless, it was one of the most long-lived paradigms for the organisation of displays of material culture from non-western societies and there are certain features
of later applications which reproduce the political assumptions of this earlier model. In both typological and geographical arrangement, for example, cultural elements characterised in the museums literature as ‘the intrusive, generalised elements of civilisation’ of the non-European cultures, were deliberately eliminated. The curator was well aware that ‘modern civilisation, has broken over all natural limits and by means of railroads and ships carries its generalised culture to the ends of the earth’.

But the resultant transformations brought about by this contact was not the designated domain of the ethnographic curator. For the material in these displays, then, and by implication the cultures they represented, time stood still.

As a means of validating the expansion of ethnographic collections, the rhetoric often employed was one of the necessity of conservation and preservation in the face of the inevitable extinction of the producers of the material culture in their custody. Paradoxically, of course, anthropology’s desire for government funding in the museum context as in the academic sphere, necessitated its aiding and abetting this extinction by proposing itself as the active agent of the colonial government. By speeding the inevitability of such destruction, anthropologists encouraged the expansion of the market in ethnography and boosted the already multiple values assigned to the discipline’s objects of study thus enhancing the status of anthropological ‘knowledge’, while simultaneously ensuring that those societies who produced such material culture maintained their position at the lower end of the evolutionary scale, since they were destined not to survive.

Since, unlike the International and Colonial Exhibition, the colonised subject was not available in the ‘flesh’, their presence had to be signified by some other means. By 1902, the principle that physiognomic characteristics were accurate indicators of intellect and morality (early ingested as a tenet of certain anthropological theses) acquired new potency through its association with the eugenics movement, now marshalled more deliberately to the aid of the state. If evolutionism had ever looked like wavering, it was now here to stay. Consequently, in museum displays of material culture from the colonies, it was common practice to include photographs, casts of the face or of the figure, or even skeletons and skulls. These were supposed to demonstrate more nearly the relationship between the inherited and cultural features of any race since:

The man himself as he appears in his everyday life, is the best illustration of his own place in history, for his
physical aspect, the expression of his face, the care of his person, his clothes, his occupations . . . tell the story with much clearness.  

In 1903, the Physical Deterioration Committee had recommended the setting up of an Imperial Bureau of Anthropology, whose anthropometry section was to be responsible for the collating of data on the physical measurements of those races coming under the jurisdiction of the British Empire.  

Despite the fact that by 1908 the Royal Anthropological Institute was still fighting for some government support for the scheme, anthropometry had already been put to considerable use by anthropologists working within the British Isles.  

The Physical Deterioration Committee, under whose aegis anthropometry came into its own in the following years, had originally been set up in response to medical reports on the poor state of health of the working class.  

While this generated concern about the social circumstances of the mass of the population, the ensuing debate around the issues of deterioration versus degeneration was fuelled by the eugenists, who were still mostly convinced of the biological and inherited, rather than environmental, determinants of such a deterioration. If this complex 'scientific' philosophy had ambiguous implications for the working classes, its implications for colonised peoples are as insidious.  

The ethnographic curators' insistence that a person's physiognomy and the expression of the face could designate their position in history takes on particular significance in the context of this preoccupation with and popular visibility of the 'science' of anthropometry. The emphasis on the body as a feature of museum display would have made it difficult to avoid an association with the work of Francis Galton or Karl Pearson, especially at a time of increasing government advocacy of eugenics (often in conjunction with 'anthropological' investigations) as a means of strengthening the national stock. Evidently, the Museums Association were fully aware of eugenics policies and the means by which the ideology of selective breeding was implemented as part of a policy of national regeneration. That the 1907 Presidential Address of the Association reads like a eugenics tract, therefore, comes as no surprise. At this meeting, a proposal was put forward for an Institute of Museums where once again the emphasis was educational, but where, significantly, of equal importance would be a regard for heredity teaching, seeing that the teaching of evolution must be based upon it. Here the endeavour would be to instruct the public in the part that inherited traits, character, virtues, vices, capabilities, temper, diseases, play in the destinies of men . . . and to popularise such branches of the subject of heredity as selection, variation and immunity.  

