THE POETICS AND THE POLITICS OF EXHIBITING OTHER CULTURES

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CHAPTER THREE

Contents

1   Introduction

As the title suggests this chapter develops the central theme of the book, representation. It is about objects, or more specifically *systems of representation* that produce meaning through the display of objects. Like the two previous chapters it is concerned with the process of representation – the manner in which meaning is constructed and conveyed through language and objects. It will consider *representation* in the singular – the activity or process – as well as *representations* – the resultant entities or products. Where this chapter differs is in its focus: it examines not so much language, as how meaning is created through classification and display. Moreover it contemplates this process in the particular context of objects said to be 'ethnographic'. So the chapter is concerned with ethnographic museums, in other words institutions whose representational strategies feature the ethnographic objects or artefacts of 'other cultures'. It will not, however, seek to answer fully the question of how these representational systems are received. The question of consumption is too large to be tackled in any great detail here (though see the brief discussion in section 5.5 below); for a fuller discussion, see **du Gay**, ed., 1997.

Why investigate ethnographic exhibitions and displays? Because ethnographic museums have had to address themselves in a concerted fashion to the problems of representation. Museum curators are no longer automatically perceived as the unassailable keepers of knowledge about their collections; museums are no longer simply revered as spaces promoting knowledge and enlightenment, the automatic resting place for historic and culturally important ethnographic objects. How the West classifies, categorizes and represents other cultures is emerging as a topic of some debate.

Two significant critiques of museums have recently been advanced. Both take a *constructionist* view of representation. The first uses the insights from *semiotics* and the manner in which language constructs and conveys meaning to analyse the diversity of ways in which exhibitions create representations of other cultures. By considering how meanings are constructed and produced, this critique concerns itself primarily with the semiotics or *poetics* of exhibiting. The second critique forefronts questions of discourse and power to interrogate the historical nature of museums and collecting. It argues that there is a link between the rise of ethnographic museums and the expansion of Western nations. By exploring the link between knowledge of other cultures and the imperial nations, this critique considers representation in the light of the *politics* of exhibiting.

This chapter therefore considers both the *poetics* and the *politics* of exhibiting. In doing so, it builds on the twofold structure delineated in Chapter 1, contrasting the approach which concentrates on *language* and *signification*, with another which prioritizes *discourse* and *discursive practices*. The differences at the heart of these critiques will be brought out

by the case studies deployed. In these, the insights gained will be used in specific contexts to discuss how objects, exhibitions and museums function to represent other cultures.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. Section 2 presents some preliminary working definitions. First it will review what is meant by a 'museum' and 'ethnography'. Then it will reflect on how objects acquire meaning as a prelude to considering how meaning is produced within the context of an exhibition or museum.

Section 3 attends to one of the principal ways in which museums represent other cultures – the exhibition. Using a case study, it will highlight the manner in which ethnographic displays are vehicles of meaning, how objects, texts and photographs work to create a representation of a particular people, at a precise historical moment. The focus of this section will be an exhibition which opened at the Museum of Mankind – the Ethnography Department of the British Museum – in 1993 entitled *Paradise: Change and Continuity in the New Guinea Highlands*. The theme of section 3 is the *poetics* of exhibiting.

Section 4 explores the critiques that go beyond the issue of construction and the exhibition context to question the politics of the museum. The main thrust of this critique concerns the relationship between knowledge and power. The focus here is on the institution whose activities of collecting and curating cease to be neutral or innocent activities but emerge as an instrumental means of knowing and possessing the 'culture' of others. This section will consider in detail the collection and interpretation of the artefacts known as The Benin Bronzes.

Finally, section 5 will provide a brief coda to the chapter, examining how curatorial activities have become a contested site and how the salience of the critiques tackled in this chapter has had tangible effects on the policies of collection, storage and display.

2   Establishing definitions, negotiating meanings, discerning objects

2.1   Introduction

Section 2 begins by considering the key terms: 'museum', 'ethnography', 'object', 'text' and 'context'. Reflecting on the meaning and function of a museum through analysing alternative definitions will provide a basis on which to question contemporary usage and assumptions underlying these terms in later sections. Section 2 argues that a museum is a historically constituted space, and uses this to highlight contemporary definitions of an ethnographic museum. It then moves on to consider the status of 'objects' in

order to investigate the manner in which their meaning is constructed. Using the unusual case of a horse called Comanche, it shows how even the most mundane object can be endowed with value and thus be transformed into a vehicle of contested meaning.

2.2   What is a museum?

If you look up the definition of 'museum' in a dictionary. It is likely that you will find a definition *approximating* to the functional one I have chosen here: 'Museums exist in order to acquire, safeguard, conserve, and display objects, artefacts and works of arts of various kinds' (Vergo, 1993, p. 41). But we must also ask: is this definition essential or historical? Does its interpretation vary over time?

To answer this, let us seek an older, alternative definition of the museum. If we explore the classical etymology of the word museum (*musaeum*) we find that it could encompass two meanings. On one hand it signified 'a mythological setting inhabited by the nine goddesses of poetry, music, and the liberal arts', namely 'places where the Muses dwell' (Findlen, 1989, p. 60). Nature as the 'primary haunt of the Muses' was a museum in its most literal sense. On the other hand, the term also referred to the library at Alexandria, to a public site devoted to scholarship and research. So this early classical etymology allows for the museum's potential for expansiveness. It does not specify spatial parameters: the open spaces of gardens and the closed confines of the study were equally appropriate spaces for museums. Museums could therefore reconcile curiosity and scholarship, private and public domains, the whimsical and the ordered (Findlen, 1989, pp. 60–2).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries an alternative and varied terminology was accorded to contemporary 'museums', depending partly on the social and geographical location of the collectors. The *Wunderkammer* and *Kunstkammer* (the cabinets of 'wonder' and 'arts') of European aristocrats and princes were contemporaneous with the personal 'theatres of nature', 'cabinets of curiosities' and *studiolo* of the erudite and scholarly collector. British collecting occurred 'lower down' the social scale: the British scholar collected 'the curiosities of art and nature', establishing cabinets with less ordered and hierarchical collections than their continental counterparts (MacGregor, 1985, p. 147). Let us examine the constitution of a British 'cabinet of curiosities' or 'closet of rarities' (the name given to diverse assemblages of rare and striking artefacts), to pry deeper into its systems of classification and the representation of the world that it generated and disclosed.

John Tradescant the elder, a botanist and gardener, built a 'collection of rarities' from his early visits to the European mainland and the Barbary coast, where he collected plants and natural specimens. Later, partly owing to the enthusiasm of his patron, the powerful (subsequently assassinated) Duke of

Buckingham, others were commissioned to undertake collecting to augment the Tradescant 'cabinet', though this was always an adjunct to Tradescant's botanical interests. In 1628, upon settling in Lambeth, Tradescant transformed his cabinet of curiosities into an ever-expanding *musaeum*. After his appointment in 1630 as Keeper of His Majesty's Gardens, the collection was bequeathed in its entirety to his son, John Tradescant the younger.

What did it contain?

The collection was composed of an extraordinary rich amalgam of miscellaneous objects, harvested 'with less than critical discrimination' according to MacGregor (1985, p. 152). In his catalogue of 1656, '*Musaeum Tradescantianum* or A Collection of Rarities Preserved At *South Lambeth*, neer *London*', Tradescant the younger described the content of the museum in some detail .

READING A

Reading A at the end of this chapter contains four extracts from the 1656 catalogue '*Musaeum Tradescantianum* or A Collection of Rarities Preserved At *South Lambeth*, neer *London*', prepared by Tradescant the younger. Read them in the light of the following questions.

1   Extracts 1 and 2 detail the categories used by Tradescant the younger. What are they?

2   Consider Extracts 3 and 4 to discern what type of material is included in these categories.

3   How does such a classification differ from one you might expect to find today?

In Extracts 1 and 2 Tradescant the younger divides his 'materialls' into two types – Natural and Artificial – and within these types, he further subdivides into categories. He also classifies the materials into two separate spaces – the closed internal space of the *Musaeum Trandescantianum* and the open external space of his garden.

The difference between Natural and Artificial 'materialls' – or *naturalia* and *artificialia* – is ostensibly between that which is naturally occurring and that which is derived from nature but transformed by human endeavour. The 'materialls' included under both categories are, however, exceedingly diverse.

In Extracts 3 and 4 we find that the category of *naturalia* includes naturally occurring specimens ('Egges' of 'Estridges', 'Pellican'); mythical creatures ('Phoenix', 'Griffin'); or objects which qualify by virtue of provenance ('Kings-fisher from the *West India's*'), an unusual association ('... Cassawary or Emeu that dyed at *S. James's, Westminster*') or the 'curious' and colourful nature of the specimen ('two feathers of the Phoenix tayle'). The categories are tolerant of a variety of materials and provenances. Natural specimens from Continental Europe are juxtaposed with those of the West Indies or
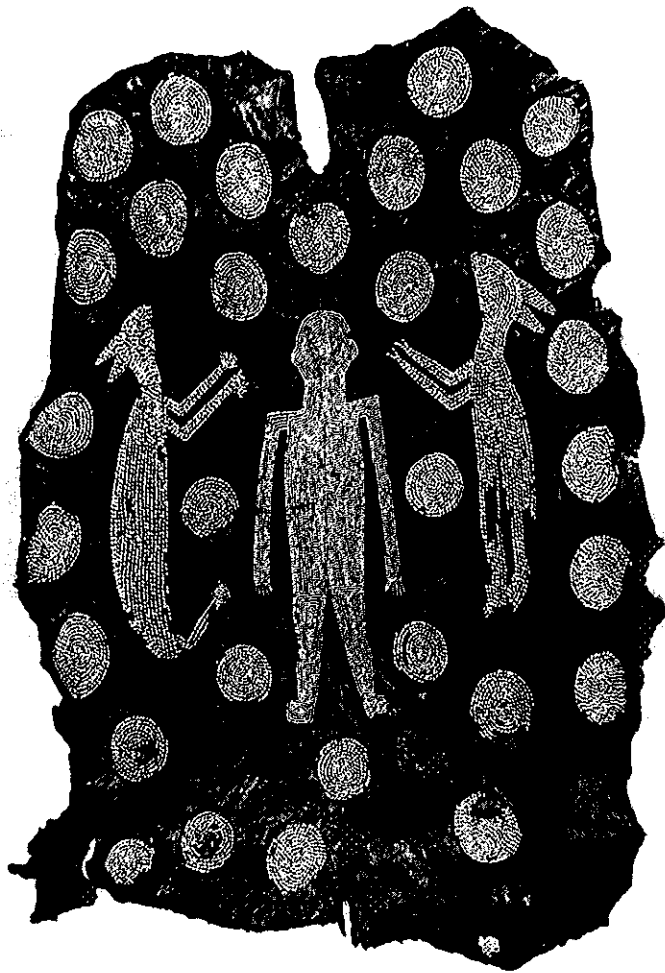
FIGURE 3.1 Powhatan's Mantle, from Tradescant's collection of rarities, now housed at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Originally described as 'Pohatan, King of Virginia's habit ...'.

Brazil, parts of natural specimens are classified with wholes, the identified is listed with the unidentifiable, common birds are classed with the Mauritian 'Dodar'. The manner in which Tradescant and his collaborators divided and subdivided the natural world seems by today's standards fairly idiosyncratic: birds (which they dismember), four-footed beasts, fishes, shell-creatures, insects, minerals, outlandish fruit (see Extract 2).

The divisions implemented in the more qualitative category of *artificialia* seem even more eccentric. This medley of curious items produces an equivalence between 'ethnographic' objects ('*Pohatan*, King of *Virginia's* habit ...', see Figure 3.1); artefacts with mythological references ('Stone of *Sarrigs*-Castle where *Hellen* of *Greece* was born'); objects that are the product of feats of human ingenuity ('Divers sorts of Ivory-balls'); fantastical objects ('blood that rained in the *Isle of Wight*') or merely fanciful ones ('*Edward the Confessors* knit-gloves'). The category of 'rarities' appears particularly discretionary, since most of the objects in the collection could be classified as 'rare, or supposedly rare, objects' (Pomian, 1990, p. 46) — '*Anne of Bullens* Night-vayle embroidered with silver', for instance.

The information or *interpretation* contained in the catalogue indicates certain priorities. The descriptions of the Natural 'materialls' are quite often objective and economic except in those circumstances where the curiosity of the item or the particularity of its association is being recorded (outlandish fruit). This kaleidoscopic view of nature predates the introduction of the hierarchical Linnaean system of classification (named after the Swedish botanist, Linne), so typical of contemporary natural history collections (and the one adapted for ethnographical collections in the Pitt Rivers Museum – see section 4). The description of the Artificial 'materialls' is often fuller, though this depends on their categorization. Those objects featured for their technical virtuosity are described in this light, whereas other items are recorded in terms of their surprising nature ('Match-coat from *Greenland* of the Intrails of Fishes'). Some *artificialia* are remarkable for their association with well-known historical characters or their exotic origins, or both, in the case of '*Pohatan*, King of *Virginia's* habit', for instance.

The descriptions are, nevertheless, very different from those one might find today. There is little of what one might call 'hard information', or 'objective description'. Garments are not described in terms of their shape, their dimensions, their colour, their age, their maker or their owner, unless the latter was a renowned personage. The constituting materials are noted if they are remarkable, in the same way that the properties of *naturalia* are only noted if they are extraordinary. There are no references to how these 'materialls' were collected, when, or by whom. These 'facts' or insights, inconsequential to the Tradescants, would nowadays be considered indispensable elements to the proper cataloguing of materials.

What does Tradescant's museum represent?

What is being *represented* here is the puzzling quality of the natural and artificial world. In the early sixteenth century a conspicuously extraordinary object with puzzling and exotic associations was worthy of inclusion in a cabinet by virtue of its 'curiosity' – its unusualness as perceived by the collector. To the contemporary observer, the internal arrangement appears arbitrary, and the terminology – 'closet of rarities' or 'cabinet of curiosities' – further corroborates the view that these cabinets were the specious products of personal preference, non-scientific and whimsical. To dismiss these cabinets on the basis of their exuberance, the plethora and diversity of items included, and the singularity of the classificatory system would, however, be a mistake. It would deny the methods – those 'rational' principles – that underpinned these stunning constructions:

> These were collections with encyclopaedic ambition, intended as a miniature version of the universe, containing specimens of every category of things and helping to render visible the totality of the universe, which otherwise would remain hidden from human eyes.
>
> (Pomian, 1990, p. 69)

To collect curiosities or rarities indicated a particular kind of inquisitiveness: 'curiosity' emerged, momentarily, as a legitimate intellectual pursuit, signifying an open, searching mind. The collector's interest in spectacular and curious objects was born of an attitude which saw Nature, of which man was part, not as 'repetitive, or shackled to a coherent set of laws' but as a phenomenon which 'was subject to unlimited variability and novelty' (Shelton, 1994, p. 184). For the curious, collecting was quest. Its purpose? To go beyond the obvious and the ordinary, to uncover the hidden knowledge which would permit him (for it was always him) a more complete grasp of the workings of the world in all its dimensions (Pomian, 1990, p. 57). This alternative definition of science tolerated diversity and miscellany because they were 'essential elements in a programme whose aim was nothing less than universality' (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p. 1). So Tradescant's 'closet of rarities', unique though it undoubtedly was, was also part of a larger socio-cultural movement adhering to a broadly unified perception of the world and

the purpose of collecting which reached its apogee in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Tradescants' collection was exceptional for another reason. The collection was personal, expansive and varied, but not exclusive. Interesting specimens were placed at the disposal of serious scholars *and* the general public:

> More significant ... than these distinguished visitors were the ordinary people who flocked to see the collection for a fee – seemingly sixpence – for the Tradescants differed ... from every collector then known of in England – in the general accessibility of their collections. Most of these visitors no doubt saw the rarities in much the same light as had the founder of the collection – 'the Bigest that Can be Gotten ... Any thing that Is strang'.
>
> (MacGregor, 1985, p. 150)

This aspect was to come into its own once the collection had been acquired by deed of gift by Elias Ashmole, who in turn gave it to the University of Oxford, thereby ensuring its transformation into the twentieth-century public museum that bears his name – the Ashmolean.

This exploration of the *Musaeum Tradescantianum* brings several important points to light about the nature of museums.

1   *Representation.* Collecting and uniting these extraordinary and varied articles – be they naturally or artificially produced – into one cabinet served to create a staggering encapsulation of the world's curiosities. This account was, in turn, an attempt at a complete *representation* of the diversity of existence in miniature – a 'microcosm'.

2   *Classification.* In describing the world, the *Musaeum Tradescantianum* worked within a classificatory system which made a distinction between two types of objects: *artificialia* and *naturalia*. Other contemporary cabinets included the categories of *antiqua* (mementoes from the past) and *scientifica* (implements, etc.). The Tradescant classificatory system did not articulate the divisions we might use today between the real and the mystical, the antique and the contemporary, the New World and the Old. The representation of the world generated by the museum applied rules of classification and collection which were, for the original collectors and cataloguers, logical and consistent with a historically specific form of knowledge and scholarship, however inappropriate they may seem to us today.

3   *Motivation.* The *Musaeum* is a *motivated* representation of the world in the sense that it sought to encapsulate the world in order to teach others about it and to convert others to the salience of this approach. Moreover, quite exceptionally for its time, this representation was aimed at a larger audience than scholars.

4   *Interpretation.* If we reflect back to the definition which began this section, namely that 'museums exist to acquire, safeguard, conserve and

display objects, artefacts or works of arts of various kinds', we find that the *Musaeum Tradescantianum* fits this description as easily as a contemporary museum might. Yet the manner and spirit in which the *Musaeum Tradescantianum* undertook these activities was clearly quite different. This is particularly evident in its mode of classification. The way in which the *Musaeum Tradescantianum* acquired, safeguarded, conserved, and displayed was in accordance with a distinct world-view which saw sense in what might be termed a hodge-podge of marvellous objects, a logical vision which had abandoned theological principles of classification, but had yet to adopt scientific ones (Pomian, 1990, p. 64).

So, unexpectedly perhaps, we find that our preliminary definition still holds; but, more importantly, we have established that a museum does not deal solely with *objects* but, more importantly, with what we could call, for the moment, *ideas* – notions of what the world is, or should be. Museums do not simply issue objective descriptions or form logical assemblages; they generate representations and attribute value and meaning in line with certain perspectives or classificatory schemas which are historically specific. They do not so much reflect the world through objects as use them to mobilize representations of the world past and present.

If this is true of all museums, what kind of classificatory schema might an 'ethnographic' museum employ and what kinds of representations might it mobilize?

2.3 What is an ethnographic museum?

To answer this we must know what the word 'ethnography' means.

Ethnography comes from *ethnos* meaning 'people/race/nation', and *graphein*   ethnography
meaning 'writing/description'. So a common definition might state that ethnography seeks 'to describe nations of people with their customs, habits and points of difference'. We are confronted by the knowledge that a definition of ethnography seeks to include notions of science and difference. In fact ethnography is a word which has acquired a range of meanings. Contemporary usage frequently invokes 'ethnography' to describe in-depth empirical research and a variety of data collection techniques which rely on prolonged and intensive interaction between the researcher and her/his subjects of research, which usually results in the production of an 'ethnographic text'. But, historically, the definition has been far more specific. In the British context, 'ethnography' refers to the research methods and texts that were linked most particularly with the human sciences of *anthropology* (the science of man or mankind, in the widest sense) and *ethnology* (the science which considers races and people and their relationship to one another, their distinctive physical and other characteristics). So when one refers to ethnographic museums today, one is placing them within a discrete discipline and theoretical framework –

anthropology – which is itself allied to a research technique – ethnographic fieldwork and the specific ethnographic texts which report on these studies.

Until the nineteenth century most of what we would now label as 'ethnographic' objects were collected in a spasmodic and fortuitous way, acquisitions whose value lay in their novelty or 'curiosity'. For these objects to be labelled as ethnographic and to be lodged within an 'ethnographic' museum or department, necessitated the development of a human science which would identify them as such, and therefore set in train a different system of classification and generate other motives for collecting them. In the context of museums, ethnographic and ethnological collections predated the establishment of anthropology, which emerged as a human science in the late nineteenth century but more properly in the early twentieth century. But the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline was significantly linked to the rise of ethnographic departments in museums (section 4). What this new human science (anthropology), but also the older sciences of cultures (ethnography and ethnology), sought to study was the way of life, primarily but not exclusively, of non-European peoples or nations. The classificatory system devised in ethnographic museums is, therefore, predominantly a geographical or social one. The objects which ethnographic museums hold in their collections were mostly made or used by those who at one time or another were believed to be 'exotic', 'pre-literate', 'primitive', 'simple', 'savage' or 'vanishing races', and who are now described as, amongst other things, 'aboriginal', 'indigenous', 'first nations', or 'autochthonous': those peoples or nations whose cultural forms were historically contrasted with the complex civilizations of other non-European societies like China or Islam or Egypt and who, at various moments in their history, encountered explorers, traders, missionaries, colonizers and most latterly, but inevitably, western anthropologists.

So in referring to 'ethnographic museums' or 'ethnographic exhibitions', one is identifying institutions or exhibitions which feature objects as the 'material culture' of peoples who have been considered, since the mid-nineteenth century, to have been the appropriate target for anthropological research. Ethnographic museums produce certain kinds of representations and mobilize distinct classificatory systems which are framed by anthropological theory and ethnographic research. As such what needs to be noted about ethnographic museums is that they do not simply reflect *natural* distinctions but serve to create *cultural* ones, which acquire their cogency when viewed through the filtering lens of a particular discipline. The geographical and social distinctions deployed are constructed, but equally they are located historically: in the struggle for power between what has been called 'the West and the Rest' (Hall, 1992). Contrary to popular assumptions, we can assert that the science of anthropology, like all sciences 'hard' or otherwise, is not primarily a *science of discovery*, but a *science of invention*. In other words it is not *reflective* of the essential nature of cultural difference, but classifies and *constitutes* this difference systematically and coherently, in

accordance with a particular view of the world that emerges in a specific place, at a distinct historical moment and within a specific body of knowledge. So, at any historical juncture, the specific definitions of 'museum' and 'ethnography' function as floating signifiers, naming devices which attach themselves and serve to signify certain kinds of cultural practice. They are contingent, not essential.

2.4 Objects and meanings

Do the artefacts which form the core of a museum's collections provide it with stability, amidst all this flux and contingency? Not necessarily. Any such stability would rest on the conflation between two notable characteristics of museum objects (and objects in general) – their **physical presence** and their **meaning**. In the next section, we shall consider the dialectic between the two, and look at how their meanings fare as classification systems change.

physical presence

meaning

Collected objects (and written records – themselves objects) are sometimes identified as the most persistent and indissoluble connection museums have between the past and present. 'Other peoples' artefacts are amongst the most 'objective' data we can expect from them, and provide an intelligible baseline from which to begin the more difficult task of interpreting cultural meanings' (Durrans, 1992, p. 146).

So objects are frequently described as documents or evidence from the past, and are regarded as pristine material embodiments of cultural essences which transcend the vicissitudes of time, place and historical contingency. Their *physicality* delivers a promise of stability and objectivity; it suggests a stable, unambiguous world.

But this is a simplification and we can see this once we turn to the question of *meaning*. To treat these physical manifestations of the social world as permanent objective evidence is to fail to make a distinction between their undisputed *physical presence* and their ever-changing *meaning*:

> All the problems that we have with metaphors raise their head in a new guise when we identify objects. We do not escape from the predicaments that language prepares for us by turning away from the semiotics of words to the semiotics of objects. It would be illusory to hope that objects present us with a more solid, unambiguous world.
>
> (Douglas, 1992, pp. 6–7)

The fixity of an object's physical presence cannot deliver guarantees at the level of meaning. In the museum context, a conflation may be encouraged between the stability of presence and that of meaning. The status of the object as invariant in presence and meaning is underpinned by the popular representation of museums as grand institutions safeguarding, collecting, exhibiting and engaging in a scholarly fashion with the nation's material

wealth. The popular perception of curatorial practice as a descriptive rather than an interpretative activity lends further support to this elision. But it is clear that artefacts do not 'spirit' themselves into museum collections: they are collected, interpreted and exhibited – all purposeful and motivated activities (as we shall see in sections 3 and 4). If, unlike other historical events, artefacts can survive relatively intact as authentic primary material from the past, this *does not* mean that they have kept their primary or 'original' meaning intact, since the specifics of these can rarely be recaptured or replayed. The distinction between physical presence and meaning must, therefore, be maintained.

It may be useful to illustrate this point by an example. Through the following reading we will consider how a fairly mundane object might change its meaning over time.

READING B

Read and make notes on the edited extracts of 'His very silence speaks: the horse who survived Custer's Last Stand' by Elizabeth A. Lawrence – Reading B at the end of this chapter – paying particular attention to the reasons behind the horse's value as an object. How might the semiotic tools you were introduced to in Chapter 1 equip you to understand the changing meaning of the horse as object?

Lawrence's article features the life of an unusual horse – Comanche (Figure 3.2) – and its extraordinary afterlife as an artefact, in order to catalogue its changing meaning. The article is useful since common expectation would be that a stuffed horse would, in all probability, have a relatively unambiguous meaning.

FIGURE 3.2
Comanche, 'the horse who survived Custer's Last Stand'.

Lawrence shows that the value bestowed on Comanche as an object was not due to his intrinsic worth: as a natural specimen of the equine species, he was only as good as any other. His distinction was his intimate connection with a significant historical encounter, the Battle of the Little Big Horn which came to be known as 'Custer's Last Stand'. This is signalled by Comanche's changing fate as a museum exhibit. Initially displayed as an oddity amongst zoological specimens at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Comanche was subsequently transformed into a valued exhibit at the University of Kansas. In this second incarnation, Comanche became the site of struggle, initially revolving around his proper niche, but subsequently around his symbolic meaning.

In her article, Lawrence draws out the distinctions between Comanche's physical presence as live and stuffed horse, in addition to giving an account of his shifting meaning. Here I propose to extend her analysis by disaggregating the different levels of meaning, using the semiological tools provided by Roland Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero* (1967), *Elements of Semiology* (1967) and *Image–Music–Text* (1977) (previously introduced in Chapter 1).

As a lone exhibit and a stuffed horse, very little recommends Comanche, apart from his function as a *sign*. As you may recall from Chapter 1, the *sign* is defined by its components, the *signifier* and the *signified*. The difference between these two components as defined by Barthes is as follows: the 'substance of the *signifier* is always material (sounds, objects, images)', whereas the *signified* 'is not "a thing" but a *mental representation of "the thing"'* (1967, pp. 112, 108) (my emphasis). So Comanche, both as a living horse, but more importantly as stuffed object, is the *signifier;* what is repeatedly *signified* is 'Custer's Last Stand', or more precisely, *the mental representation* of a defeat and a military tragedy. However, such a brief semiotic 'reading' does not provide a comprehensive explanation of Comanche's endurance as a powerful and changeable sign in the century since his death. It might be productive to investigate the different levels at which *signification* takes place.

As you know, for Barthes, signs operate within systems, but these systems function to create different orders of meaning. In the following analysis I shall use Barthes's concepts of **connotation** and **denotation** to explore the articulation of signification around Comanche. In his usage of these terms Barthes courted some controversy, but here I shall bypass this debate and use these terms to invoke two levels of meaning creation. Here, *denotation* will refer to the first level, or order, of meaning which derives from a *descriptive* relationship, between signifier and signified, corresponding to the most obvious and consensual level at which objects mean something. In this case, Comanche most obviously and consistently denotes a horse, and on this most people would agree. *Connotation* refers to a second level, or order, of meaning which guides one to look at the way in which *the image (object) is understood*, at a broader, more associative, level of meaning. It therefore makes reference to more changeable and ephemeral structures, such as the

connotation
denotation

rules of social life, of history, of social practices, ideologies and usage. At this level, as we shall see, Comanche's meaning undergoes great variation. For obvious reasons: its connotations cannot weather, intact, the changes in society's perception of itself.

Let us apply the concepts of *denotation* and *connotation* – to see how they can further extend our understanding of Comanche's enduring popularity. Comanche, initially as a living animal and subsequently as an object or sign *denotes* immediately, repeatedly and mechanically *a horse*, and the historic event and traumatic defeat of which he, as a horse, was a silent witness – namely, 'Custer's Last Stand'. As a horse, he also denotes the valued bond between a man and his mount. At these two levels his meaning never changes.

Comanche's *connotations*, however, change over time. Initially he is the link between the living and the dead, connoting the 'anger of defeat', the 'sorrow for the dead cavalrymen' and the 'vengeance towards the Indians'. Later, as an incongruous feature in the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, he connotes conquest and the victory of the civilized over the murderous savage. In the twentieth century, he ceases to have an objective value, connoting alternatively late nineteenth-century sentimentalism, good professional taxidermy, or a lucky charm. For some communities, his significance increases. For the Native American students at the University of Kansas he forcibly signifies the extreme partiality of white historical narratives and a denial of the Native American experience. These connotations deny Comanche his role as an objective witness. They transform him into a subjective and temporarily invalid symbol of white oppression. At the time of Lawrence's essay (1991), Comanche's legitimacy had been re-established by means of a text which navigates the reader towards a newer and, from today's perspective, more balanced and comprehensive interpretation of the events of 'Custer's Last Stand'.

Thus, Comanche's popularity derives from the shifting relationship between his connotations and denotations. His descriptive power maintains a greater stability (denotation) than his relevance and meaning which are both questioned and re-negotiated (connotation). It is after all the perception of 'Custer's Last Stand' that changes – not Comanche's link with it. Over time, this allows his meaning to be 'read' in different ways. Comanche continues to denote the historic battle, but what the battle *means* for Americans, native or non-native, has irrevocably altered – as has Comanche's function as he metamorphoses from oddity, to lucky symbol, to educational tool.

So, to summarize, Lawrence's article argues that the value of objects resides in the meaning that they are given – the way they are *encoded*. By charting the trajectory of a once living and banal object – a stuffed horse – and demonstrating how even steadfast categories like 'horse' can acquire extraordinary and controversial meanings, Lawrence demonstrates how the physical presence of an object cannot stabilize its meaning. Comanche's relevance derives from the fact that, as a symbol, he remains powerful, in part

because his presence is differently interpreted in different periods and in different contexts.

But Lawrence's article offers other valuable insights; the first relating to *text*, the second concerning the *context*. Let us survey each of these briefly as they build on some of the work of Chapter 1.

2.5 The uses of text

If we consider the object of Lawrence's article we find no difficulty in identifying it. It is, after all, a horse. With ethnographic objects, taken from distant and unfamiliar cultures, such convenient points of reference may be difficult to establish, because they are not so immediately recognizable. For these objects, the function of any accompanying text is crucial. As we have seen, the defining feature of ethnographic objects is that they are products of the practice of ethnography. To read and understand them, therefore, we need *texts* that can interpret and translate their meaning for us. 'Texts' here refers not only to the written word, but fabrics of knowledge that can be used as reference, including oral texts, social texts and academic texts. These perform the same function – they facilitate interpretation. In the ethnographic context the primary, though not exclusive, source of this background knowledge is the ethnographic text.

As Chapter 1 argued, language is not an empty transparent 'window on the world', it produces meaning and understanding. The purpose of ethnographic texts is ostensibly that of **decoding** – to render comprehensible   decoding
that which is initially unfamiliar, to establish a 'reading' of an event or an object. In ethnographic texts, such a 'reading' is frequently accomplished by a translation, the transposition of alien concepts or ways of viewing the world, from one language to another or from one conceptual universe to another. This is a far from simple process. Ethnographic texts adopt an objective and descriptive mode, but their production necessitates a substantial degree of translation, transposition and construction. Ethnographic texts can only successfully *decode* – unravel the meaning of that which is unfamiliar, distant, incomprehensible – if they simultaneously *encode* – translate, de-exoticize, and transform that which is alien into that which is comprehensible.

All texts involve an economy of meaning: foregrounding certain interpretations and excluding others, seeking to plot a relatively unambiguous route through meaning. Ethnographic texts, more consciously than others perhaps, direct the reader towards a *preferred reading* since they must navigate the reader on a directed route through potentially complex and unfamiliar terrain. This preferred reading involves the dual process of unravelling certain meanings – *decoding* – but equally of selection and creativity which allows certain meanings to surface – **encoding**. A basket, for   encoding
instance, might be decoded in many ways (the work of a particular artist; a fine exemplar; an ancient, unique specimen; etc.) but the accompanying text

will encode it towards one or other of these, thereby guiding its interpretation and circumscribing its meaning. It will render intelligible the nature, history and cultural particularity of ethnographic objects. In so doing it will provide a compelling and convincing reading – it will 'quicken' and solidify the meaning. Recalling Lawrence's article, we may remember that it was the label – the *text* – which fixed Comanche's meaning in the most direct way and it was the text, therefore, which became the focus of dispute and subsequent reinterpretation.

2.6 Questions of context

On reading Lawrence's article one of the points that emerges most forcefully is the manner in which new layers of meaning are appended to Comanche over time, but in such a way that no new layer completely eclipses the previous one. Whatever Comanche's re-contextualization, he never completely loses his original meaning; it is re-articulated or added to. The palimpsest provides a useful metaphor for this process, where new layers of meaning are superimposed over older ones, or re-articulated, once the object is placed in a different context. This process, illustrated by Comanche's trajectory, is true for all objects. It is a particularly relevant way of perceiving the overlapping meanings of ethnographic collections, since they are most frequently the result of cultural, spatial and temporal displacement. 'Almost nothing displayed in museums was made to be seen in them. Museums provide an experience of most of the world's art and artefacts that does not bear even the remotest resemblance to what their makers intended' (Vogel, 1991, p. 191).

Ethnographic objects in historically important collections accumulate a palimpsest of meanings. So we can think of objects as elements which participate in a 'continuous history' (Ames, 1992, p. 141), where the makers, collectors and curators are simply points of origination, congregation and dispersal (Douglas, 1992, p.15): a history that extends 'from origin to current destination, including the changing meanings as the object is continually redefined along the way' (Ames, 1992, p. 141).

Viewing objects as palimpsests of meaning allows one to incorporate a rich and complex social history into the contemporary analysis of the object. Contemporary curatorial practice does attempt to chart the flow by attempting to establish when objects were collected, by whom, from where, for what purpose, what the originating culture was, who the maker was, what the maker intended, how and when it was used (was it strictly functional or did it have other purposes?) and what other objects were used in conjunction with it. However, as we shall see in section 3, this does not sufficiently problematize the manner in which objects acquire meanings. Those who critique museums from the standpoint of the *politics* of collecting argue that such an analysis fails to address the fact that ethnographic objects have entered into western collections purely as the result of unequal relationships of power. The questions of context and collecting can become far more vexed than the above framework suggests.

2.7 Summary

> Museums not only collect and store fragments of culture: they themselves
> are part of culture ...; a special zone where living culture dies and dead
> culture springs to life.
>
> (Durrans, 1993, p. 125)

This section started by arguing that at different points in history museums
have had distinct ways of viewing objects and conferring meaning, value and
validity. Using the example of the *Museaum Tradescantianum*, we saw that
museums endow objects with importance because they are seen as
representing some form of cultural value, perhaps an unusual association, a
geographical location, or a distinct type of society. This initial example
allowed us to argue that the meaning of objects is neither natural nor fixed: it
is culturally constructed and changes from one historical context to another,
depending on what system of classification is used. This theme was
elaborated in relation to 'ethnographic' objects. It was argued that the
category of 'ethnography' emerged as a particular academic discipline. It
followed that objects were not intrinsically 'ethnographic', but that they had
to be collected and described in terms that rendered them so. This analysis
was taken further when we considered the ways in which objects acquire
meaning. It was argued that to understand the levels at which objects acquire
meaning, we have to investigate the texts that are used to interpret them in
addition to the nature of their historical trajectory. It was argued that an
object offers no guarantees at the level of signification; the stability which
derives from its *physical presence* must be conceptually divorced from the
shifting nature of its *meaning*.

In the next section we will consider how objects may acquire meaning in the
distinct context of an exhibition.

3 Fashioning cultures: the poetics of exhibiting

3.1 Introduction

In this section we move from discussion of the object to the practices of
exhibiting. It is the exhibition context which seems to provide us with the
best forum for an examination of the creation of meaning. Exhibitions are
discrete events which articulate objects, texts, visual representations,
reconstructions and sounds to create an intricate and bounded
representational system. It is therefore an exceedingly appropriate context
for exploring the **poetics of exhibiting**: the practice of producing meaning   poetics of exhibiting
through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related
components of an exhibition.

In order to provide a 'reading' of some depth I have chosen a case study format. The exhibition chosen – *Paradise: Change and Continuity in the New Guinea Highlands* – was an unusual exhibition in many ways, most particularly because of the manner in which it sought to examine the contemporary moment amongst the Wahgi people of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, but equally because it incorporated a record of its own creation. It was the subject of two extended commentaries: one by Michael O'Hanlon, the anthropologist/curator of the exhibition (*Paradise: portraying the New Guinea Highlands*, 1993), the other by James Clifford (*Paradise,* 1995), an anthropologist and cultural critic. The following section will not, however, dwell on its uniqueness, but more on what it can teach us about the general principles of meaning construction in the exhibition context. In this sense, therefore, the 'reading' presented here articulates a particular view of the exhibition. It is not, nor can it be, a comprehensive assessment of the diversity of issues involved; it is necessarily selective. Those who want other 'readings' should refer to the texts cited above in their original, full state, rather than the extracts included here.

3.2 Introducing *Paradise*

The exhibition *Paradise: Change and Continuity in the New Guinea Highlands* opened at the Museum of Mankind, the Ethnographic Department of the British Museum, on the 16 July 1993 and closed on 2 July 1995. During the two years of its life *Paradise: Change and Continuity in the New Guinea Highlands* could be found on the second floor of the Museum of Mankind. As part of a programme of rolling temporary exhibitions, its ostensible purpose was to bring the culture and history of the Wahgi people of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea to the attention of the public in Britain. A wheelchair ramp, a narrow corridor and two glass doors separated *Paradise* from the rest of the museum. Walking through them one entered the introductory space, with a large full-colour picture (Plate 3.I in the colour plate section) of:

> ... a genial-looking man stand[ing] casually in front of a corrugated iron wall and frame window; he wears a striped apron of some commercial material, exotic accoutrements and gigantic headdress of red and black feathers. His face is painted black and red; a bright white substance is smeared across his chest. He looks straight at you, with a kind of smile.
>
> (Clifford, 1995, p. 93)

The introductory panel, 'Paradise', on the left of the photograph, disclosed the aim of the exhibition: to show 'something of the history and culture of the Wahgi people of the New Guinea Highlands'. It then introduced the structuring themes of the exhibition – change and continuity.

ACTIVITY 1

Read as much as you can of the panel text from Plate 3.1 and consider how the exhibition is being introduced – what does the text tell you about the significance of the term 'Paradise'?

How might this establish a *preferred reading* of the exhibition?

This introductory text tells us a number of things: primarily, that 'Paradise' symbolizes both *change* – the transforming effect of coffee wealth – and *continuity* – the capacity for cultural forms to adapt to transforming circumstances. This tension is symbolized by the elements of the photograph: the birds of paradise feathers versus the corrugated iron for example, both integral to the picture, and by implication, Wahgi life. But this introduction also foregrounds the issues of *representation*: Paradise, the exhibition – the reconstruction of reality – is a subversion of Paradise, the 'myth' – the stereotype of the South Pacific. In contrast to a false image, it implies, this exhibition proposes a corrective, more authentic description of a particular South Pacific community. Closer to the truth but not all-inclusive – we are only shown 'something' of the history and culture of the Wahgi. So the introduction alerts us to the veracity of the reconstruction or representation. Although it makes claims of objectivity and representativeness, it disavows claims to comprehensiveness.

So even at the moment of entry we are drawn into the practice of signification and construction. The introductory panel contains within itself the structure of the whole exhibition, providing us with a mental map. We learn of the rationale of the exhibition and are alerted to its possible future content. So this initial panel sets the parameters of the representation and establishes a distinct narrative and sequencing.

What is the exhibition about? Wahgi history and culture.

What does this mean? It means recent contact, change and continuity reflected through material culture, including adornment, as transformed and preserved through the income from cash-cropping coffee.

The introductory narrative helps to guide the unfamiliar visitor through difficult and potentially dazzling terrain – the complexities of Wahgi culture could not, pragmatically, be fully explicated in this restricted exhibition space. To generate a meaningful path through the exhibition, the curator, the designers and technicians must choose which objects to display and which display methods might achieve the greatest impact, as well as what kinds of information might be included in the panels, label text or captions. These choices are in part 'repressive', in the sense that they direct the visitor towards certain interpretations and understandings, opening certain doors to meaning but inevitably closing off others.