The fact that this practice of scrutiny so close to the prevalent eugenic ideology is present to such a degree in the discourse of the Museums Association, is another indication of the museums' willingness to participate in the state's concern for national regeneration, and points to a further complex of meanings inscribed in the objects in their collections that was far closer to home.  

IV  

One means of gauging the potential of the ethnographic collections, both as vehicles for a nationalistic ideology and as sites for the proliferation of contradictory and therefore productive knowledges concerning the colonial subject, is through an examination of the discourses around education in the literature of the Museums Association for the period 1902–1910. It is through these discourses that museums constituted their 'ideal' publics and consequently the 'ideal' function of the collections in their custody.  

Much of the discussion was formulated as a result of renewed interest in a concept known as the 'New Museum Idea'. The primary objective of this 'idea' was to 'afford the diffusion of instruction and rational amusement among the mass of the people' and only secondly 'to afford the scientific student every possible means of examining and studying the specimens of which the museum consists'.  

The museum was thus designated as provider of both 'rational amusement' and 'scientific study' for two distinct publics while prioritising one. What is particularly interesting here is that the 'New Museum Idea' was anything but new by 1902. Between 1902 and 1910, however, the need to attract what was loosely referred to as 'the mass of the people', is revived as one of the central concerns for museum curators. How then was this purportedly liberal extension of the democratic principle of 'education for all' transformed through the institution of the museum, into a discourse inextricably implicated in imperial ideologies?  

The notion of an educational practice based on the careful observation and study of museum collections had already been integral to both the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Gallery from their inauguration in the 1850s. And here also it was designed to attract a certain sector of the working class. Although this early initiative came primarily from a left middle-class intelligentsia, demands from within the working classes for effective educational provision were later met by workers themselves through the Social Democratic Federation and other socialist organisations.  

The fact that 'rational amusement for the mass of the people' was reintroduced as a focus of debate within the museums establishment in 1902, by which time the composition and strength of the working class had altered considerably, indicates a new function for this concept. With the rise of socialism and the subsequent organisation of a large proportion of the working class, it presented enough of a constituency
A. C. Haddon, the Cambridge anthropologist, now
they can live', was 'to elevate [them] above their
of the British Empire'. By 1900 the League claimed
all classes and all creeds except atheists and enemies
popularising Empire through lectures in rural
The notion of the museum as an institution that
ordinary matter-of-fact lives'. By 1907 the Museums Association was con-
joined all classes together for political objects ... to
form a new political society which should embrace
League, for example, was a society that specialised in
other public displays of material culture from the
colonies felt in some way obliged to define their
publics as having a large working-class component,
and in terms of an educational priority, is significant
in itself, whether or not it was successfully imple-
mented. The emphasis on this priority is more easily
understandable in the context of social imperialism,
whereby the working classes were wooed by both
Liberals and Conservatives on two fronts: imperial-
ism and social reform. As a principle, this policy was
designed to unite all classes in the defence of nation
and empire by focusing its campaign on convincing
the working classes that their interests were best
served by the development and expansion of
Empire. And it is evident as early as 1902 that
museums' concern with constructing their image as
an organ for popular education was, indeed, speci-
fically calculated to ensure that they had a recog-
nised part to play in what was acknowledged at the
Museums Association annual conference that year,
as the 'one great national work, the building up of
the Empire through the elevation of the commu-
nities and the individual'.
In 1903 this declared allegiance was compounded
by the formation of the League of Empire, founded
with the aim of bringing children from different
parts of the Empire into contact with one another,
and 'getting them acquainted' with parts of it other
than those in which they lived, through correspon-
dence, lectures and exchanges. The museums
played a crucial role in this organisation and one
which was clearly signalled by the distinguished
line-up of museum directors and officials heading a
sub-committee entitled 'School Museum Commit-
tee'. By 1907 the Museums Association was con-
gratulating itself on the rather ambitious and
dubious achievement of 'splendid success in educat-
ing and refining the masses of the population'.
Museums' assumed role as specifically 'popular'
educators concerned with encouraging working-
class participation, received a further fillip of appro-
val through a symposium organised under the aegis
of the Empire League Educational Committee. This
eighty day conference, held in London in 1907, had
a special interest for those involved in museum work.
A section was inaugurated specifically to deal with
museums and education. Even outside of the par-
eters of its own professional caucus, the museum
was clearly recognised as an important element in
furthering the objectives of the Empire. Any inter-
person of this educative principle advocated by
both Leagues as simply a benevolent paternalism
making use of Empire as a potential 'living geo-
graphy lesson', should be dismissed after 1908. By

The most democratic and socialistic possession of the
people. All have equal access to them, peer and peasant
receive the same privileges and treatment, each one
contributes in direct proportion to his means to their
maintenance and each has a feeling of individual proprie-
torship.

The notion of the museum as an institution that
transcended class barriers is particularly significant,
not only in the light of the persistent claims for class
unity made by organisations dedicated to juvenile
education reform, but also in view of the constancy
with which this rhetoric was applied in organisations
dedicated to the 'ideal' of Empire, who also mobi-
lised the pedagogic apparatus. The Primrose
League, for example, was a society that specialised in
popularising Empire through lectures in rural
districts and was founded in 1883 with the aim of
'these classes together for political objects ... to
form a new political society which should embrace
all classes and all creeds except atheists and enemies
of the British Empire'. By 1900 the League claimed
to include in its membership one and a half million
workers and agricultural labourers. The special role
of the museum for that sector of society described as
having no life 'but this life of making money so that
they can live', was 'to elevate [them] above their
ordinary matter-of-fact lives'.

By 1904 both the Horniman and the Manchester
Museum were making claims for the conspicuous
presence of both school groups and working-class
participation. An exchange in the Museums Journal
of the same year indicates the degree to which this
was now a sensitive issue, in this instance, in the case
of ethnographic collections. Free public lectures by
A. C. Haddon, the Cambridge anthropologist, now
advisory curator of the Horniman, had come in for
sharp criticism since, 'The time for delivery ... is
11.30 a.m. which showed that they were not alto-
gether intended for the labouring classes'. The
Horniman felt this rebuff keenly enough to respond
that despite this unfortunate time schedule 'large
parties of workmen from various institutions . . .
visited the museum'.

Obviously one should not take the intention as a
measure of its effectiveness, but it is important to
point out here that the fact that both museums and
other public displays of material culture from the

colonies felt in some way obliged to define their
democratic role as having a large working-class component,
and in terms of an educational priority, is significant
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furthering the objectives of the Empire. Any inter-
person of this educative principle advocated by
both Leagues as simply a benevolent paternalism
making use of Empire as a potential 'living geo-
graphy lesson', should be dismissed after 1908. By
this time it had been transformed into a more specific call for the recognition of the superiority of the European races:

The progress of colonisation and commerce makes it every year increasingly evident that European races and especially those of our own islands, are destined to assume a position in part, one of authority, in part, one of light and leading, in all regions of the world.44

Consequently since the British assumed the position of the world’s teachers, it was essential that they were themselves well taught.

As late as 1909, the relevance of education, especially through the use of ethnographic collections, was as persistent a theme in general museums discourse as it was in the discourse of the professional body of academic anthropology, the Royal Anthropological Institute:

Heaven-born Cadets are not the only Englishmen who are placed in authority over native races ... There are Engine Drivers, Inspectors of Police ... Civil Engineers of various denominations ... to mention only a few whose sole opportunity of imbibing scientific knowledge is from the local museum of the town or city in which they have been brought up.46

Clearly, certain class sectors were seen as an indispensible means of promoting an image of the museum as the site of the consummation of a seamless and unproblematic national unity. Furthermore, the fact that the terms of this address are borrowed in no small measure from a 1907 speech by that ardent exponent of social imperialism, the Liberal M.P. Viscount Haldane, places it firmly within this political discourse.46