But let us consider the importance and use of the photographic image (Plate 3.1). We might first remark that the persuasiveness of the text is significantly enhanced by the photograph that accompanies it. Photographs

PLATES 3.1-3.XV: Views of the *Paradise* exhibition, Museum of Mankind, London
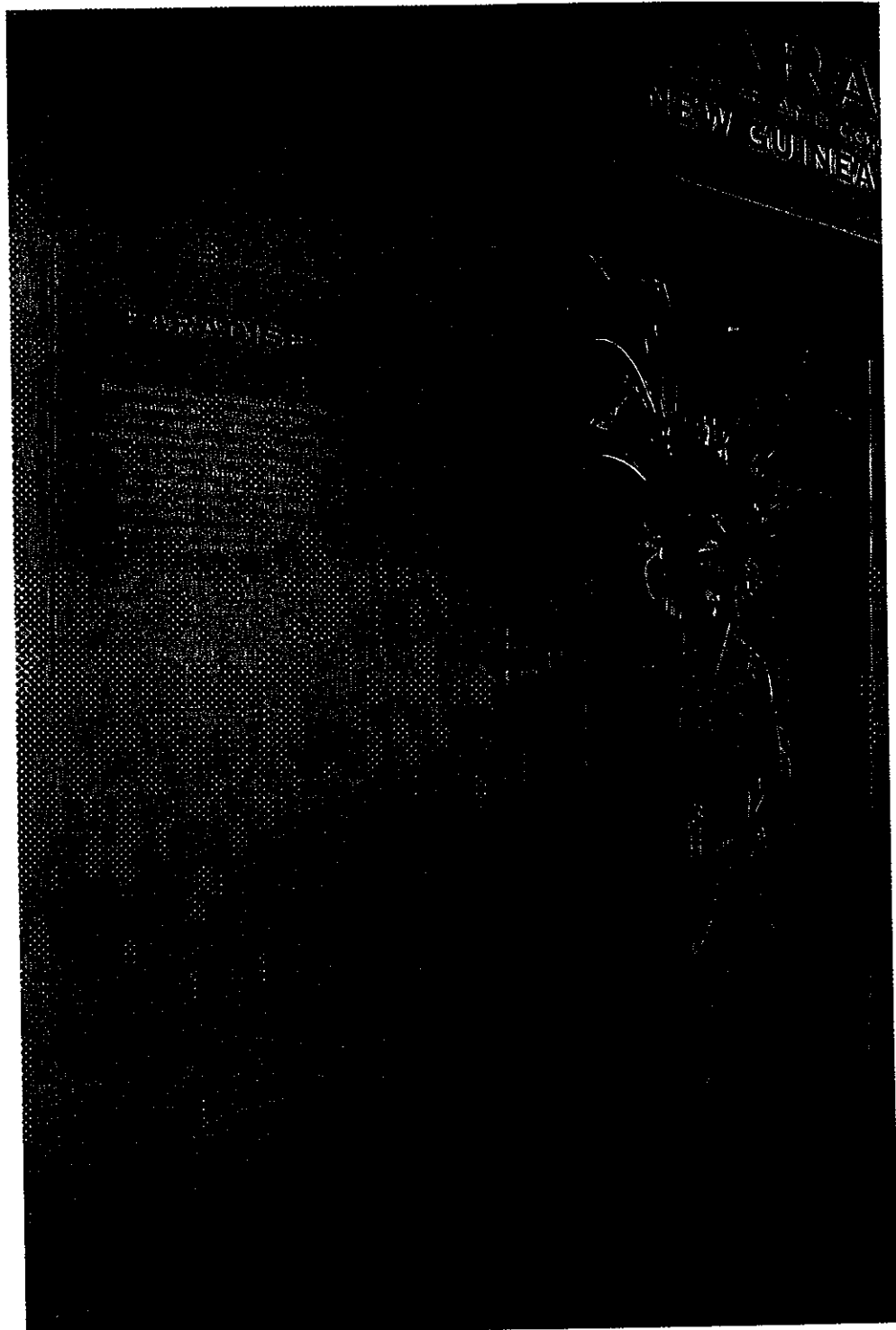
PLATE 3.1
The introductory section of the exhibition
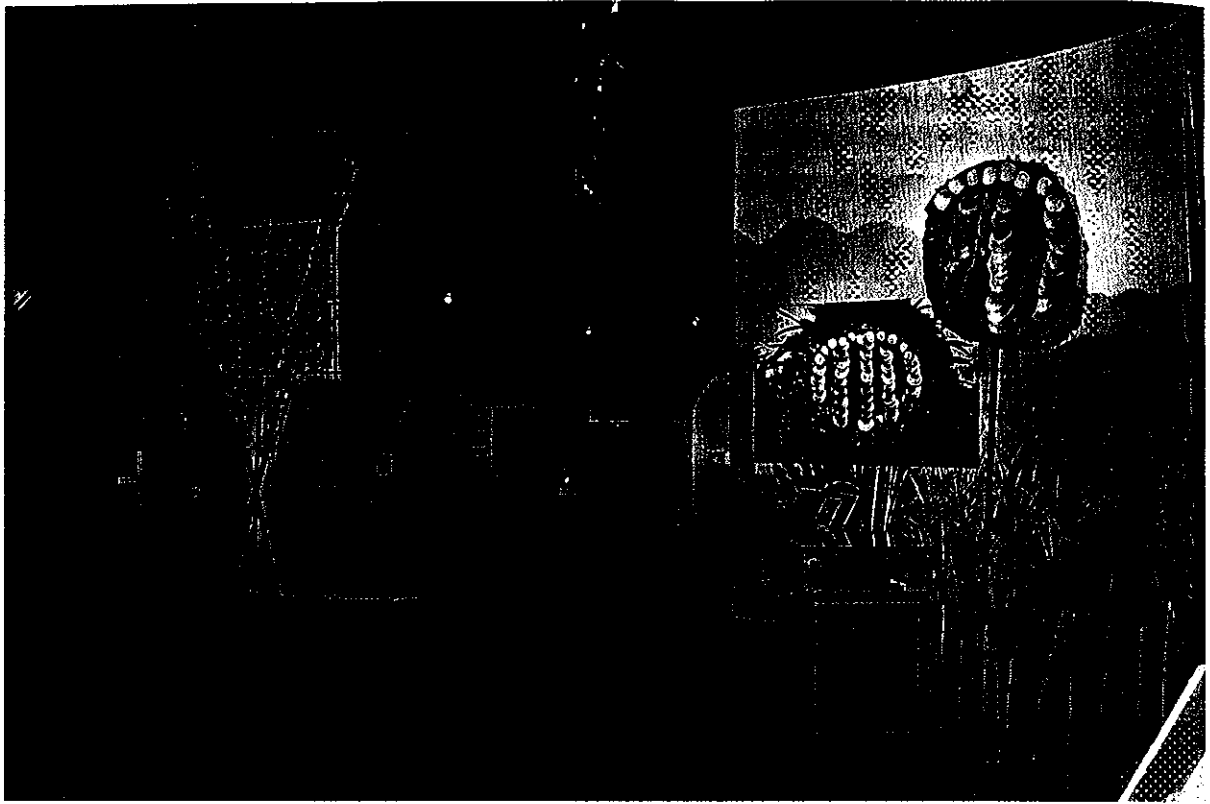
PLATE 3.II Foreground: (right) the bridewealth banners and First Contact display; (left) the compensation payment poles. Background: wall cases and free-standing glass cases containing Wahgi wigs and other items of adornment.

PLATE 3.III Sequential parts of the exhibition: (left to right) coffee production, the trade-store and shield displays.
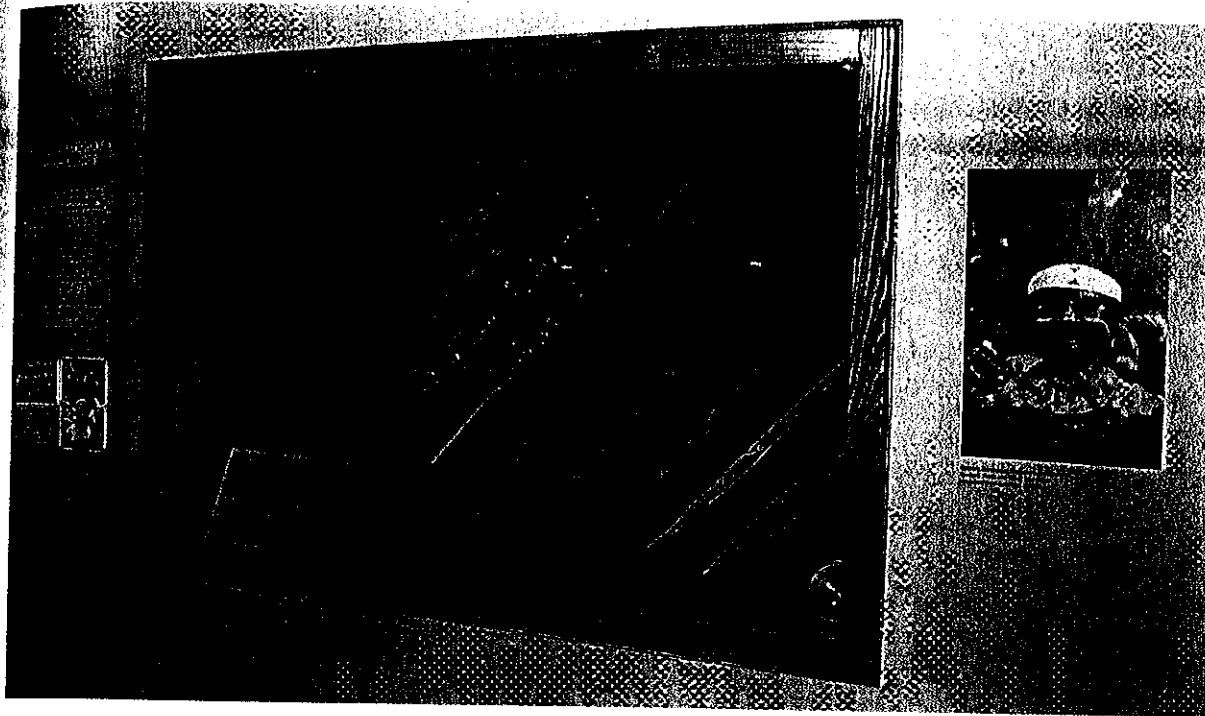
PLATE 3.IV Wall case containing Wahgi items of adornment, old and new. Note the headband made of flame-coloured Big Boy bubble gum wrappers.
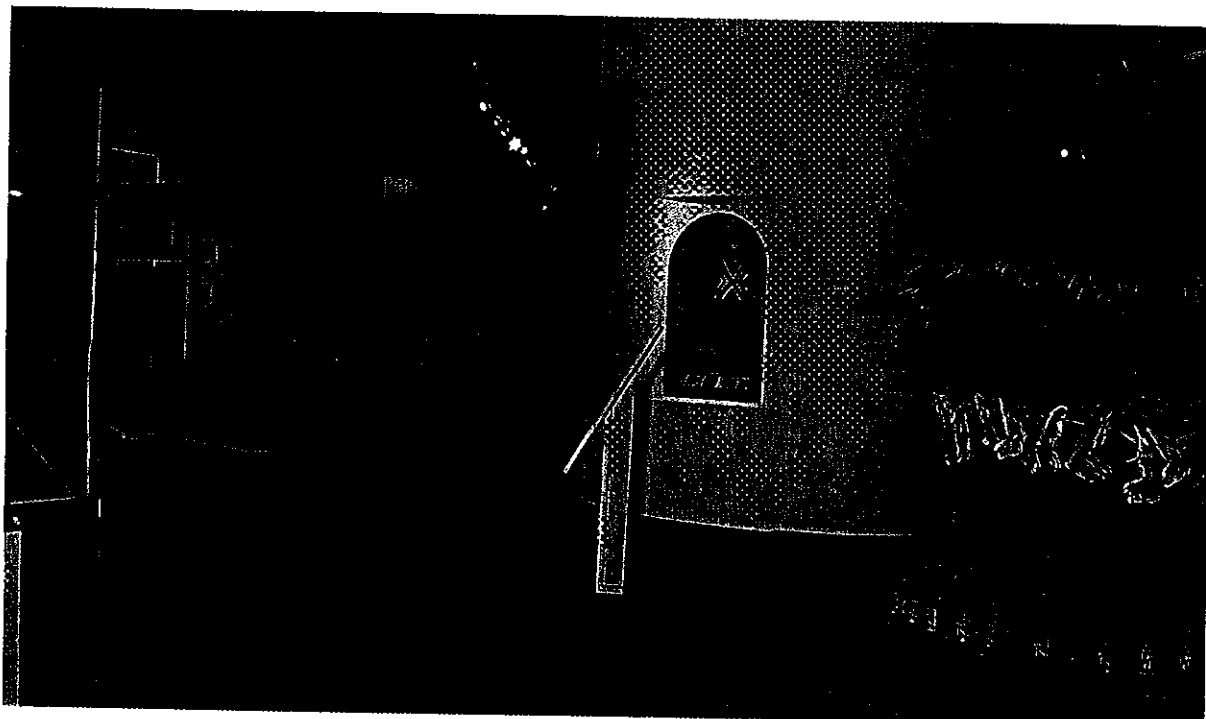
PLATE 3.V *Bolyim* house (right). Note the simulated pig jaws strung around the middle, and upturned beer bottles around the base.
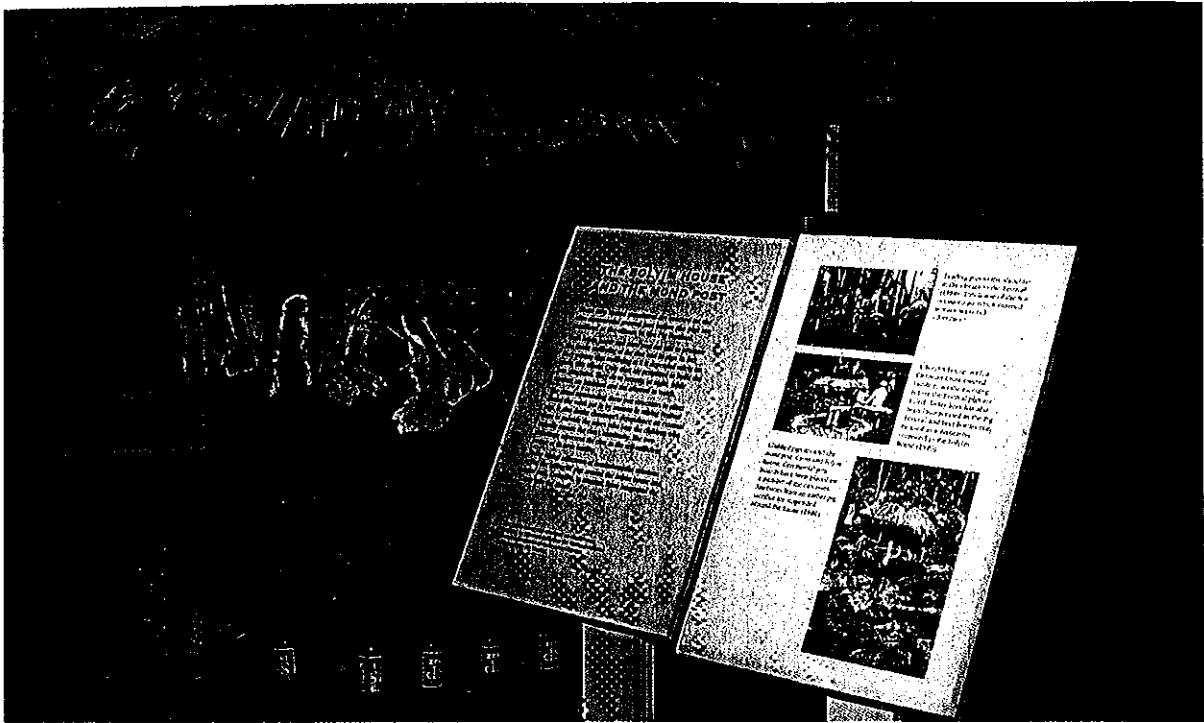
PLATE 3.VI *Bolyim* house, showing accompanying panel text and photographs.
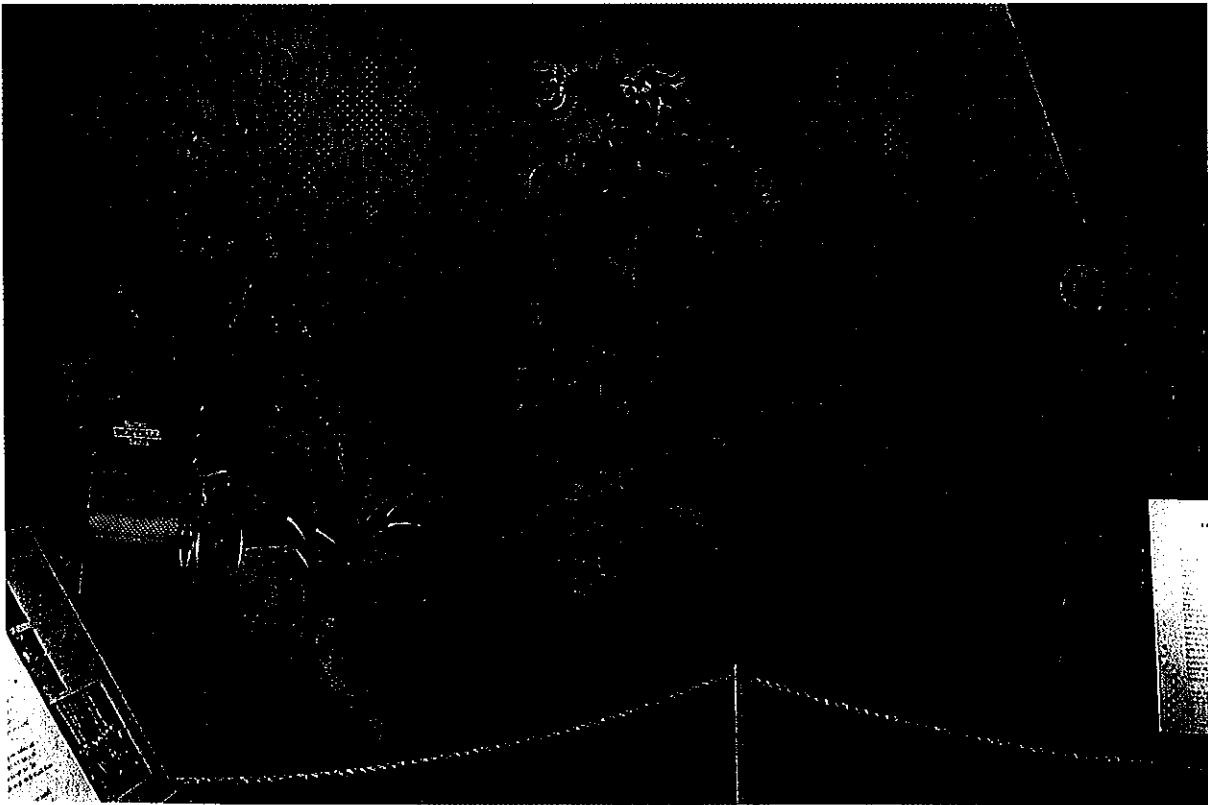
PLATE 3.VII Coffee production display. Note the artificial coffee bush, the coffee beans drying on the plastic sheeting, the hand-powered coffee pulper, and weighing scales.
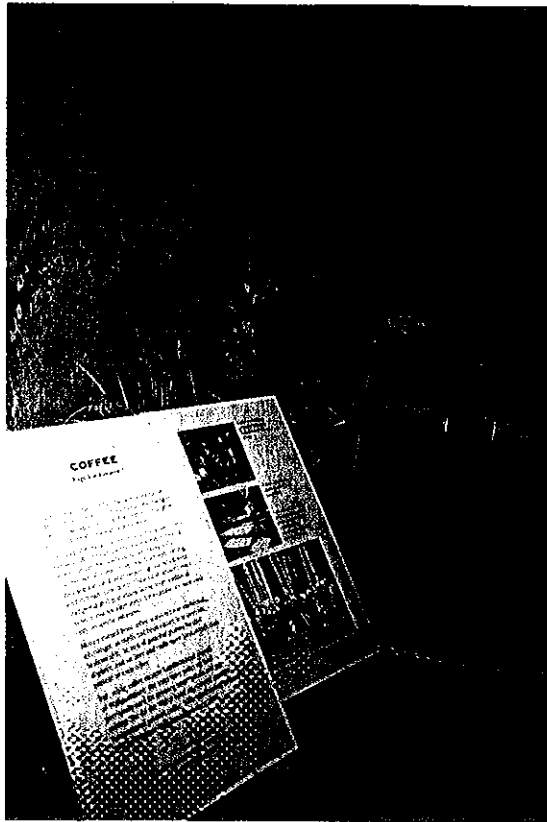
PLATE 3.VIII Coffee production display, panel text and photographs. Note the similarity between the display and the photographs featured on the panel.

PLATE 3.IX First Contact display, showing First Contact panel with black-and-white photographs displayed against enlargement of black-and-white photograph taken by Mick Leahy.
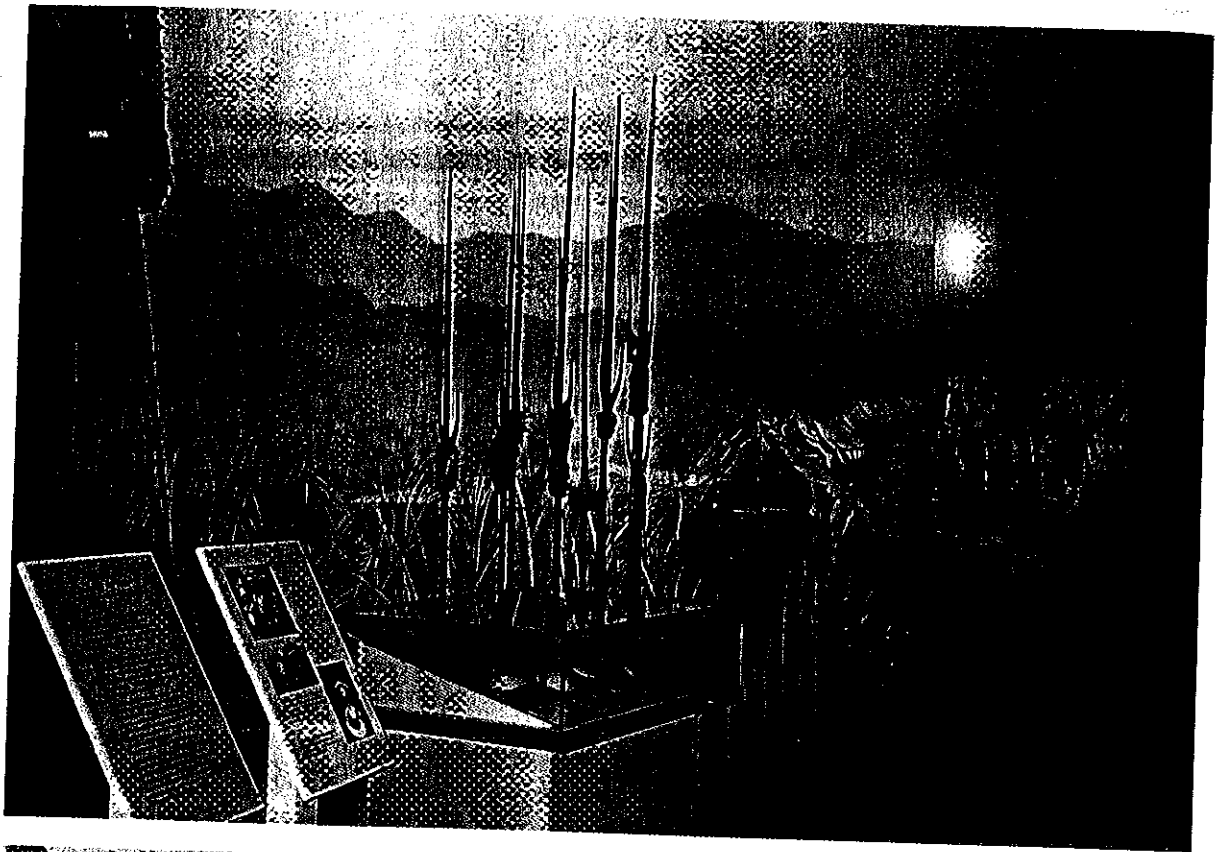
PLATE 3.X First Contact display, showing *kula jimben* spears against scene painting (reflecting photograph in Plate 3.1X).

PLATE 3.XI First Contact display, showing bridewealth banners, and the '… and after' panel text and photographs. Note the similarity between the blow-up of the middle photograph and the reconstructed bridewealth banner.
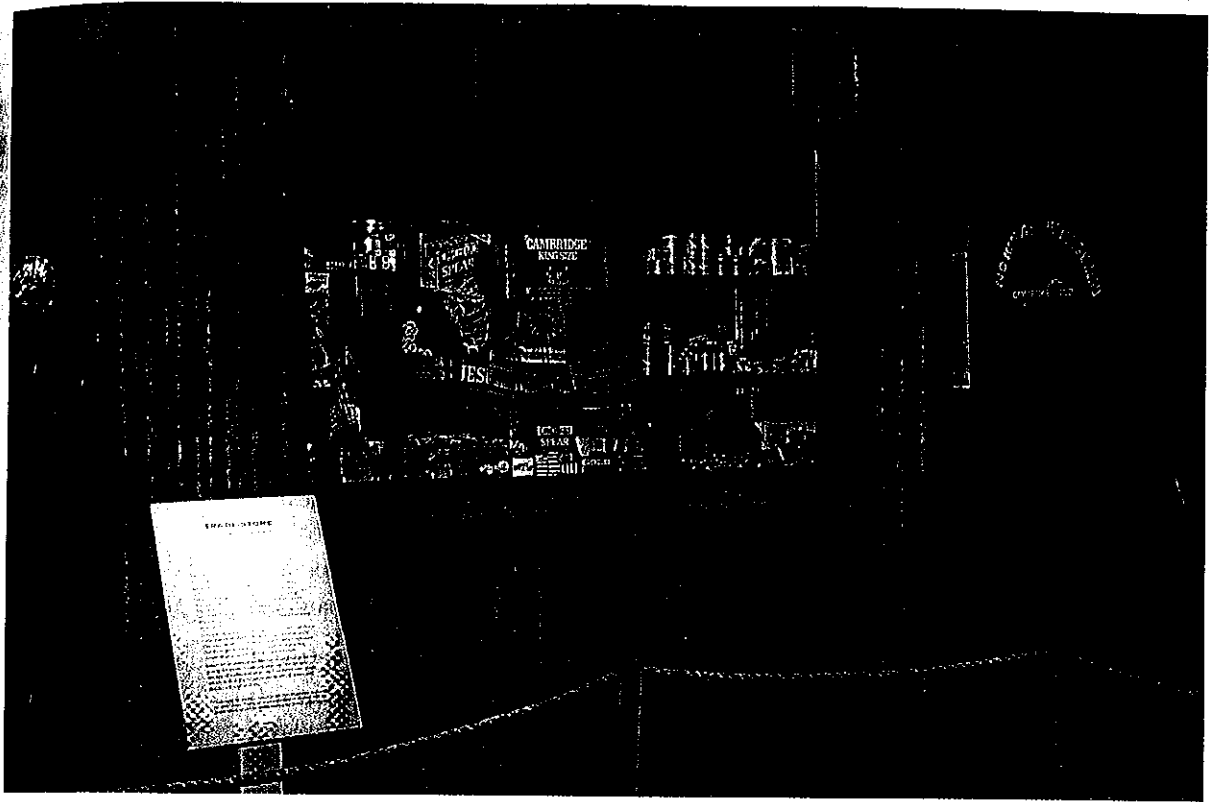
PLATE 3.XII Trade-store display. Note the warning on the door (and weighing scales from neighbouring coffee production display).
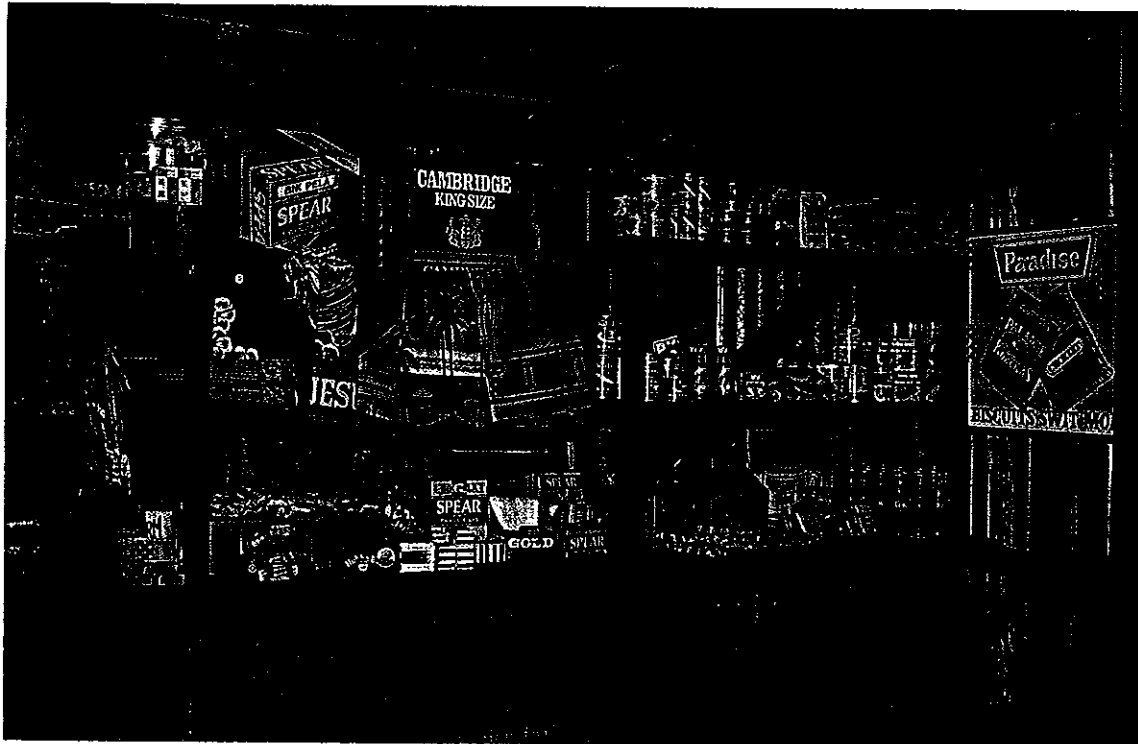
PLATE 3.XIII Interior of trade-store display, showing the variety of products on sale.
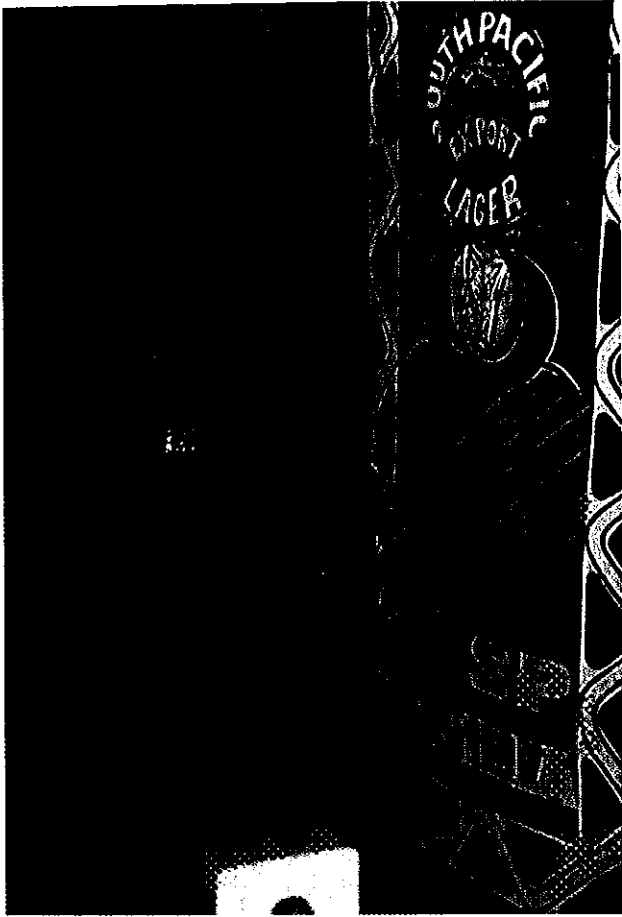
PLATE 3.XIV The side of the trade-store display, showing how a connection was created with the neighbouring shield display.
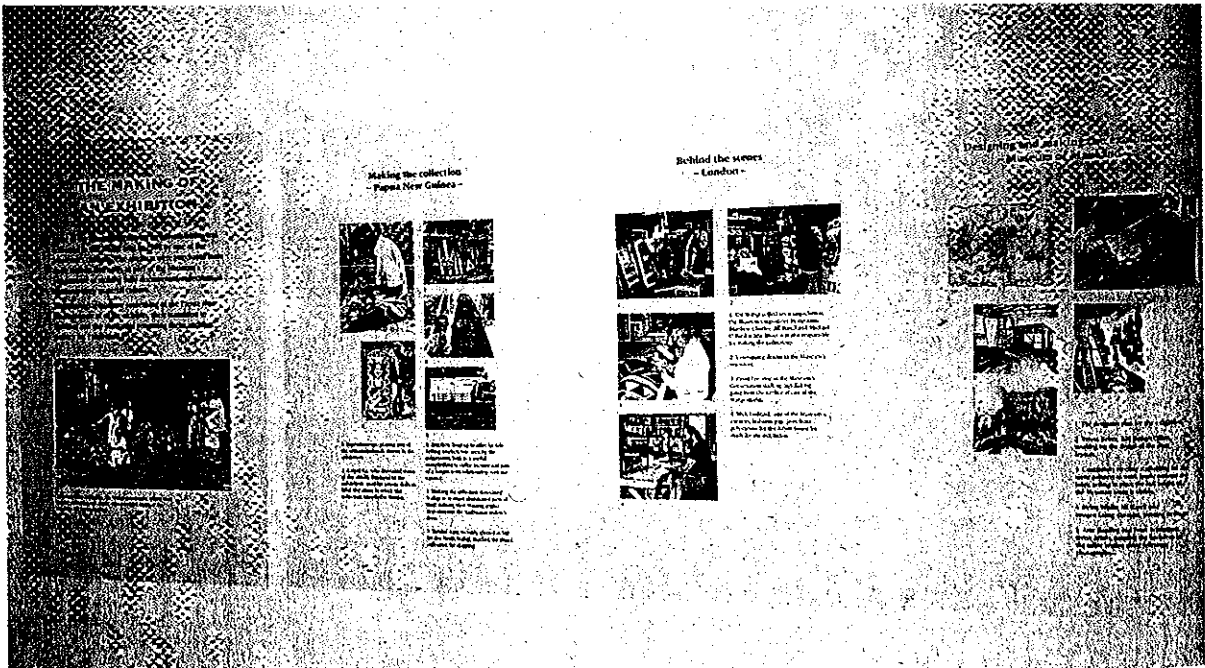
PLATE 3.XV Panels on 'The Making of the Exhibition', showing the process of collecting in the field with the assistance of the Wahgi, and the process of exhibiting in London.

can ease the work of representation within the exhibition context by virtue of their verisimilitude. As we shall see later, photographs in this exhibition were also used more actively in the practice of *signification*.

The personal image which initiates the exhibition declares that this is not the South Pacific as we all know it from the Rogers and Hammerstein film – a stereotype – this is an *authentic* Waghi. The image *denotes* Wahgi reality; it is one of a collection of photographs which objectively records an event – the opening of the store. It purports to be an adequate and truthful reflection of the event. But this denotation of Wahgi 'reality' has meaningful effects.

First, it 'naturalizes' the text: by this I mean that the photograph makes it appear less as a *construction* of Wahgi reality than a *reflection* of it, since both the 'reality' and the effects of the processes being described in the exhibition (those of change and continuity) are represented in the photograph. The concept of 'naturalization' is an important one which will be taken up through this analysis and later on in this section in the discussion of 'myth'.

But the photograph relays a complex message. It includes *connotations* of the hybrid nature of adornment (the bamboo frame is covered with imported fabric, the paints are commercially produced); the ambivalence of coffee wealth and its effect on taste (the adoption of black plumes for adornment); the nature of a typical Papua New Guinea trade-store (reconstructed in the main gallery). These only become clear once the visitor has completed the full circuit of the exhibition: on passing this photograph on the way out s/he may 'read' it more fully, being less startled by its exuberance and more aware of its encapsulation of the exhibition themes.

Second, it tends to legitimate the photographer/curator voice since the image denotes and guarantees O'Hanlon's having been there in the Highlands. It connotes *authentic* anthropological knowledge which means being appropriately familiar with the Wahgi. By association it authenticates the objects: they were collected while *he-was-there*.

But this brilliant photograph has an additional 'ethnographic' purpose. It connotes difference in all its exotic resplendence (a connotation incorporated into the exhibition poster) while simultaneously domesticating and transcending it. As one's eyes move from photograph to text, what is at first stunning and vibrant but indecipherable – except for the smile – is subsequently *translated*. This is recognizably a wealthy man in the midst of a celebration. He quickly becomes *known* and *familiar* to us. He is not simply 'a Wahgi', he is Kauwiye (Andrew) Aipe, a genial entrepreneur. Moreover he is welcoming us to the exhibition space, to the Wahgi way of life and the context in which Wahgi artefacts acquire meaning. Once the exotic is translated and proves hospitable, we can proceed into the remainder of the exhibition space.

This brief introduction alerts us to the type of construction and representation attempted in ethnographic exhibitions. Ethnographic exhibitions most

usually adopt the format of contextualizing and reconstructing. Curators/ designers work with objects and contextualize them so that these assume a purposive role; objects are commonly selected as representative, rather than unique, examples. As both cultural expressions and physical proof, these provide insights into cultural phenomena of which they are taken to be the physical manifestation ('representation'). The visitor is, therefore, drawn into a new and different world in which unfamiliar objects might be made intelligible, where the design encourages the distance between the visitor and the 'originating culture' (the culture from which the objects were appropriated) to be reduced. Since the primary purpose of such exhibitions is the translation of difference – to acquaint the viewer with unfamiliar concepts, values and ideas – their key motive is communication through understanding and interpretation. Ethnographic exhibitions are typically syncretic (pulling together things from different sources). Nevertheless, though their ostensible form is that of *mimesis*, the imitation of 'reality', their effectiveness depends on a high degree of selectivity and construction. It is this – the *poetics* of exhibiting – that the rest of this section will address.

3.3 *Paradise* regained

> [T]he next, larger, space [of the exhibition] draws you in. It contains striking things: a reconstructed highland trade-store, rows of oddly decorated shields, wicked-looking ... spears, and bamboo poles covered with leaves which, on closer inspection, turn out to be paper money.
>
> (Clifford, 1995, p. 93)

The themes of the next large space are those of contact and coffee, war, shields and peacemaking. It is here that we notice the full effect of the design of the exhibition, the cacophony of colour and objects promised by the initial photograph of Kauwiye Aipe.

ACTIVITY 2

Look at a selection of photographs of the exhibition spaces following the introductory space (Plates 3.II–3.V). These will give you a flavour of the exhibition. When looking at these, consider how the objects are exhibited. How might different methods of display affect your perception of the objects?

In the exhibition we discover that there are several methods of display. I have disaggregated them as follows:

- on open display – shields (Plate 3.III)
- table cases – shells, items of adornment (Plate 3.II)
- wall cases – items of adornment (Plate 3.IV)
- reconstructions – bridewealth banners, trade-store, *bolyim* house (Plates 3.II, 3.III, 3.V)
- simulacra – compensation payment poles (Plate 3.II).

We could think of these methods of display as different but equivalent techniques, but this interpretation is not wholly adequate. In the *Paradise* example, the selection of these different contexts was influenced by lack of funds which meant that the curator was obliged to use a display structure inherited from the previous exhibition (O'Hanlon, 1993, pp. 82–5).

Here we are concerned with the *effects* of these different display techniques. *Paradise* utilized a diversity of display techniques, so its richness allows us to address the different levels in which methods of display create contexts for the production of meaning.

All these forms of display incorporate Wahgi material culture, but the different techniques affect our perception and reaction to the objects. Let us illustrate this by taking a simple example. A simple reconstruction such as the coffee production display (Plates 3.VII, 3.VIII) includes artefacts known as Wahgi because of their context of use. They are included because of their role in Wahgi life. These are not ostentatious objects but mechanical and mundane items which appear to need very little interpretation. They exemplify the literal reality of Wahgi life in which they feature quite heavily. The combination of the artefacts is not ambiguous, it is 'obvious' they belong together: the accompanying photographs show just such a combination of artefacts being used by the Wahgi. So the visitor is encouraged to trust – by virtue of the presence and combination of artefacts – that this is a 'reflection' of Wahgi reality. Such representations work to *denote* 'Wahgi reality' and *connote* the 'naturalness' of the display technique.

The glass cases, in contrast, establish distance by placing the object in a more sterile and ordered environment (Plates 3.II, 3.IV). This more conventional museum approach connotes the artificiality of display technique. Ethnographic objects are rarely made for glass cases, nor are they habitually selected and disaggregated from other associated objects while in use. Putting material artefacts in glass cases therefore underlines the dislocation and re-contextualization that is at the root of collecting and exhibiting. So whereas reconstruction may establish a context which evokes and recreates the 'actual' environment of production or use of an object, glass cases render the objects more distant; they do not merge into their context in the same way as they might if they were placed in a reconstructed site (Plates 3.II, 3.III).

These distinctions are amplified by the use of text. In the reconstructions, numerous objects are displayed in combination and assigned communal labels; but in the glass cases the objects are given individual identities. Each object, then, is accorded a particular value, interpreted and explained. So in open displays the presence of the object and its context or *presentation* eclipses the fact that it is being *represented*. The fact of representation is obscured. We perceive here the process of *naturalization*, as the objects appear *naturally* suited to this context, seeming to speak for or represent themselves. In glass cases, however, the work involved in representation is made more overt by virtue of the artificial separation and presentation of the object.

But there is one last type of display that remains unmentioned – the simulacra. The differences between reconstructions and simulacra are subtle. The reconstructions are partially 'authentic' artefacts – made by the museum technicians according to Wahgi design and incorporating Wahgi materials, be it shells, fibre or trade goods. The simulacra are *imitations* of real Wahgi objects such as the compensation payment poles (Plate 3.II). These are neither genuine Wahgi objects, nor do they incorporate them, but as objects they draw from Wahgi 'reality' in their design. We can designate them, after Barthes, as 'trick effects': since their purpose is to make what is heavily *connoted* pass as *denoted* (Barthes, 1977, pp. 21–2). Their presence is initially unquestioned – they appear to denote 'Wahgi reality' – until we see the 'real thing' in the photographs on the curving adjacent wall (Plate 3.II). At first these banners appear authentic, it is the accompanying text and photographs that intentionally alert us to their subterfuge:

> The ... banners made of banknotes only really make sense when one sees the nearby color photograph of men holding them aloft in a procession. The 'Ah ha' response comes when looking at the picture, not the object. The banners are strange and beautiful in their way, but clearly simulacra ... They become secondary, not 'the real thing' seen so clearly in the image.
>
> (Clifford, 1995, p. 99)

But their presence is nevertheless important, since these tangibly simulated objects smooth the representational work: if the text interprets and directs the reading of the object, then the object draws the reader to the text. The 'trick' is to validate the text. The presence of these simulacra in conjunction with the 'real thing' in the form of the photograph anchors the representation of Wahgi peace-making and compensation written about in the accompanying text.

3.4 Structuring *Paradise*

This part of section 3 will examine how images and texts can be used to create meaning in the exhibition context, by analysing a specific display in *Paradise*.