V

Part and parcel of this ideology of national unity was the constitution of the concept of a National Culture, and here too the ethnographic curator played a particular role. As early as 1904, Henry Balfour, Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and President of the Anthropological Institute, laid plans for what he called a museum of national culture. Balfour went as far as specifying that this museum would denote ‘British’ in nature rather than possession, which was rather the function of material culture from the colonies as well as in the larger survey museums. ‘We want a National Museum’, he said, ‘National in the sense that it deals with the people of the British Isles, their arts, their industries, customs and beliefs, local differences in physical and cultural characteristics, the development of appliances, the survival of primitive forms in certain districts and so forth.’47 Although this objective was not realised in the museum context until much later, the proposal for a national, or, more accurately, ‘folk’ museum, is a persistent element in museums’ discourse, throughout the years 1902–1912.48

Paradoxically, the same rhetoric of extinction and preservation, once applied by academic anthropologists to specifically colonised races as a means of validating anthropology’s expansion, was now systematically applied to certain communities within the British Isles. The conception promoted by this rhetoric of a national British culture as a resilient ‘folk’ culture, surviving in rural communities, was a popular fantasy shared by those at both ends of the political spectrum, and it was assumed by certain members of the middle-class intelligentsia to be their responsibility to bring it to light in the common cause of national unity.49 Since 1905 supposed ‘folk’ culture had already been officially mobilised in the sphere of juvenile education to instill a correct patriotic spirit. By October 1907, Cecil Sharp, that untiring middle-class campaigner for the revival of ‘folksong’, had published his collection of what he defined as ‘authentic’ folk music since it was not the composition of an individual and as such, limited in outlook and appeal, but a communal and racial product, the expression, in musical idiom, of aims and ideals that are primarily national in character.50

While the effects of this discourse were visible through anthropological practice by those working within the discipline, it was not incorporated into museum practice. Its visibility in the public domain lies rather in the sphere of the ‘amusement’ section of the International and Colonial Exhibition. Here, Irish and Scottish Villages were reconstructed together with Dahomeyan, Somali, and Senegalese Villages. Without exception these are all produced through the official guidebooks as quaint ‘survivals’ in the anthropological sense. But while both European and African villages were produced as ‘primitive’, it was a ‘primitiveness’ that had already been clearly qualified in both cases, in terms that would have been familiar to a large proportion of the exhibition public through the discourse on national tradition constructed through the renewed interest in folklore. Consequently the proximity of these villages on site had the inverse effect of accentuating the distance between the European ‘primitive’ and their colonial counterpart. This was further reinforced by the suggestion in the guidebooks that, even in these supposedly simple European communities, there was evidence of an inherent superiority in relation to the colonised races represented. The predominance of adjectives such as ‘healthy’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘industrious’ together with descriptions of the Irish and Scottish living quarters as ‘spacious’, compare favourably with the constantly repeated assurances that the Africans are in fact much cleaner than they look.51 Similarly, while the guidebooks are full of references to the ancient traditions of the Irish and the Scots, the Africans are accredited with no such history or tradition.52

Thus, what at first appears to constitute an irreconcilable contradiction — the construction of certain ‘British’ communities as themselves...
essentially ‘primitive’ — must be understood as a means by which both museums and exhibitions established the notion of an intrinsically national culture through the discourse of origination. In addition, by emphasising the relative ‘difference’ of the black colonised subject, both the museum ethnographic collection and those ‘villages’ in the International and Colonial Exhibitions representing these peoples reinforced the illusion of a homogeneous British culture.