Clearly texts and images can have a number of functions. In order to disaggregate these I shall use the terms 'presentation', 'representation' and 'presence'. I will use the terms **presentation** to refer to the overall arrangement and the techniques employed; **presence** to imply the type of object and the power it exerts; and **representation** to consider the manner in which the objects work in conjunction with contexts and texts to produce meaning (Dubé, 1995, p. 4).

presentation
presence
representation

Looking at the photographs of the First Contact display carefully (Plates 3.IX, 3.X, 3.XI), examine how the texts and the images are used in the context of this discrete space. You do not need to dwell at length on this. Simply reflect on the different types of texts used in this display. What might their roles be? What roles are the photographs given: do they illustrate, amplify, authenticate the text? How might these photographs denote a changing historical period?

Let us consider the 'texts' and what narrative techniques are used, before moving on to consider the function and significance of photographs in *Paradise*. As in most exhibitions *Paradise* used several types of *texts*:

1   *Panels*. These contain thematic information or delineate a particular arena of human activity.

2   *Labels*. These are assigned to particular objects, offering explanations of how the object is articulated in its social contexts.

3   Photographic *captions*. These exemplify or subvert certain concepts or descriptions contained in other texts.

The difference between these texts is quite subtle. Panel texts connote authority but are, conversely, more interpretative. Labels and captions, on the other hand, are more 'literal'; they claim to describe what is there. This is partly determined by space. Nevertheless these texts work together and separately, each *encoding* through the semblance of *decoding*. The difference between these texts, but also their contribution to signification, can be exemplified at the level of translation.

Ethnographic exhibitions frequently make use of indigenous terms within the substance of their texts. This is done for many reasons, partly to acknowledge the insufficiency of translation, but equally because in an ethnographic exhibition it accords 'a voice' to the people featured. Such concessions to indigenous language have, furthermore, proved popular and acceptable to the audiences who visit ethnographic exhibitions. But utilizing indigenous languages has certain effects. On labels, they are often entered as descriptions to signify the object – the *bolyim* house, a *mond* post – and a connection is created between object and description which appears transparent, definitive and transcendent. This is a *bolyim house* – no need for translation (Plate 3.VI). Panels frequently have sayings, asides or proverbs, in unfamiliar languages encouraging the reader to enter, momentarily at least, into the conceptual universe – the way of seeing – of the people concerned. In the First Contact panel, for instance, Kekanem Goi's remark recounting his first reaction to the patrol's arrival ('*Alamb kipe gonzip alamb ende wom mo?*') is translated ('Is it ghosts, the dead who have come?') to denote the shock of the encounter between the Whites and the Wahgi (Plate 3.IX). But equally the process of inclusion is a complex one, involving selection, translation and interpretation. Meaning must be altered so that an allegory or metaphor deriving from one culture is made comprehensible in the language of another.

So here we see that, though texts impart information, they are also economies of meaning, selecting what they would ideally like the visitor to know – what is important. They also reinforce certain aspects of design. In the First Contact display the spears are not given labels, but one can easily 'read' them since their arrangement (Plate 3.X) overtly reflects the content of one of the large photographs (Plate 3.IX). No overt guidance (text) is needed since they can be interpreted against the photograph.

This is one of the functions of the photographs in the First Contact display. At one level the type of reconstruction attempted seeks simply to mimic the content of the photographs. The scene painting reflects the image of Mick Leahy's encampment (Plate 3.X), the reconstructed fence and the group of *kula jimben* spears – some collected in the 1930s, others in the 1990s – recreate the situation in the black-and-white photograph of the Leahy patrol camp (Plate 3.IX). The bridewealth banner reflects the colour picture, itself a blow-up of one of the pictures in the panel (Plate 3.XI). This is not all. The images, in addition to authenticating the (re)construction and the objects, serve to connote the passage of time. This is related by the quality of the reproduction (grainy/clear) and its type (colour/black and white) – a message easily understood. The 'faded' colour of the bridewealth banner picture (taken in the 1950s) contrasts with the 'true' colour of the other, more recent, pictures (taken in the 1980s) and the black-and-white grainy reproductions of those taken in the 1930s (Clifford, 1995, pp. 99–100). The interplay and proximity of these images of changing quality and type reinforces the theme of the text and locates the objects to create a very rich representation of change and continuity.

But some photographs have a function which go beyond that of *presentation* and *representation*. In the *Paradise* exhibition they are equally a substitute for *presence*. In the case of the bridewealth banners, most particularly, the large blow-up photograph *substitutes* for the object (Plates 3.II and 3.XI). Moreover, the photograph – the representation of the real banner – overshadows the adjacent reconstruction – the partially authentic artefact which incorporates *real* Wahgi shells and fibre – by being far more splendid:

> It is no longer a question of a photo providing 'context' for an object. We confront an object that cannot be present physically, a 1950s bridewealth banner – long disassembled, as is its proper fate. This banner has been 'collected' in the photographs. Given its prominence, the color image seems somehow more real, in a sense more 'authentic' than ... the less impressive older banner propped beside it ...
>
> (Clifford, 1995, p. 100)

Clifford comments that, for him, this is preferable. Collecting would artificially remove the object and make it immortal, whereas collecting the object-as-photograph provides a legitimate alternative: recording the existence of the object without interrupting its proper cultural disposal. So

photographs, in the exhibition context, can accord a *presence* to ephemeral artefacts – artefacts that would be destroyed in their proper social context: the bridewealth banners and *bolyim* house for instance – and those that cannot be exported legally – such as the Bird of Paradise feathers (Plate 3.I) – or practically – the Wahgi themselves (Plate 3.XV).

In the *Paradise* exhibition, therefore, photographs have three effects: they enhance the *presentation* of the exhibition; they substitute for the physical *presence* of ethnographic 'objects' or 'subjects'; and they ease the work of *representation* by providing a 'real' context which either contextualizes the object or allows a blueprint for the display design.

3.5 *Paradise*: the exhibit as artefact

In the preceding sections we have considered how objects, texts and contexts have worked in conjunction to produce meaning. Let us bring these to bear on the trade-store exhibit to examine how the context of display, and by extension the exhibition, can be considered as a fiction and an artefact. The word fiction is not used here in a derogatory way, but rather in its *neutral* sense: the Latin verb *fingere* from which fiction derives means that something has been fashioned and made through human endeavour. O'Hanlon himself boldly acknowledges his role in this process of authorship (1993, Introduction, Chapter 3). As an articulated but bounded representational system, the trade-store will be used here as a metaphor for the *Paradise* exhibition as a whole (Plate 3.III).

The trade-store clearly operates on the level of *presentation*. It mimics a 'real' Highland store with a corrugated iron roof. The reconstruction is 'authentic' even down to its incorporation of the usual notice on its door – *No ken askim long dinau* (Don't ask for credit) – and the floor – sandy and littered with beer bottle tops (Plates 3.XII, 3.XIV). The hodge-podge of goods, all imported, purposefully attempts to 'capture something of the raw colours of such enterprises' (O'Hanlon, 1993, p. 89) (Plate 3.XIII). And is their function purely presentation? No. The presence of these goods clearly heightens our power of imagination; the combination is fascinating; each item draws our attention. One stops to read the different brand names – Cambridge cigarettes, *LikLik Wopa* ('little whopper' biscuits), Paradise *Kokonas* (coconut biscuits), Big Sister pudding, the ubiquitous Coca Cola – and to take in the exuberance of the display.

On the level of *presence*, the items denote 'the expanding range of goods on sale' (O'Hanlon, 1993, p. 89), most particularly what can be bought with coffee wealth. The store was intended as 'a reconstruction, stocked with the goods which would be on sale during the Wahgi coffee season' (panel text). So these objects are genuine and representative samples of the totality of artefacts that could be found in a store (they were brought over from Papua New Guinea). The store *enlivens* the representation of Wahgi life. Its presence – as an artefact in its own right – *anchors* the narrative in the panel text, which

conversely interprets the meaning of the whole and the miscellany of goods which it contains.

Considering the context of display – the trade-store – the arrangements of these objects seems appropriate, 'natural' even. Imagine these trade goods ordered in a glass case: the isolation would affect our perception, drawing us to the object rather than the combination. It is the contrived miscellany of objects in the trade-store that makes it compelling and produces meaning; the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts. The trade-store is itself a system of representation, externally and internally narrated. Each object is interpreted through its label, which cross-refers to others, the advertising slogans and to the panel text. Furthermore the store goods are interpreted in two different languages – *tok pisin* (the local *lingua franca)*, and English. These trade labels reaffirm difference but also transcend it.

The trade-store is an enabling context which 'quickens' our understanding of the ambivalent impact of coffee wealth, transforming exchange relations, encouraging warfare. But this representation is articulated with the adjacent displays (Plate 3.III), coffee production – the source of money – and the shields, which connote in their design and form 'South Pacific' beer cans (Plate 3.III, 3.XIV). Indeed the trade-store, though denotative of a 'typical' Highlands store, has another level of artifice – two 'trick effects'. O'Hanlon tells us that he has had to cut away the front to permit visibility and surreptitiously included 'South Pacific' empties along the far wall, not because this is representative of reality, but because a reference to beer must be included in a depiction of New Guinea life (1993, pp. 89–90). Their inclusion here enables us to make an effortless move to the next display (Plate 3.III and 3.XIV).

The display takes us back to the initial image and functions covertly as a focal point for our other senses. It is the first time one can remark the change in the scene painting and it is from the trade-store that we become aware that the sounds can be heard. What effects might these have?

Let us first take the case of the scene painting. In the introductory space, scene painting is restricted to the depiction of two mountain ranges and the sky. In the main exhibition space it is varied to denote the physical and social environment of the Highlands of New Guinea, alternatively dense Highlands vegetation (behind the trade-store and the hand-coffee mill) and an enclosed camp identical to the one in the photographs of the Leahy expedition or a Wahgi village (behind the *bolyim* house and *mond* post). The scene painting works with the photographs and the reconstructions to innocently denote the Wahgi world, to reflect the physical environment of the Highlands of New Guinea 'as-it-really-is'. This denotation of Wahgi reality is affirmed aurally, by the continuous looped three-minute tape featuring New Guinea early morning sounds, cicadas, singing, jew's harp, but also bingo calls, issuing from the trade-store. These sounds locate the visitor in the Highlands. Providing a contrast with the busy London streets, but equally with the quiet reverence of the other galleries, these aural representations

deepen the impression of entering the Wahgi physical and social world because they work on an affective, emotional level. Amplifying the themes of the exhibition, these sounds 'collected in the field' denote the Highlands but connote tradition (through sounds of jew's harp, singing) and change (through the recognizable sound of bingo). So what at first seemed different, is with repetition made familiar and the visitor is encouraged to imagine they are in the New Guinea Highlands. But this representation of 'how-it-really-is' necessarily supports a distinct thematic narrative about the way in which change and continuity shape contemporary Wahgi life.

Thus we can think of *Paradise*, the exhibition, as a complex representational system featuring objects (made and used by the Wahgi), reconstructions (of Wahgi material, of Wahgi design, but made by Museum staff) and simulacra whose cogency derives from the articulation of these different elements into a narrative with texts, images and sounds. At one level the *Paradise* exhibition is 'typically' ethnographic: its focus is the socio-cultural whole that is Wahgi life, and it uses objects as exemplars, each a sample of a representative type whose presence guarantees the veracity of the representation. It is equally typical in the sense that it is necessarily selective: what we are presented with is a representation of Wahgi life, authored and partial.

3.6 The myths of *Paradise*

In the preceding analysis two things were learned:
1   the extent to which exhibitions are constructions,
2   that the end of this construction is to persuade, to render 'natural' or 'innocent' what is profoundly 'constructed' and 'motivated'.

The first point has been extensively investigated, the second point is that which concerns us now. The point of departure – the argument to follow – is simply that *all* cultural producers – advertisers, designers, curators, authors (including this one) – are involved in the creation of 'myths' in the manner in which Barthes defines this. As a consequence, these producers are inevitably the holders of symbolic power.

We shall look at 'myth' by critically assessing the contrasting accounts of both Clifford (1995) and O'Hanlon (1993) concerning the production of exhibitions. The *Paradise* exhibition, unusually, included panels and text which highlighted the conditions of production of the exhibition, the role of the author and curator and his relationship with the community he chose to represent. Such a candid account is placed at the end of the exhibition, and so in a sense one 'reads' the exhibition as a partial truth, retrospectively. It is worth noting that it is precisely because the *Paradise* exhibition was not a standard unreflective exhibit, but a resourceful and complex exhibition that addressed the problematic aspects of its own production and political accountability, that it has provoked such valuable and reflexive comment, of a kind that can push the student and cultural critic alike beyond simply stereotyping the process of exhibiting.

READINGS C AND D

Let us consider certain extracts from O'Hanlon's (1993) book and Clifford's (1995) commentary, Readings C and D at the end of this chapter.

These two texts have alternative purposes and voices. O'Hanlon writes as a curator/anthropologist. He recounts the process of collecting and exhibiting as he sees it, to strip it of its aura of 'magic'. Clifford's text offers a different perspective, from the point of view of the cultural critic and the visitor; someone who is enthusiastic about *Paradise,* but who uses it to push the analysis on to questions of power. *These are both partial views – texts about texts – and must be read as such.* They constitute part of an ongoing dialogue.

You should take notes on these two extracts, particularly the differing views on *collecting* and *exhibiting.* How does each seek to qualify their point of view? How do their interpretations contrast?

Let us first consider O'Hanlon's perspective.

O'Hanlon's account of collecting adopts a reflexive tone which acknowledges the contingencies of collecting as well as the potential inapplicability of an anthropologist's categories. He represents collecting as a valuable educational experience. He argues that collecting does not involve a 'rupture' of artefacts from their local context, but requires complex negotiations between the Wahgi and himself, dictated by existing – Wahgi – categories of social relations and local political agendas. He is directed by and drawn into a complex series of relationships in which he is attributed the status of an agent by his Wahgi friends. His departure places him at one remove from these expectations of a continuing relationship of indebtedness.

Collecting Wahgi material culture, and prompting its production, pushes O'Hanlon to recognize the limits of knowledge. It alerts him to cultural complexities and the convoluted meanings of certain artefacts. It creates an artificial social situation, bringing the subtleties of Wahgi classification and definitions, which he might otherwise have missed, to his attention. For instance, although the Wahgi are prepared to make certain ritually significant items for O'Hanlon (*geru* boards), they are not prepared to make others (*bolyim* house).

So collecting emerges from O'Hanlon's account as a complex, negotiated process, where the anthropologist does *not* have the power one might otherwise expect. It necessitates, instead, local knowledge, resources and resourcefulness.

In relationship to exhibiting, O'Hanlon stresses that the exhibition is an authored text and assemblage – an *artefact.* He avows his desire that the Wahgi should have a degree of *presence* in the exhibition and writes that he would like to honour the Wahgi's request for stones and posts to be put in the first antechamber of the exhibition (an antechamber that was subsequently changed by the designers). He notes, furthermore, that his exhibition should

accord the Wahgi a 'voice' by using Wahgi or *tok pisin* text. Secondly, he overtly signals the constructed nature of the exhibition within the exhibition itself: the last panels foreground the different stages of its production (Plate 3.XV).

Clifford (1995) on the other hand reviews the exhibition, in part because it does tackle issues and provide information which in most exhibitions is backgrounded. While acknowledging this, however, he subjects the materials provided to further scrutiny. For Clifford, like O'Hanlon, *Paradise* is an artefact fashioned by the interplay between curators, designers and the museum institution, but not necessarily the Wahgi. He critically questions the extent to which the Wahgi could be considered as partners or co-authors and cites the following evidence. First, the lack of a significant Wahgi 'voice'. Second, his view that the self-reflexivity incorporated into the exhibition (Plate 3.XV) is less provocative than it might be. Lastly he questions the exact nature of the 'continuing relationship of indebtedness' between O'Hanlon and the Wahgi. Using the example of the 'taboo stones' he argues that the Wahgi had little effective power. Finally, he asks to what extent specific interpersonal relationships struck up between the anthropologist and his colleagues or friends within the community ('in the field') can be mapped onto the institutional setting.

ACTIVITY 4

We now have two different views of the process of collecting and exhibiting. What do you think of these views? Which strikes you as the more compelling, and why?

We can add to these two commentaries on the practices of collecting and exhibiting another critical dimension, using Barthes's theory of 'myth', or mythical speech, which was discussed in Chapter 1. Two aspects of his exposition may be useful here, to push the dialogue, and the analysis of exhibiting above, further.

First, Barthes calls 'myths' a second order semiological language. This means that, in contrast to ordinary language, it does not work on the basis of an arbitrary, unmotivated relationship between the signifier and signified. With 'myth' there is always some form of 'motivation', namely some purpose, intent or rationale underlying its use. Furthermore the persuasiveness of 'myths' derive from their 'natural justification' of their purpose:

> What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; what myth gives back in return is a *natural* image of this reality.
>
> (Barthes, 1989, p. 155)

So myth 'naturalizes' speech, transmuting what is essentially *cultural* (historical, constructed and motivated) into something which it materializes

as *natural* (transhistorical, innocent and factual). Myth's duplicity is therefore located in its ability to 'naturalize' and make 'innocent' what is profoundly motivated.

The second point follows from this and concerns the ability of myth to 'de-politicize' speech:

> Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it *purifies* them, it makes them *innocent*, it gives them a *natural* and *eternal* justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.
>
> (Barthes, 1989, p. 156, my emphasis)

So by asserting that 'myth' de-politicizes speech, Barthes argues that myth does not hide or conceal its motivation. Instead, by giving it a universal, transhistorical basis and by stressing objectivity, and its origins in nature, myth **purifies** its motivation.

purification by myth

How might these insights provide an additional 'reading' of the texts to the ones we have just explored?

In this section we have treated the *Paradise* exhibition as a fashioned event and a complex system of signification. Both these aspects can be addressed by Barthes's analysis of 'myth'.

Let us first consider 'motivation'. *Paradise*, like all exhibitions or any other cultural products, was clearly the result of a series of deliberate actions: the collection was purchased, the exhibition planned, written and constructed. The objects were removed from Wahgi cultural life and re-presented in cases, restored in the quasi-'natural' setting of a reconstruction or represented in scene paintings and photographs. *Paradise* was not a rambling narrative with a number of disconnected objects thrown together; it was a highly structured event, in which *even* the apparent miscellanies were designed to seem 'real'.

Moreover the overwhelming purpose of the exhibition was that of representing Wahgi *reality*: the artefacts, once part of the Wahgi social universe, visibly correspond to Wahgi 'reality' as captured in the photographs, or mimicked in the reconstructions. So the phenomenon of Wahgi cultural life is domesticated and transformed – it is 'naturalized'. The exhibition adopts a factual, easy tone where selected representative objects are described in objective terms and where sounds, scene painting reconstructions, photographs, quotations, all accord a *presence* to the Wahgi.

So the *Paradise* exhibition, like all exhibitions, is a descriptive and motivated event. But doesn't O'Hanlon go some way to recognizing this?

O'Hanlon does not deny his agency as an anthropologist; he incorporates it into his narratives (the exhibition and the book). Aware as he is of the complexities of collecting and exhibiting, he sets out to explore the

contingencies and conditions of possibility of both. O'Hanlon's motivations are clearly 'natural' and acceptable, given his professional status, as is his desire to show a recent collection. Being the first major display of Papua New Guinea Highlands material culture in Britain, the exhibition was considered to be both appropriate and timely. Collecting, furthermore, affords him the opportunity of speculating on the blurred category of Wahgi material culture that he has to work within. He argues that, in the New Guinea context, collecting is not necessarily rupture but exchange (his methods have differed quite considerably from the directly exploitative collecting trips of others), conceived and effected in synchrony with the Wahgi view of the world. O'Hanlon therefore questions whether the Wahgi would necessarily view collecting as *appropriation*, belonging, as they do, to an elaborate culture of exchange.

Clearly O'Hanlon explores his motivations as a collector/curator. But for Barthes, this might be perceived as an act of *purification*. The intense attention to the intricacies of the various practices leading up to the exhibition encourages a reading of collecting and exhibiting as exchanges in which the collector and the Wahgi are partners. The panel at the end of the exhibition particularly hints at the **symbolic power** of the exhibition, namely the way in which it constructs and persuades through delineating a path through meaning. The presentation of the Waghi as knowing agents and cultural producers, and of O'Hanlon as author and curator, *purifies* the *symbolic power* of the exhibition and the curator.

Clifford, on the other hand, implicitly draws a distinction between the *symbolic power* of the exhibition and the **institutional power** of the British Museum. He agrees that O'Hanlon has acknowledged his relatively powerful role as author and circumscriber of meaning through his last panel, and through his book. But Clifford remains unconvinced that the relationship between the Wahgi and the institution – the British Museum – is sufficiently examined. Clifford argues that the two – *symbolic power* and *institutional power* – are symbiotic, and that while O'Hanlon fully acknowledges his symbolic power, he does not tackle the institutional relationship.

What might the implications be of prioritizing a reading of exhibition as *mythical structure* rather than simply as *artefact*? There are implications concerning authorship and power. If the exhibition is a form of mythical speech, then the anthropologist is a kind of mythologist: out of the oddments of the present and the debris of the past s/he puts together new constructions and meanings that are persuasive and necessarily disguised because they are interpretations which are received as facts and truths. But it must be remarked that if one opts to perceive an exhibition as a mythical structure, then the *symbolic power* of the anthropologist is not a choice but an *inevitability*. Collecting and authorship necessitate the production of 'partial truths' and 'persuasive fictions'.

Clifford, however, in his analysis, hints at an important distinction. We can differentiate between *symbolic power* – which is inevitable and located

(margin notes:)
ation by myth

symbolic power

institutional power

around the author (and therefore under individual control: for example, the relationship between O'Hanlon and the Wahgi) – and *institutional power* – which is more exclusionary and situated round the institution (the direct relationship between the British Museum and the Wahgi, and the latter's relative power of sanction). As we shall see (section 4) the question of *institutional power* is an influential critique when exercised in relation to museums since it reaches beyond the internal articulation of meaning to the broader issue of the role of the museum in society at large and its relationship to knowledge.

> ACTIVITY 5
>
> So, to the two different views of the process of collecting and exhibiting, we have added another dimension. Has this discussion of 'myth' altered your view of exhibiting? Why?

3.7 Summary

This section subjected ethnographic displays to a particular type of analysis. Drawing on semiotic theory – the work of Barthes – in relation to a case study – the *Paradise* exhibition – we showed how exhibitions trace a particular path through meaning and motivation. Initially treating the exhibition as an artefact, the analysis explored the various ways in which objects, contexts, texts and visual representations were deployed to construct meaning. It explored the internal ordering of the various elements and their articulation, but disaggregated the display into several levels: presence, presentation and representation, allowing us to examine the *poetics* of exhibiting. Treating an ethnographic display as an artefact provided a means of detecting the complex web of signification and how it was produced. We then considered the different views that the commentaries on *Paradise* offered on the practices of collecting and exhibiting. We found that these commentaries gave distinct interpretations, and we added to this a theoretical alternative which pushed us towards a more 'political' interpretation of exhibiting, by proposing that an exhibition is a mythical structure. This, in turn, permitted us to question exhibitions and museums in line with two different analyses of power: *symbolic* and *institutional*.

4 Captivating cultures: the politics of exhibiting

4.1 Introduction

The last section considered exhibiting in terms of its *poetics* – the internal articulation and production of meaning. This section will invoke a theoretical model and texts to explore the *politics* of exhibiting – the role of

exhibitions/museums in the production of social *knowledge*. Whereas section 3 used the work of Roland Barthes, this section will appeal to the work of Michel Foucault whose writings were also discussed in Chapter 1. So the model of representation used in this section will focus on broader issues of knowledge and power. Examining the **politics of exhibiting** will cause the question of *institutional power*, raised in section 3, to be specifically addressed. As we noted in previous sections, museum collections do not simply 'happen': artefacts have to be made to be collected, and collected to be exhibited. They are historical, social and political events. This section will present yet another 'reading' of the practices of exhibiting: a critique which argues that the practices of collecting and exhibiting are powerful activities, and that an analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge should be incorporated into any investigation into exhibiting/museums. Examples from a specific historical, political moment – the late nineteenth century – will be used in this section for reasons that will become apparent.

politics of exhibiting

4.2 Knowledge and power

The aspects of Michel Foucault's work which we shall investigate here concern the specific definition he gives to *discourse* and the axis he defines between *power/knowledge*. In establishing these definitions, we are adopting a new interpretation of anthropological knowledge.

discourse

Discourse, as you may recall from Chapter 1, section 4, is a group of statements which provides a language for talking about a particular topic, one that constructs that topic in a particular way. It is a way of formulating a topic and a field of inquiry which answers specific 'governing statements' (questions) and produces 'strategic knowledge': *savoir*. For Foucault, in contrast to Barthes, knowledge cannot be reduced to the realm of pure 'meaning' or 'language' because all knowledge operates as a historically situated social practice: all knowledge is **power/knowledge**. So 'strategic knowledge' is knowledge inseparable from relationships of power (Foucault, 1980, p. 145). Discourses, according to this definition, do not simply reflect 'reality' or innocently designate objects. Rather, they *constitute them in specific contexts according to particular relations of power*. So if the subject of anthropological enquiry is discursively constituted, this implies that this knowledge does not simply operate at the level of 'meaning' or 'ideas', nor does it innocently reflect 'reality'. On the contrary:

power/knowledge

> [anthropology] itself is possible only on the basis of a certain situation, of an absolutely singular event ...: [anthropology] has its roots, in fact, in a possibility that properly belongs to the history of our culture ... [Anthropology] can assume its proper dimensions only within the historical sovereignty – always restrained, but always present – of European thought and the relation that can bring it face to face with all other cultures as well as with itself.
>
> (Foucault, 1989, pp. 376–7)

So if we take the emergent social science of anthropology or ethnology in the latter part of the nineteenth century, we could characterize it as a rather diffuse body of knowledge constituted by scholars, which acquired a hesitant disciplinary status by virtue of its placement in small institutional bases, most particularly the museum. Alternatively, one can see it as more complicit, a discipline which, despite its aspiration to general human relevance and enlightenment, was primarily a discourse about the culturally or racially despised, developed by the members of a dominant culture in the imperial context (Stocking, 1985, p. 112). Stocking, for example, argues that it is a discipline which codified knowledge in such a manner that it could be called upon as 'a moral as well as a scientific justification for the often bloody process' of imperial expansion (1987, p. 273). By providing a classificatory schema for the 'races' of humankind, it can be argued, it encouraged and aided their regulation.

Foucault's meditation on the subject of discourse reflected his more general preoccupation with the genesis of the human sciences. For Foucault, studying the genesis of the human sciences revealed that these are not 'enlightened' sciences – progressive views of the human condition – but particular forms of knowledge which emerged at a distinct historical moment. While they frequently constituted themselves as enlightened, they were more properly united in their desire to regulate human subjects. For Foucault, the new human 'sciences', of which anthropology is one, sought to codify and regulate certain sections of society: women, 'natives', the insane, the infirm and the criminal classes, which, as sciences, they discursively constituted as real subjects of knowledge on the basis of material evidence (see Chapter 1). These sciences were allied to techniques of regulation (the prison, the mental asylum, the hospital, the university) and the rise of the nation-state. Discourses systematically 'form the objects [subjects] of which they speak' (Barrett, 1991, p. 130), but in accordance with newly emerging relationships of power which sought not to control violently but to discipline in institutional settings, most usually through the emphasis on the body.

Using a Foucauldian perspective suggests that anthropology emerged as a distinctive type of knowledge at a defined historical moment (the middle of the nineteenth century) and was inscribed with particular relationships of power (Empire and colonial expansion) and therefore largely depended in some measure on the unequal encounter of what has elsewhere been called 'the West and the Rest' (Hall, 1992).

One may ask to what extent does this new critical dimension contribute to an analysis of ethnographic display?

Employing a Foucauldian framework necessitates recasting the field of anthropology as a discursive formation: one constituted through the operation of several discourses; equally one which does not simply reflect 'real' distinctions between peoples, but creates them. Moreover, as a science which mobilizes a classificatory system, it manufactures these distinctions on the basis of a certain *representation* of this difference, and subsequently

uses this typology to determine whom it seeks to study and what the best research methods to employ might be. Correspondingly, as anthropological discourses change, so do representations and the kinds of evidence needed to support these types of knowledge. These factors clearly have implications in terms of material culture and methods of display.
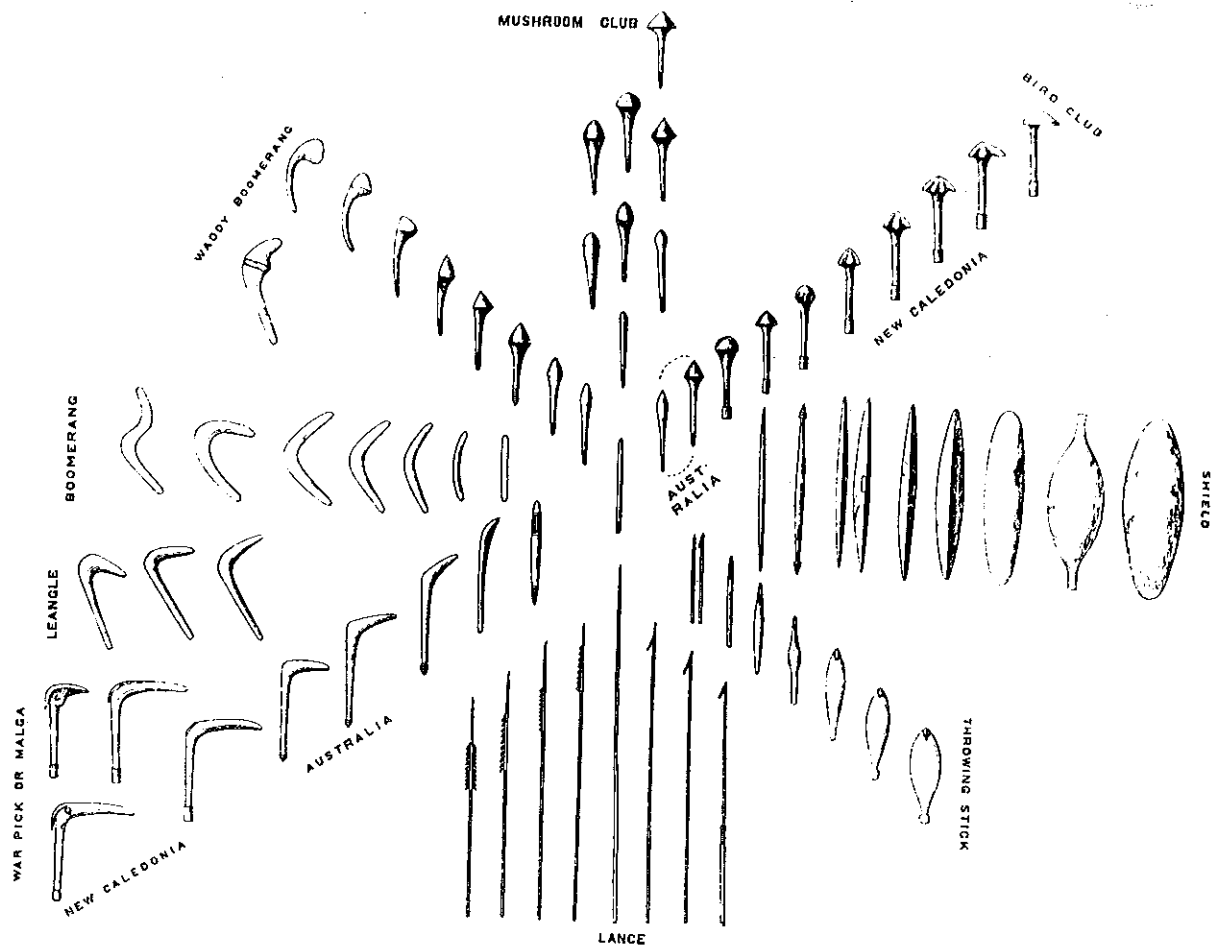
Let us now see how using a Foucauldian argument about the relationship between discourse and representation might present a different perspective on the museum context to that of section 3.

4.3 Displaying others

Ethnographic artefacts were constituent items of the oldest collections, but in many cases the delineation of artefacts as specifically 'ethnographic', whether by virtue of circumscribed displays, specific departments, or museums, only took on a scientific status late in the nineteenth century. Indeed anthropology was to find its first institutional home in museums, rather than universities. 'In a period when not only anthropology, but science generally was much more "object" – or specimen – orientated than today' (Stocking, 1987, p. 263), the existence of collections propelled anthropology towards institutionalization, as curators started to define themselves professionally as anthropologists. One of the most notable museums to emerge in the nineteenth century was the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

We will examine the relationship between discourse and exhibiting in the context of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Older displays seem to furnish us with particularly good examples of the processes at work, perhaps because we recognize their artifice more readily (Lavine and Karp, 1991, p. 1).

Augustus Henry Lane Fox (later Pitt Rivers, after inheriting a substantial fortune), the founder and patron of the Pitt Rivers Museum, developed a particular interest in collecting objects after visiting the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851. Initially a collector of arms, he soon broadened his interest to encompass archaeological and ethnographic items (Chapman, 1985, p. 16). He was interested in theories of evolution and human antiquity as well as 'racial' theories. By the comparison of artefacts from different periods and places, in particular the 'commoner class of objects', he sought to establish historical sequences which visibly mapped technological development and small alterations in form over time. He believed that only through the 'persistence of forms' could one 'show that disparate peoples possessed common traits, and thus re-established their past connection' (Chapman, 1985, p. 23). By arranging sequences of artefacts one could reflect on 'the sequence of ideas by which mankind has advanced from the condition of lower animals' (Lane Fox quoted in Chapman, 1985, p. 33) because the technological sophistication of objects stood for or represented the intangible aspects of culture. For Lane Fox, continuities in the form of artefacts provided decisive evidence for ethnological and evolutionary connections (Figure 3.3).

FIGURE 3.3

'Clubs, Boomerangs,
Shields and Lances':
an illustration from
Henry Lane Fox's
*The Evolution of
Culture* (Oxford,
Pitt Rivers Museum,
1875).

Lane Fox was dedicated to the idea of displaying these connections in a museum. In the early 1860s he sought a wider audience for his collection and eventually, in 1883, offered the whole collection to Oxford on condition that it was exhibited in the manner he determined.

The Pitt Rivers collection thus distinguished itself by virtue of its arrangement. Its systematic approach owed more to a Linnean natural historical classification (of groups, genera and species) than the more common geographical classification typical of other contemporary ethnographic displays (Figure 3.4) (Chapman, 1985, pp. 25–6; Coombes 1994a, pp. 117–9; Lane Fox, 1874). Pitt Rivers arranged his artefacts primarily in a *typological* manner, namely one which privileged form and function but was cross-cut by geographical principles of regional groupings. Artefacts were arranged sequentially to permit comparative analysis. Archaeological artefacts from ancient peoples and contemporary ethnographical materials – from 'survivals' – were arranged side by side to form a complex representation whose purpose was the illustration of human evolution and history. In this manner the Pitt Rivers collection and museum provided a predominant and compelling *typological* representation, which spoke volumes about the determination of its founder to promote a particular

FIGURE 3.4
An ethnographic gallery of the British Museum, c. 1900.
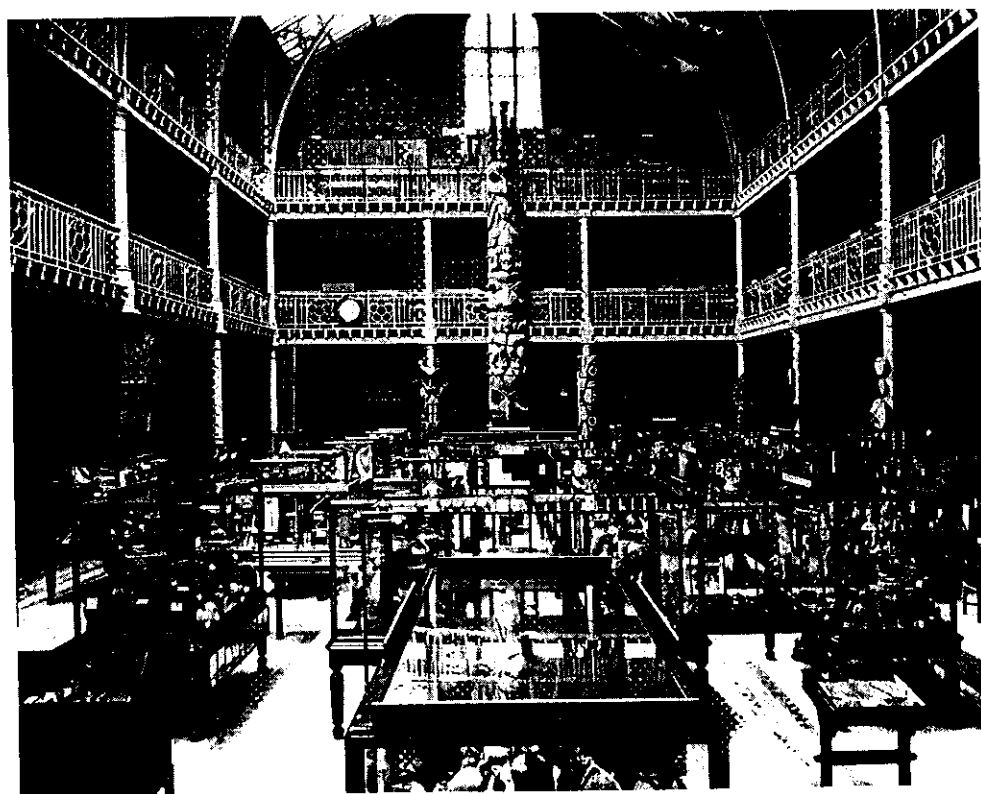
FIGURE 3.5
The main exhibition hall of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, c. 1970.

strand of anthropological inquiry, and therefore of knowledge and discourse (Figure 3.5). The representation of other cultures that it gave rise to was determined by Pitt Rivers' preferred view of functional *evolutionary discourse*. In presenting this focused view, the Pitt Rivers Museum did not

reflect the 'complex and comprehensive' debates taking place in the emerging discipline of anthropology or among the Museums Association concerning the classification of ethnographic material, but accorded with more popular views of the relationship between the 'races' which it legitimated by virtue of its position as a scientific discourse (Coombes, 1994a, p. 117).

What issues are raised by examining the Pitt Rivers display and in what manner is this form of representation different to that of the *Musaeum Tradescantianum*?

First, one has to consider how the inclusion of the artefacts was determined by the type of knowledge that was brought to bear on them and how these legitimated certain discourses. As 'curiosities', ethnographic artefacts occupied an equivalent place to other decontextualized objects – artefacts to prompt the imagination and philosophical reflection. The Tradescant display now appears whimsical and disorderly in its arrangement, reflective of a particular world view which applied classificatory criteria (Artificial versus Natural curiosities) but also a hierarchy of value (in terms of curiosities and rareties) very different from the evolutionary ones. Collecting was seemingly an idiosyncratic process, even though undeniably already the product of exploration, conquest and colonization.

Ethnographic artefacts in the Pitt Rivers collection, by contrast, were subjected to the seemingly more rigorous discourse of science. Utilized as 'evidence' and 'proof', they were the material embodiment of the socio-cultural complexities of other cultures. These ethnographic artefacts were systematically collected, selected and arranged according to a classificatory schema whose function was to illustrate the progress of human history by according different cultures different places on the evolutionary ladder (Coombes, 1994a, p. 118). Pitt Rivers himself was keen to contrast the science and comprehensive reach of his approach with the incompleteness of earlier cabinets of curiosities. '[T]hese ethnological *curiosities*, as they have been termed, have been chosen without any regard to their history or psychology ... they have not been obtained in sufficient number or variety to render classification possible' (Lane Fox, 1874, p. 294).

What distinguishes Pitt Rivers' approach is the fact that the classificatory and evaluatory schema that it invokes is seen as 'scientific', where this refers to a positivistic framework of knowledge, and where the representation (the method of display) reinforces and derives from the evolutionary discourse that frames it.

Second, the Pitt Rivers Museum as a nineteenth-century museum had a more instrumental vision of its role in public education and the specific benefits for its audience. Its typically congested display was less a collection for the edification of the contemplative scholar or the interested visitor, than a detached, objective, positivist tool promoting the 'diffusion of instruction' and 'rational amusement' of the mass of the British population, whom he judged as improperly ignorant of the nature of human development and

'history' (Coombes, 1994a, p. 121, 123). So the Pitt Rivers Museum mobilized an evaluative discourse concerning the civilizing effect of culture on the mass of the population. The museum was expected to bring social benefit by shaping the intellect and transforming social behaviour (Bennett, 1994, p. 26).

In the late nineteenth century, bids for anthropology to be recognized as a science of humanity coincided with the rapid expansion of the 'museum idea'. The 'museum idea', simply put, was the belief that museums were an ideal vehicle for public instruction: by contemplating cultural artefacts on display, the common man/woman could become receptive to 'their improving influence' (Bennett, 1994, p. 23). The belief in the 'multiplication of culture's utility' was not restricted to museums but extended to art galleries and libraries (ibid.). The rise of anthropology as a discipline coincided with and was supported by the ferment in exhibiting activity, either in the shape of the great exhibitions or in the shape of museums which arose in great numbers all over Britain between 1890–1920 (Greenhalgh, 1993, p. 88). So one can argue that the Pitt Rivers Museum was implicated in other discourses of 'self' and 'other' which produced a division between geographically distanced cultures, but also between the cultures of the different classes of British society.

To conclude, it has been shown that both the Tradescant and the Pitt Rivers collections/museums are historical products. But it has equally been stated that what distinguishes the Pitt Rivers collection is the particular articulation between the evolutionary discourse and the method of display which it implemented. The Pitt Rivers Museum, it can be argued, at this historical juncture (the late nineteenth century) promoted and legitimized the reduction of cultures to objects, so that they could be judged and ranked in a hierarchical relationship with each other. This anthropological – or more properly, ethnographic – discourse did not reflect the 'real' state of the cultures it exhibited so much as the power relationship between those *subjected* to such classification and those *promoting* it.