Because the educational policies adopted by the museums over the period 1902–1910 could be appropriated by either the more conservative ideology of national efficiency or the more liberal ideology of social reform, the ethnographic collections were able to negotiate a particular space for themselves. In an educational capacity they operated in the conjuncture between popular and scientific theories of race and culture, and thus acted as an agency for different imperial ideologies. There was, however, an ambivalence underpinning the relationship of the ethnographic curators to the colonial government. By declaring that their aim was to provide ‘objective’ education on ‘neutral’ territory, those anthropologists working within the museums establishment claimed a degree of independence from specific government policies. The emphasis on the ‘scientific’ nature of the knowledge produced through the classification and organisation of their collections on the other hand, was calculated to reinforce their role as purveyors of ‘objective truth’. At the same time, as a deliberate strategy of survival, the new academic discipline of anthropology relied on the argument that anthropological knowledge as produced through museum collections, was an essential training for the colonial civil servant and an indispensable facilitator in the subjugation of the colonies. Furthermore, the focus on evolutionary paradigms as a means of representing material culture from the colonies to British publics reinforced some of the worst aspects of those racial stereotypes disseminated through the more propagandist International and Colonial Exhibitions.

VI

Now, nearly a century later, we find ourselves on the threshold of another educational initiative, equally optimistically referred to as ‘Education for All’ under the rubric of multi-culturalism. It is a moment when debates on the restitution of cultural property take up prime time in the media. It is also a time dominated by the euphemism of ‘rationalisation’ for the Arts, Humanities and Education and by a government characterised by the outright hostility to ethnic minorities of Margaret Thatcher’s infamous aliens speech and by the jingoism of her Falklands victory speech on the 2nd of July 1982:

We have learned something about ourselves, a lesson which we desperately needed to learn. When we started out, there were the waverers, and the fainthearts ... There were those who would not admit it ... but — in their heart of hearts — they too had their secret fears that it was true: that Britain was no longer the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world. Well, they were wrong.

How does a museum displaying the material culture of other nations negotiate a position of relative autonomy from the rabid xenophobia characterised by Thatcher’s speech, while at the same time justifying its expansion and maintenance?

The controversy generated over an exhibition at the Museum of Mankind, ‘The Hidden Peoples of the Amazon’, is a useful marker of the problems involved in working towards any self-critical representation of other cultures within a museum context. It also demonstrates how difficult it is to escape the legacy left by the historical formation of the institution itself.

On the 8th August 1985, the Museum was picketed by representatives from Survival International and two Indian representatives from different Indian rights organisations. The demonstration concerned the absence in the display of any evidence of the ongoing struggle between the Indians and the Brazilian government or indeed of any resistance or self-determination by Indian groups such as themselves. According to Richard Bourne (Chairman of S.I.), one of the objections against incorporating evidence of such resistance into the exhibition was that it would have disrupted what was an essentially ‘objective’ account. It is also true to say that without the goodwill of the Brazilian Government it would have been extremely difficult to have carried out the extensive fieldwork necessary for the exhibition.

Evidently today, more than ever, the public ethnographic museum is caught between two stools. On the one hand, the museum still perceives itself as both purveyor of ‘objective’ scientific knowledge and as a potential resource centre for a broad-based multicultural education. On the other hand, it is clearly hostage to and sometimes beneficiary of the vagaries of different state policies and political regimes, and aware of the necessity of being seen to perform some vital and visible public function to justify its maintenance, while fighting to preserve a measure of autonomy.

A surprising degree of correspondance still evidently exists between the International and Colonial Exhibitions of old and certain contemporary ethnographic display practices. Now that both scientific exegesis and popular entertainment are contained within the same edifice, the invitation to partake of a vicarious tourism is as strong as ever an incentive to visit the Museum.