4.4 Museums and the construction of culture

As we have shown in the previous section, a Foucauldian interpretation of exhibiting would state that ethnographic objects are defined and classified according to the frameworks of knowledge that allow them to be understood. We have considered the representations that museums produced and how these are linked to discourse. But, as was hinted in the last section and as you saw in Chapter 1, Foucault also argues that discourses do not operate in isolation, they occur in formations – **discursive formations**. The term *discursive formation*, refers to the systematic operation of *several* discourses or statements constituting a 'body of knowledge', which work together to construct a specific object/topic of analysis in a particular way, and to limit the other ways in which that object/topic may be constituted. In the case of museum displays, such a formation might include anthropological, aesthetic,

discursive
formations

and educational discourses. The internal cohesion of a *discursive formation*, for Foucault, does not depend on putative 'agreement' between statements. There may seem to be fierce internal debates, and different statements within the field of knowledge may appear antagonistic or even irreconcilable. But this does not undermine the cohesion or the creation of a 'body of knowledge' or a 'body of truth' around a particular object in a systematic and ordered fashion (Hall, 1992, p. 291).

In the following activity, we will consider how several competing discourses served to construct particular objects as desirable and valuable ethnographic artefacts. The case under consideration is that of the Benin Bronzes.

READING E

The extracts in Reading E are drawn from the work of Annie E. Coombes (1994a). Although these extracts may seem a little fragmented, it is important to understand the argument that Coombes makes concerning the articulation of discourses around the West African artefacts known as the Benin Bronzes (Figure 3.6 (a) and (b)). Some background context may be of use here. These artefacts were the subject of controversy both because of the manner in which they were appropriated (in a punitive expedition that was mounted in 1897 as a reprisal for the killing of a British party by Benin forces), and because of the objects' technical expertise and aesthetic qualities. So Coombes has selected her case well to explore these issues: the appropriation and exhibiting of the Benin Bronzes is particularly well documented. Coombes can, therefore, examine how these objects were discursively produced through the articulation of a number of discourses, but equally how power/ knowledge worked in the institutional context.

Read the Coombes' extracts (Reading E) and make notes in the light of the following questions:

1   How were the Bronzes discussed? How did commentators rationalize their origins? How were these objects discursively produced?

2   How were they displayed?

3   What institutional factors determined the Bronzes' prestige among curators?

Coombes argues the Benin Bronzes are an important case for two reasons.

First, they are counter-suggestive. She argues that the artistry of the Benin Bronzes should have challenged prevailing scientific and aesthetic discourses which held that African cultures were incapable of complex artistic achievement. The Benin Bronzes were first discursively produced as survivals of the impact of the foreign forces – the Portuguese – but most particularly of 'recognized' civilizations such as Egypt, since, it was argued, the people of Benin were not capable of such artistic expression. Those scholarly publications which questioned these assumptions were initially
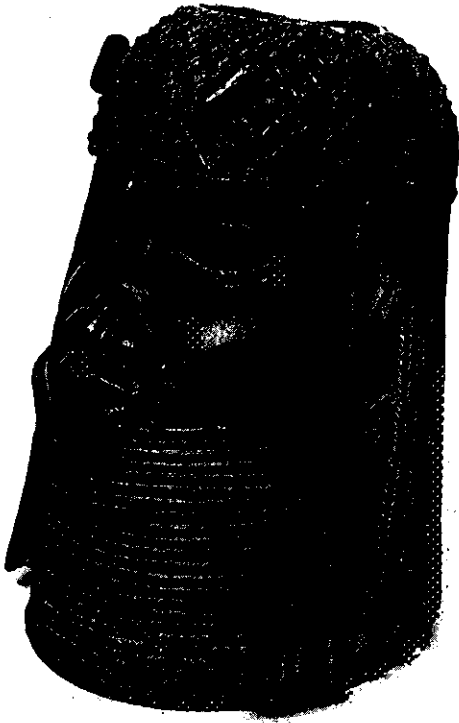
FIGURE 3.6 (a) An Oni of Ife (dead king), Benin bronze, sixteenth/seventeenth century.

FIGURE 3.6 (b) Bronze figure from Benin, sixteenth/seventeenth century.

ignored, whereas those which integrated these atypical artefacts into pre-existing discourses, most particularly the discourse on 'degeneration', gained ground. Coombes recounts how the Benin Bronzes were incorporated into a discourse in which degeneration and artistic ability were proved to be compatible. So the Bronzes' uniqueness did not challenge prevailing discourse; rather the discourse domesticated the problem of the Bronzes. Coombes employs a Foucauldian framework to understand how the Benin artefacts were discursively constructed, making reference to the various 'scientific' – notably anthropological – and aesthetic discourses that competed to incorporate the Benin artefacts. She alludes to a discursive formation that is particularly rigid.

Coombes, moreover, asserts that these scientific discourses derived a significant measure of their persuasiveness from their agreement with other popular discourses on 'race'. She explores, in this connection, the images of Benin produced by the popular press. She shows that these *acknowledged* the artistic quality of the artefacts but always in the context of reports illustrating *the degeneracy* of Benin civilization and amidst frequent mentions of the massacre of the English prior to the punitive raid.

Secondly, Coombes delineates the relationship between the Benin Bronzes, anthropological discourses and museums, in ways which allow museums to

be seen as the seats of institutional power. She investigates the relationship between power/knowledge in three separate museum contexts: the Horniman Museum, the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers. Coombes shows the distinctions in their discursive constructions of the Benin Bronzes but connects these differences to struggles for power within and between these institutions. At the Horniman, Quirk alters his opinion of the Benin Bronzes, once these are displayed at the British Museum, to gain prestige. For Read and Dalton, at the British Museum, the transformation in their discursive construction of the Benin artefacts is linked to bids for power and recognition within the British Museum (and to their being thwarted in their desires to purchase the totality of the Bronzes). The Pitt Rivers, predictably perhaps, manages to incorporate the Benin Bronzes into a typological display of casting technology and therefore a display on ironwork, paying particular attention to the *cire perdue* method.

Coombes articulates a further argument which considers the link between the Benin Bronzes and colonial power. She argues that these Benin artefacts did not come to occupy the status of artefacts by accident, but by virtue of colonial **appropriation** (Figure 3.7). She deepens this connection between colonialism and collecting by observing that the artefacts were sold to pay for the Protectorate.

appropriation

So in summary, by considering the historical articulation of several sets of discourses, Coombes shows how a body of knowledge can be created not only around a particular region of the world, but also around the material culture that it produces. She demonstrates how there is consistency despite disagreement. Discourses, she argues, work in formations which frame the manner in which one can think and talk of these objects and the subjects that produce them. She incorporates a discussion of power, concluding that collecting and exhibiting are the by-products of colonial power. So in relationship to a particular category of objects – the Benin Bronzes – she argues that knowledge is indissolubly yoked to power, and in this case *institutional power* since it is the museum and its internal struggles that shape how the Bronzes are ultimately perceived.

Let us push this analysis further by considering the link between exhibiting and looking.

FIGURE 3.7
British officers of the Benin punitive expedition with bronzes and ivories taken from the royal compound, Benin City, 1897.

4.5 Colonial spectacles

The interconnection between power and exhibiting outlined by Coombes (1994a, 1994b) seems most persuasive when one explores the issue of 'living exhibits': the peoples that were brought over to feature in the colonial, national and international exhibitions staged in Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see the discussion of 'the Hottentot Venus' in Chapter 4, section 4.4). Let us review the work of Foucault to discern how **power and visibility** or spectacle are joined.

power and visibility

Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge incorporates a theory of *visibility*. Foucault can be thought of as a 'visual historian' because he examined the manner in which objects and subjects were 'shown'. He argued the phenomenon of 'being seen' was neither an automatic nor a natural process, but linked to what power/knowledge guides one to see – it relied on one's being 'given to be seen' (Rajchman, 1988). Furthermore, in the human sciences, what is seen and counts as 'evidence' is most usually linked to corrective action. The human sciences therefore differ from the hard sciences: perceiving electrons does not elicit questions of what to *do* with them, but 'seeing' the poor, the infirm, the mad or 'savages', unleashes precisely these questions (Rajchman, 1988, p. 102). So being made visible is an ambiguous pleasure, connected to the operation of power. Applying this to the instance of ethnographic objects: in the Pitt Rivers Museum the subtlety and significance of differences in material culture can only be properly 'seen' if one is implicated in a discourse that applies an evolutionary schema in which these objects can be used as 'proof' of the discourse and thus differentiated, ordered and classified in that way.

The link between visibility and power is rendered most compelling when one considers human subjects and in particular the great spectacles of the colonial period – the national and international exhibitions that were mounted in Great Britain between 1850 and 1925. These exhibitions were notable for a great many things: their promotion of exploration, trade, business interests, commerce; their dependence on adequate rail links, colonial trading networks, and advertising; their launching of now familiar products: Colman's mustard, Goodyear India rubber and ice cream; their notable effect on the institutionalization of collecting and internalization of commerce (Beckenbridge, 1989). Among these other notable distractions, they provided another type of spectacle: the display of peoples. In this section we will look, very briefly, at ethnographic displays which showed people, not objects.

The Exposition Universelle (Paris) in 1867 was the first to include colonial subjects as service workers, while the first exhibition to inaugurate displays of people simply *as spectacle* – as objects of the gaze – was the Exposition Universelle (Paris) of 1889. These 'authentic' manifestations of 'primitive culture' became a popular feature of most exhibitions into the early decades of this century. The last exhibition to feature dependent peoples in this manner

in Britain took place at the British Empire Exhibition (1924–5) at Wembley (though some might argue it continues today in other forms) (Benedict et al., 1983, p. 52). As displays, dependent peoples were brought over to provide viewers with the experience of being in other worlds; situated in 'authentic' villages, they were asked to re-enact, for the viewing public, their everyday lives. These peoples were classified in terms of the geography of the exhibition, but equally, sometimes, according to putative notions of their 'relationship' to each other in evolutionary terms. At the St Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904, where people from the Philippines were accorded a significant place in the Hall of Anthropology, the various villages and their tribes were helpfully ordered in a fashion which 'faithfully' portrayed the evolution of human development, from the lowest to the highest level (Greenhalgh, 1988, p. 101).

In the era where the primary data used for the comparison of cultures was often provided by colonial administrators and not anthropologists, such displays provided remarkable opportunities. The 'armchair anthropologists' of the period were initially keen to derive benefit from the presence of these authentic living 'specimens' or scientifically significant objects. These human exhibits provided valuable evidence for an emerging discipline. They were real, authentic exemplars of 'primitive' people, 'survivals' of other histories, 'vanishing races' or genuine 'degenerates' (depending on the particular anthropological discourse one held). On their bodies were written the traces of earlier cultures. This physical evidence provided 'proof' that could not otherwise be obtained but which could tangibly substantiate contemporary physical anthropological discourses. In 1900, W.H. Rivers, who was to become an influential figure in British anthropology, suggested that 'the Anthropological Institute should seek special permission from the exhibition proprietors in order to "inspect" these people prior to the exhibits opening to the general public' so that evidence could be collected (Coombes, 1994a, p. 88).

They could be and were measured, classified and photographed. Photographic representations in the shape of photographs of anthropometric measurements or colour postcards fuelled scientific speculation and popular belief. The popularity of these exhibitions – many millions of visitors from all walks of life trooped past native villages – helped to support the dominant popular discourse that other cultures were 'survivals' or 'savages'. This was particularly so when 'primitive' or 'savage' customs came into view: the Igorots at the St Louis Fair purchasing, roasting and eating dog meat (Figure 3.8) or the Ainu at the Japan British Exhibition of 1910 photographed with a bear skull.

So one can argue that the blurring of 'scientific' and 'popular' anthropological discourses served in more or less subtle ways to legitimize and substantiate a discourse of European imperial superiority (Greenhalgh, 1988, p. 109). To understand these displays the visitor had to bring certain kinds of knowledge with him/her, reinforced by other representations – photographs, postcards, museum displays, paintings – and had to be implicated within a particular

FIGURE 3.8
Igorots eating dog meat in the Philippine exhibit at the St Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1904.

geography of power. The display of people was a display of a power asymmetry, which these displays, in a circular fashion, served to legitimize (Benedict et al., 1983, p. 45; Coombes, 1994a and 1994b, p. 88). The exhibitions and displays can equally be thought of as 'symbolic wishful thinking' which sought to construct a spurious unity (a 'one world' framed in evolutionary terms) in which colonizer and colonized could be reunited and where those of 'vastly different cultural tradition and aspirations are made to appear one' (Benedict et al., 1983, p. 52).

Thus, a Foucauldian model allows one to argue that being able to 'see' these native villages and their constituent populations was clearly neither a 'natural' process, nor an accidental one, but a socio-historical one, which was associated with and reinforced standard museological representations of peoples through ethnographic artefacts. The argument which connects museological representations with spectacular ones is supported when it becomes clear that certain of the ethnographic collections featured in the colonial, national or international exhibitions, or the photographs of these visitor peoples, were often incorporated into the ethnographical collections or archives of established museums.

So here the relationship between scientific knowledge (anthropology), popular culture, the geography of power (colonialism) and visibility (photograph, display) is rendered particularly overt. But a note of caution must also be inserted. The Foucauldian model is a totalizing one. By this I mean that a Foucauldian model produces a vision of museums and exhibiting which is primarily based on a belief in social control. If Coombes' (1994a) analysis is taken to its logical end point, that even the Benin Bronzes fail to pierce the solid structure of pre-existing ethnographic disclosure, then one is left with questions of how intellectual paradigms change. How have we come

to the point where such artefacts as the Benin Bronzes can be 'seen' as art when previously they could not? And how are we to understand this new state of knowledge? Although Coombes' longer text (1994a) provides a much more comprehensive account of the tensions in the process of exhibiting,than the extract presented here, it is nevertheless the case that a Foucauldian-based analysis argues convincingly that collections are not extracted willingly from originating cultures, they are always excisions, removed, often painfully from the body of other, less powerful, cultures. These collections, it further argues, assume the rationale of education to be to lend future purpose but also to justify the original act. Collecting is constructed as a pursuit inevitably dogged by its own history, always betrayed by hidden intent. Collecting is, in short, a discredited and ignoble activity. This Foucauldian critique links collecting and exhibiting to such an extent that it puts into question whether the ends can ever justify the means. Provocative and thought-provoking though this critique undoubtedly is, it fails to produce either a convincing evocation of the paradoxical relationship between ethnography and the museum, or an acknowledgement of the bureaucratic and pragmatic decisions at the heart of the process of exhibiting.

4.6 Summary

This section has specifically addressed the *politics of exhibiting*. It has advanced a significantly different view to the one proposed by Mary Douglas (see section 2.4 above), namely that objects circulate in continuous history where makers, collectors and curators are simply points of origination, congregation and dispersal, in a circular system (1992, p. 15). In this view, the activities of collecting and exhibiting are not neutral, but powerful. Indeed it has been argued, through using a Foucauldian model, that it is impossible to dissociate the supposedly neutral and enlightened world of scholarship on one hand from the world of politics and power on the other. So this section does not focus on the production of meaning, but the linkages between representation and museums as seats of institutional power. The examples used substantiate the proposition that significant linkages existed in the nineteenth century between desires for institutional power, the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline, and the popularity of colonial discourses.

Thus, an argument that considers the *politics of exhibiting* advances the view that museums *appropriate* and *display* objects for certain ends. Objects are incorporated and constructed by the articulation of pre-existing discourses. The museum becomes an arbiter of meaning since its institutional position allows it to articulate and reinforce the scientific credibility of frameworks of knowledge or *discursive formations* through its methods of display.

Moreover we have found that an argument about power/knowledge can be articulated around exhibiting and displays, particularly in terms of *visibility*. The *politics of exhibiting* means museums make certain cultures *visible*, in other words they allow them to be subjected to the scrutiny of power. This

derives from a historically unequal relationship between western powers and other peoples.

We have seen that, at one moment, what allowed a *human subject* to be transformed into an *ethnographic object* was a particular relationship of knowledge to power in association with wider social changes whereby, in the exhibition context, the colonizer/seer/knower was made separate and distinct from the colonized/seen/known. In this section, therefore, it has been argued that, just as power reduced cultures to objects (in the Pitt Rivers collection), it also allowed the objectification of human subjects (in displays). In this manner the ability to display ethnographic objects or subjects required certain types of knowledge (for interpretation and narrative) allied with a particular relationship of power.

5 The futures of exhibiting

5.1 Introduction

The very nature of exhibiting ... makes it a contested terrain.

(Lavine and Karp, 1991, p. 1)

The purpose of the last three sections has been to contextualize and analyse the practices of exhibiting, using theoretical models which forefront the *poetics* and *politics of representation*. So now if we re-evaluate our original definition of the museum, namely that it is an institution which exists 'in order to acquire, safeguard, conserve, and display objects, artefacts and works of arts of various kinds' (Vergo, 1993, p. 41), we find that these terms have acquired far from objective or neutral meanings.

While those types of analyses that we have attempted in the previous sections have become more commonplace, they cannot account for the complexity of the exhibiting process or the position of present-day museums. An analysis that forefronts the *poetics of exhibiting*, by examining the product – the exhibit – rather than the process of exhibiting, runs the risk of wishing to fix meaning to the exclusion of the 'hidden history' of production. Similarly an analysis that seeks to investigate the *politics of exhibiting* may produce an over-deterministic account revolving around social control, which may be best illustrated by taking nineteenth-century examples. In this brief coda to the chapter, I shall provide four reasons why these two models of representation might have become popular, and how the adoption of such perspectives has altered the practices of exhibiting. In so doing I shall argue that we have reached a turning point in the history of ethnographic museums in particular, but equally of museums in general. As you may notice, I link the changes in ethnographic museums to changes within the discipline of anthropology but also to wider changes in society and therefore to the consumers of exhibits in western nations.

5.2 Disturbance of anthropological assumptions by decolonization

If anthropology thrived in the colonial era, then it follows that it has had to reassess its hold in the light of decolonization. Anthropologists have had to question how a discipline which has a growing awareness of its own complicity with colonial forces, whose primary research method – fieldwork – was dependent on colonial support, can ring the changes in the wake of decolonization, globalization and cultural revivalism among indigenous people. Today anthropologists are asked and ask themselves *why* they seek to study those 'other' than themselves. They must justify their thirst for and entitlement to knowledge. These questions of politics and ethics have impacted on the field of exhibiting, since cultural producers are asked to be accountable to the cultures whom they represent.

5.3 Partiality of anthropological knowledge

In recent years the assertion that anthropological knowledge is by its very nature 'partial' (like all forms of knowledge, scientific and otherwise) has taken hold. By 'partial' one should understand two things: (1) that what it aims to construct and produce through ethnographic texts can only ever comprise part of the whole; and (2) 'partial' in the sense of subjective.

5.4 Anthropological knowledge as representation

When in section 2.3 we described anthropology as a science of invention not discovery, we highlighted moves that have taken hold of the discipline. During the last twenty years some of the critical debates that have transformed the discipline of anthropology have revolved around the nature of the ethnographic text as a form of representation. Asserting that ethnographic texts are not accurate descriptions made of one culture by another but by the *writing of one culture by another* would, today, be a starting point in an analysis of ethnographic work, rather than a radical statement. At the early stages of the discipline, the production of ethnographic texts seemed difficult in a technical sense: how could the values, beliefs and structures of other societies be accurately translated into terms that were understandable to other anthropologists? Today, the term 'writing' foregrounds something quite different: the fact that an active process of representation is involved in constructing one culture for another. What is being produced therefore is not a reflection of the 'truth' of other cultures but a representation of them. Inevitably, therefore, the task of writing ethnographies has become 'morally, politically, even epistemologically delicate' (Geertz, 1988, p. 130). Claims about the inevitable indeterminacy of anthropological knowledge have been accompanied by associated claims about its power. So anthropological knowledge is now considered to have a powerful but ambiguous role.

How might these changes in anthropology have affected ethnographic exhibitions? The changing shape of ethnographic displays cannot, and does not, reflect directly the wealth of transformative debates within anthropology, but it *is* indirectly affected by the grosser shifts. This is partly because museums now employ anthropologists with fieldwork experience, rather than train professional curators to deal specifically with material culture. Classical anthropological enquiry sought to define the essence of 'traditional societies' by ignoring the powerful structures that surrounded and facilitated the anthropological endeavour. Correspondingly, ethnographic displays admitted largely 'authentic', 'traditional' objects as evidence. The present turn towards anti-essentialism has prompted ethnographic exhibitions which, in contrast, increasingly feature incongruous cultural products, denoting the perpetuation and re-creation of tradition through the appropriation of new forms or consumer products.

Amongst other things, the *Paradise* exhibition reflects such a shift. The presence of the later panels and the chapters on exhibiting and collecting in the accompanying book acknowledges the partiality of anthropological knowledge and the ambiguous role of the anthropologist. The theme of this exhibition – change and continuity – specifically allows for the inclusion of hybrid Wahgi artefacts: headbands sewn from Big Boy bubble gum wrappers (Plate 3.IV) reflect the colour of older headbands, for instance, or the shields used for warfare but appropriating new derivative ornamentation. The contexts of display are not classical: reconstructions include modern consumer items (Coca Cola in the trade-store, South Pacific beer surrounding the *bolyim* house), simulacra mimicking the hybrid nature of the peace-making banners (incorporating money). The objects, the reconstructions, the simulacra and the photographs frustrate the categories of 'authenticity' and 'tradition'. The category of Wahgi material culture includes artefacts which are both hybrid and syncretic. O'Hanlon indicates through this strategy that he recognizes that objects are not *innately* 'ethnographic' but that they must be *designated* as such.