Furthermore, despite any criticism levelled at the museum as an institution, it’s authority speaks louder than the voices of those represented within its walls, as this passage from a recent Arts Review testifies:
During a week in or around the Amazon, I found it difficult to escape from the other tourists and enjoy even a semblance of the jungle. This was all white man’s territory and for a truer description of life with the Hidden Peoples of the Amazon I would recommend both this exhibition and the fascinating book that accompanies it.5

Notes

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2. Education For All: the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, H.M.S.O., March 1985. The Committee was initially chaired by Anthony Rampton until 1981 when Lord Swann took over. A. Sivanandan’s comments on the distinction between a multicultural education initiative and one that is actively anti-racist, are worth citing in full here:

‘Now there is nothing wrong with multicultural or multicultural education as such, it is good to learn about other races, about other people’s cultures. It may even help to modify individual attitudes, correct personal biases. But that . . . is merely to tinker with educational methods and techniques and leave unaltered the whole racist structure of the educational system. And education itself comes to be seen as an adjustment process within a racist society and not as a force for changing the values that make that society racist. “Ethnic minorities” do not suffer “disabilities” because of “ethnic differences” . . . but because such differences are given a differential weightage in a racist hierarchy. Our concern . . . was not with multi-cultural, multi-ethnic education but with anti-racist education. Just to learn about other people’s cultures is not to learn about the racism of one’s own.’ A. Sivanandan, ‘Challenging Racism: Strategies for the 80’s’, Race and Class, vol. xxv, no. 2, Autumn 1983, p. 5.


3. Agenda of the Annual Conference of the Museum Ethnographers Group (a Sub-Committee of the Museum’s Association), held on 25 April 1986, at the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. Item 9.2 reports a discussion on the ‘new’ (my emphasis) importance of multicultural education and a request from some members that the M.E.G. form a policy regarding dealings with the apartheid regime in South Africa.


6. The Museums Association was founded in York in 1888 at the initiation of the York Philosophical Society as the professional body of museum curators and administrators. The Museums Journal, founded in 1901, was to represent the interests of all types of museums within Britain mainly, but also the Empire and later the Commonwealth and Dominions. The aim of the monthly publication was inter-communication between the museums in the association.


8. The distinction was implicit rather than explicit and is demonstrated through the absence of almost any discussion or mention of exhibitions in the pages of the Museums Journal despite the active participation by members of the Museums Association and in particular by anthropologists. Such silence is stranger in view of the fact that many museums including the Horniman, Liverpool County Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum acquired ethnographic material from such sources.

9. See, for example, B. I. Gilman, Museum Ideals of Purpose and Method (Boston, 1923), pp. 435–42.

10. See, for example, The Imperial International Exhibition, Official Guide (London, 1909), p. 43. Describing the ‘amusement’ entitled the ‘Dahomey Village’, the writer says, ‘Entering the Gateway here, we are at once transported to Western Africa’. The entry for the ‘Kaffir Camp’ in the same guide (p. 45) began, ‘Entering their camp, we first detect them coming down the distant steep mountains with their camels and horses’.

11. This division was clearly not maintained as rigorously as the authorities would have wished. See Ben Shephard, ‘Showbiz Imperialism: The Case of Peter Lobengula’, in Imperialism and Popular Culture, ed. John M. MacKenzie (Manchester, 1986), pp. 94–112. This examines an instance of marriage between an African ‘performer’ and a white woman and the ensuing furor over miscegenation in the press.

12. The Museums Journal contained regular comments from visitors to the various collections.

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 19.
24. See Lieutenant General Pitt Rivers, op. cit., p. 119. Evolutionary theory as applied in Pitt Rivers’ collection clearly also had implications for the ‘new woman’. In this passage Pitt Rivers describes a series of crates shown carried by women from various countries. According to him these were ‘collected expressly to show the women of my district how little they resemble the beasts of burden they might have been if they had been bred elsewhere.’

26. Ibid.
30. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. xxxviii, 1908, pp. 489–92; *Man*, no. 9, 1909, p. 128 describes the ‘science’ as demonstrating ‘how measurement of physical and mental characteristics are a reliable test of physical deterioration and progress’.

31. See Watt Smyth, *op. cit.*


35. For a detailed analysis of educational initiatives from within the working class see Brian Simon, *op. cit.*


52. See, for example, *The Franco-British Exhibition Official Guide*, London, 1908, p. 53. This lists no less than five ‘realistic reproductions’ of ‘ancient monuments’ included in the ‘Irish Village’ of Ballymaclinton.

53. See note 2.