We have seen that changes in the academic discipline, itself affected by larger cultural movement (such as post-modernism), have created new boundaries for exhibiting: to name but three, the inclusion of self-reflexivity, or dialogue or polyvocality (many voices, interpretations of objects); the move towards incorporating hybrid and syncretic objects; and a right for those represented to have a say in exhibition construction (Coombes, 1994b). The latter point directs us to another sphere of influence. In locating the causes of changes in the practices of exhibiting, and therefore representing, we must also look at the wider social context. Museums as public institutions seek and survive on the basis of a constituency. Ethnographic displays may be affected by the changes in anthropological discourse, but it is their relevance and popularity with visitors that determines their survival. Now, therefore, we must briefly address the issue of consumption.

5.5 The question of audience

For some, the equation is simple: if museums have to appeal to the public, their messages have in some way to concord with the collective view of this audience, since their survival depends on making the collection, the exhibition and the museum meaningful to this pre-defined group (Ames, 1992). The public nature of the ethnographic museum has two implications. First, that museums as educational institutions can serve to deepen knowledge but they are usually not directly confrontational; their representations must be held to be appropriate and to concord broadly with the view of social reality the visitor holds (Ames, 1992, p. 21). The public attending museums expect their representations of the world to be confirmed, if a little extended, by the museum. Second, as museums seek to widen their natural constituency to reach more varied audiences, so the visiting public will become increasingly more diverse and may have more varied, or even competing, demands. In particular, if this new audience includes those communities which the museum *represents*, or their descendants, then the museum's representations may have to concord with the sense of self this new constituency holds in addition to that of the wider public. So museums in the 1990s have to address a plurality of views. As 'multicultural and intercultural issues' emerge ever more on the public's agenda, so 'the inherent contestability of museum exhibitions is bound to open the choices made in those exhibitions to heated debate' (Lavine and Karp, 1991, p. 1). As museums become more concerned about their public image and are increasingly asked to transform themselves into commercially viable institutions, the degree of control which the public can exert on them through attendance, protest or, the most powerful of all, publicity, grows. Public access therefore 'entail[s] ... a degree of public control over the museum enterprise' (Ames, 1992, p. 21).

To illustrate this, I shall use a Canadian example. Below I shall delineate very briefly how a reaction towards an exhibition might present a new challenge to the politics of representation.

On 14 January 1988 the exhibition *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* opened at the Glenbow Museum, in Calgary, Alberta, as part of a cultural festival which was planned to coincide with the Winter Olympics. The exhibition brought together hundreds of artefacts from foreign museums with some of the earliest aboriginal materials in the Glenbow collection. It had several aims which were largely achieved: to highlight the 'richness, diversity and complexity' of Canada's native cultures at the moment of contact; to emphasize the 'distinctive view' of these cultures by examining the 'common threads' between them; and, finally, to emphasize the 'adaptability and resilience' of these cultures in the face of European domination (Harrison, 1988a, p. 12).

In April 1986 Shell Oil announced that it would provide sponsorship enabling the project to go ahead. Shortly after this the Lubicon Lake Indian Band of

Cree of Northern Alberta called for a boycott of the 1988 Winter Olympics, to draw attention to their unsolved, but outstanding, claim for the return of their traditional lands. Although the Lubicon Lake Indian Band of Cree initially sought primarily to target wealthy and powerful interests, later their attention was drawn to the politics of exhibiting. They focused on the exhibition for one outstanding reason: Shell Oil was drilling on land claimed as part of their traditional lands (Ames, 1991, p. 9). 'The irony of using a display of North American Indian artefacts to attract people to the Winter Olympics being organized by interests who are still actively seeking to destroy Indian people seems painfully obvious' (Chief Bernard Ominayak, 1988, quoted in Harrison, 1988b, p. 7)

The protests challenged the cultural authority of experts and institutions, and their 'entitlements' to native material culture, and gained much media attention, popular and international support. The exhibition did open, but the controversy surrounding it catapulted relations between museums and native peoples of Canada into a new era.

The most direct result was the creation of a Task Force whose mission was 'to develop an ethical framework and strategies for Aboriginal nations to represent their history and cultures in concert with cultural institutions' (quoted in Herle, 1994, pp. 40–41). The published report, *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples* (1992), contained several recommendations. The essence of these was increased 'dialogue' between curators and native peoples and 'partnership' – a sharing of responsibility for the management of cultural property. Museums were asked to accord a role and a voice to native peoples without denying the work, experience or expertise of non-native museum staff (Herle, 1994, pp. 41–3). The response from Canadian institutions has been to work out relations on an individual basis: each museum entering different sets of negotiation with the elders, spiritual leaders or native cultural organizations. Certain museums loan sacred objects on a long-term basis to native-run cultural centres; others return sacred or ceremonial items regularly to communities for short periods. The 'institutional' and scientific imperative of conservation is temporarily waived in favour of 'moral' imperatives and 'spiritual' care (Herle, 1994, p. 47; Ames et al., 1988, p. 49). These collaborations have wider ramifications: acknowledging the sacred nature of material and the importance of native values means re-assessing the imperatives underlying conservation (is it acceptable to treat sacred or other material according to scientific views of impermanence?), storage (where and how should sacred material be stored?) and display (should certain items be seen? and, if so, in what context?).

As we saw in sections 3 and 4, one cannot read directly from culture to politics or vice versa. Dialogue and polyvocality (many voices) in the exhibition or the museum context do not map easily onto the state of national politics. The Lubicon Lake Cree land claim was not propelled to a solution by virtue of the protest or the ensuing reconciliation between the museums

and the native communities. But national politics did provide the context in which these issues were negotiated. The controversy surrounding *The Spirit Sings* must be read against the specific history of conquest, local indigenous politics, contemporary popular opinion and Canada's particular national interpretation of what it means to be a multicultural country.

6   Conclusion

> Selective memories cannot be avoided, but they can be counteracted.
>
> (Davies, 1995, p. 11)

In section 5, we considered the implications of the two previous sections by considering how practices of exhibiting/representing must be affected by critiques which forefront both the 'poetical' and 'political' nature of exhibiting. We considered briefly the practical effects of such critiques. We showed that the movement towards hybrid forms and syncretism could be read as a result of changing perceptions of anthropology of itself and its subject matter. The incorporation of other values at more structural levels indicates an acceptance on the part of museums that collecting and exhibiting are 'political' activities: ethnographic objects are increasingly defined and represented by the originated peoples or their descendants in an 'auto-ethnographic' process.

The beginning of this chapter set up a relatively uncontroversial definition of museums which has been progressively re-assessed. The result has been that museums have emerged as highly contestable entities, with distinct histories and purposes. It has been argued that in order to enquire into the types of representation produced by a museum one might use one of several strategies. One could consider the historical location of the museum, to examine the 'world view' it sought to put across. Alternatively one could highlight the manner in which the museums make objects meaningful and exhibitions create a complex web of signification – the *poetics of exhibiting*. Lastly, one could try to look at museums in terms of the link between power and knowledge in order to look at the discourses articulated throughout their displays – the *politics of exhibiting*.

Each of these views has been considered. Section 2 sought to look at the history and method of a museum in a critical light through the use of two case studies. In section 3, museum collections were described as inevitably selective and exhibitions as a further selection. The task was to show how this selective process might facilitate the path of meaning creation. To do this, it selected a case study – the *Paradise* exhibition – which was then analysed in terms of its *poetics*. The elements of exhibitions – objects, texts, contexts of display, visual representation – were investigated separately and together in order to ascertain how their articulation might produce meaning, how they might be used to represent and re-present other cultures. It was argued that exhibitions could be viewed as mythical structures invested with symbolic power. In section 4,

selectivity was given a more ambivalent gloss by contending that it was a product of power and its relationship to knowledge. Focusing on the museum as an institution allowed an examination of the *politics of exhibiting* and an exploration of the manner in which anthropological knowledge had legitimized certain ways of seeing and means of controlling other cultures. Section 5 considered, briefly, what the effects of these highly cogent critiques might be in the context of contemporary exhibits.

What conclusion can one reach? We can assert that museums *are* systems of representation. They are also contested entities, which establish systems that confer certain kinds of meaning and validity upon objects in line with specific or articulated discourses. A museum will endow objects with importance and meaning because these come to represent certain kinds of cultural value. Museums are arbiters of meaning and the processes of making collecting plans, acquiring objects, mounting displays require both symbolic and institutional power. But equally we can argue that the result of the potent critiques delineated in this chapter has been to challenge the authority of ethnographic exhibitions and museums. This has, in turn, resulted in a new movement which recognizes that selectivity is inevitable and endeavours to broaden the base of who works in and who visits museums, and thereby actively seeks to integrate other perspectives and new voices.

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Acknowledgement

READING A:
Tradescant the younger, 'Extracts from the *Musaeum Tradescantianum*'

The following are four extracts all from the 1656 catalogue '*Musaeum Tradescantianum* or A Collection of Rarities Preserved At *South Lambeth* neer *London*', prepared by John Tradescant the younger.

Extract 1

The first extract is contained in the preface addressed *To The Ingenious Reader.*

[...] Now for the materialls themselves I reduce them unto two sorts; one *Naturall,* of which some are more familiarly known & named amongst us, as divers sorts of Birds, fourefooted Beasts and Fishes to whom I have given usual *English* names. Other are lesse familiar ... as the shell Creatures, Insects, Mineralls, Outlandish-Fruits and the like, which are part of the *Materia Medica;* ... The other sort is *Artificialls* such as Utensills, Householdstuffe, Habits, Instruments of Warre used by severall Nations, rare curiosities of Art &c. These are also expressed in *English* (saving the Coynes, which would vary but little if Translated) for the ready satisfying whomsoever may desire a view thereof. The *Catalogue* of my *Garden* I have also added in the Conclusion (and given the names of the *Plants* both in *Latine* and *English)* that nothing may be wanting which at present comes within view, and might be expected from

Your ready friend

John Tradescant.

Extract 2: The index

A view of the whole

1. Birds with their eggs, beaks, feathers, clawes, spurres. (page 1)

2. Fourfooted beasts with some of their hides, hornes, and hoofs. (5)

3. Divers sorts of strange fishes. (8)

4. Shell-creatures, whereof some are called *Mollia,* some *Crustacea,* others *Testacea,* of these are both *univalvia,* and *bivalvia.* (10)

5. Severall sorts of Insects, terrestrial – *anelytra, coleoptera, aptera, apoda.* (14)

6. Mineralls, and those of neare nature with them, as Earths, Coralls, Salts, Bitumens, Petrified things, choicer Stones, Gemmes. (17)

7. Outlandish Fruits from both the *Indies,* with Seeds, Gummes, Roots, Woods, and divers Ingredients Medicinall, and for the Art sof Dying. (26)

8. Mechanicks, choice pieces in Carvings, Turnings, Paintings. (36)

9. Other variety of Rarities. (42)

10. Warlike Instruments, European, Indian, &c. (44)

11. Garments, Habits, Vests, Ornaments. (47)

12. Utensils, and Householdstuffe. (52)

13. *Numismata,* Coynes ancient and modern, both gold, silver, and copper, Hebrew, Greeke, Roman both Imperial and Consular. (55)

14. Medalls, gold, silver, copper and lead. (66)

Hortus Tradescantianus

15. An enumeration of his Plants, Shrubs, and Trees both in English and Latine. (73)

16. A *Catalogue* of his Benefactors. (179)

Extract 3

The third and fourth extracts contain some examples of the entries featured in the catalogue into two of the sections listed above.

Under the subdivided section: 'I. Some kindes of *Birds* their Egges, Beaks, Feathers, Clawes, and Spurres' the following items are featured:

1. *EGGES*
   [...]
   Crocodiles,
   Estridges,
   [...]
   Divers sorts of Egges from *Turkie:* one given for a Dragons egge.
   Easter Egges of the Patriarchs of *Jerusalem*

2. *BEAKS, or HEADS*
   Cassawary, or Emeu,
   Griffin,
   [...]
   Aracari of *Brasil,* his beak four inches long, almost two thick, like a Turkes sword.
   [...]

Guarya of *Marahoon Brasil:* his beak like a
Poland sword.
Jabira,Brasil, [...]

3. *FEATHERS*
Divers curious and beautifully coloured feathers
of Birds from the West India's.
The breast of a Peacock from the West India's.
[...]
Two feathers of the Phoenix tayle.
[...]

4. *CLAWES*
The claw of the bird Rock; who, as Authors
report, is able to trusse an Elephant.
Eagles clawes.
Cock spurs three inches long.
A legge and claw of the Cassawary or Emeu that
dyed at *S. James's, Westminster.*
Twenty several sorts of clawes of other strange
birds, not found described by Authors.

5. *Whole BIRDS*
Kings-fisher from the *West India's.*
[...]
A black bird with red shoulders and pinions,
from *Virginia.*
Matuitui, the bigness of a Thrush, short neck
and legges.
[...]
Penguin, which never flies for want of wings.
[...]
Pellican. [...]
Dodar, from the Island *Mauritius;* it is not able to
flie being so big. [...]
The Bustard as big as a Turky, usually taken by
Greyhounds on *Newmarket-heath.*
Divers sorts of Birds-nests of various forms.

Extract 4

Under the sections 'VII Mechanick artficiall Works
in Carvings, Turnings, Sowings and Paintings',
'VIII. Variety of Rarities ' and 'X. Garments,
Vestures, Habits, Ornaments', the following items
are featured:

VII. Mechanick artificiall Works in Carvings,
Turnings, Sowings and Paintings
Several curious painting in little forms, very
ancient.
[...]
The Indian lip-stone which they wear the in lip.
[...]
Halfe a Hasle-nut with 70 pieces of

householdstuffe in it.
A Cherry-stone holding 10 dozen of Tortois-shell
combs, made by *Edward Gibbons.*
[...]
Divers sorts of Ivory-balls turned one within
another, some 6, some 12 folds; very excellent
work.
[...]

VIII. Variety of Rarities
Indian morris-bells of shells and fruits.
[...]
Indian Conjurers rattle, wherewith he calls up
Spirits.
[...]
A Circumcision Knife of stone, and the
instrument to take up the *praeputium* of silver.
[...]
A piece of the Stone of *Sarrigs*-Castle where
Hellen of *Greece* was born.
A piece of the Stone of the Oracle of *Apollo.*
[...]
Ancient Iron-Money in crosse-plates, like
Anchors, preserved in *Pontefract*-Castle, *Yorke-
shire.*
[...]
A Brazen-ball to warm the Nunnes hands.
[...]
Blood that rained in the *Isle of Wight,* attested by
Sir *Jo: Oglander.* [...]

X. Garments, Vestures, Habits, Ornaments.
An Arabian vest.
[...]
A Portugall habit.
[...]
A Greinland-habit. [...]
Match-coat from *Greenland* of the Intrails of
Fishes.
Pohatan, King of *Virginia's* habit all
embroidered with shells, or Roanoke.
[...]
Nunnes penitentiall Girdles of Haire.
[...]
Handkerchiffs of severall sorts of excellent
needle-work.
Edward the Confessors knit-gloves.
Anne of Bullens Night-vayle embroidered with
silver.
[...]
Henry 8. hawking glove, hawks-hood, dogs-
coller.
[...]

READING B:
Elizabeth A. Lawrence, 'His very silence speaks: the horse who survived Custer's Last Stand'

No man of the immediate command of Lieutenant Colonel (Brevet Major General) George A. Custer survived to describe the dramatic clash between Seventh U.S. Cavalrymen and Sioux and Cheyenne warriors which became known as 'Custer's Last Stand'. Fought on a Montana hillside on June 25, 1876, the conflict in which approximately 210 cavalrymen lost their lives has evoked extraordinary interest [...] Although the Custer Battle was part of a larger two-day military engagement, the Battle of the Little Big Horn, it is the 'Last Stand' that has exerted such a profound influence on people's imagination. The image of Custer's men, outnumbered and surrounded, fighting to the death against overwhelming odds is a perennially fascinating image. [...]

Much of the appeal of Custer's Last Stand is rooted in the mystery that surrounds the event [...]. [The sole being] who became famous as a survivor was mute [...] [T]wo days following the battle a cavalry horse from Custer's command was found alive – Comanche, the mount [... of] Captain Myles W. Keogh of Troop I. Seldom in history have people wished so fervently that an animal could speak and illuminate the unknown elements of the battle, and the actions and motivations of its controversial leader. Although other Seventh Cavalry horses survived [... and] great numbers of victorious Indians lived through the battle, Comanche became widely known as the 'sole survivor' of Custer's Last Stand. This designation has been an inextricable part of his fame. [...]

Following his discovery, the badly wounded horse was rescued from the battlefield, nursed back to health, and maintained as an honored member of the Seventh Cavalry. [...]

From the cavalrymen he represented, Comanche took on the mantle of heroism. The horse [...] became a link between the living and the dead. His endurance and invincibility were symbols for survival in the face of overwhelming odds. The wounded horse became the focus for various emotions – the bitter anger of defeat, sorrow for the dead cavalrymen and vengeance toward the Indian Nations.

Comanche lived for fifteen-and-a-half years following the Little Big Horn Battle [...] As the 'lone survivor', he earned his own place in history through fortitude, and conferred fame upon his rider. The strong bond between Captain Keogh and his horse [...] took on legendary proportions and was purported to be the reason for the animal's unlikely survival [...] Comanche became known not only as a paragon of endurance, but of faithfulness as well [...] a symbolic expression of humankind's ancient dream of unity with the animal world.

[...]

During his retirement, Comanche was not only an honored soldier referred to as the 'second commanding officer' of his regiment, but a pampered pet as well. [...]

Throughout his life, Comanche stood for the honor of the defeated men who had died for their country and for the shame and anger the nation felt at the Indians' victory. As the years unfolded, the horse was also embued with broader meanings, for the United States was undergoing an era of dramatic change. Comanche's life as an Indian fighter came full circle, spanning the time from the great Indian victory at the Little Big Horn through the Indians' total defeat at Wounded Knee in 1890 (an engagement often referred to as 'the Seventh's revenge'). [...]

When Comanche died at Fort Riley in 1891, [...] his remains were preserved and mounted by Lewis L. Dyche of the Natural History Museum at the University of Kansas, where he is still displayed. One of [Dyche's] conditions [...] was that he could exhibit the stuffed horse along with his other zoological specimens at the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893. Thus Comanche's posthumous role began as an oddity – a domestic animal standing among wild species – an incongruous attraction for throngs of people who attended the fair. [...] The purpose of the Exposition was to [...] celebrate American progress. [...] 1893 was a time to take pride in the accomplishments of expansion and the final conquest of a once wild continent, which many people construed as the victory of 'civilization over savagery'. [...]

America was entering the machine age, and the end of the horse era [...] was fast approaching. Comanche was an extremely popular attraction at the Chicago Fair [...] In describing Dyche's display of wild fauna among which the horse stood, anthropomorphism and racism were often combined. For example, two wolverines were said to be 'meditating upon some kind of meanness' and so were referred to as 'Indian devils'. [...] Comanche, 'the old war horse', was designated as 'the only surviving horse of the Custer massacre' [...] Custer's Last Stand, became inextricably identified with the term 'massacre,' an inappropriate word since the battle involved armed fighting forces on both sides. [...]

Little information has come to light regarding Comanche's first few decades as a museum specimen, which [...] began in 1902 when he was placed in the newly constructed Dyche Hall at the University of Kansas. [...] From 1934 until 1941, the building which housed him was closed and Comanche was stored in the basement of a university auditorium. [...]

Comanche's significance [...] is reflected by the numerous requests to obtain him – either as a loan or permanent possession – that have been and still are received by the University of Kansas. [...]

Beginning in about 1938, and continuing sporadically [...] into the present, the greatest number of requests have involved relocating Comanche at the Custer Battlefield National Monument Museum. [...] In general, National Park officials and Custer Battlefield personnel have opposed transferring Comanche to the battle site. [...] One regional director, for example, considered the horse 'not essential to the proper interpretation of the battle,' stating that 'if we retrieved the horse, it would be entirely on sentimental grounds.' He added that though the horse would exert 'a potent spell' upon students [...] it would [...] make the visitor 'goggle and exclaim' rather than understand. One official even asserted that Comanche's main value was as 'an interesting example of the techniques of taxidermy in transition' [...]

[...] Whereas for those who want him at Fort Riley Comanche epitomizes the glory of cavalry life, and for those who would move him to Montana he is an inseparable part of the battle that made him immortal, for the University of Kansas he represents cherished tradition. [...]

To insure Comanche's retention [...] graduates wrote letters insisting that their alma mater 'hold that line' against any attempt to remove him, for they remembered 'battle-scarred old "Faithful"' who 'was "our silent partner" and in our hearts became a real part of the University.' Because of Comanche's courage and endurance, students would rub Comanche's nose or steal a strand of his tail hair to bring luck in exams (before he was encased in glass). [...]

And so Comanche has stayed, secure in his special humidified glass 'stall' at the University of Kansas. Prior to 1970, there was a brief label outlining the horse's history [...] The first sentence stated: 'Comanche was the sole survivor of the Custer massacre at the Battle of the Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876' [...] In 1970, the idea of Comanche as 'sole survivor' and the inaccuracy of 'massacre' for what was in reality a battle took on new significance. [...] American Indian students at the university took up the challenge that, for them, was embodied by the display and interpretation of the cavalry horse in the museum. As a result of this different kind of onslaught, Comanche's image would be transformed to accommodate new meanings. [...]

Calling the Comanche exhibit a 'racist symbol', a group of native American university students protested that the horse perpetuated the stereotype of Custer and his troops being 'massacred' by 'savage' Indians who were in the wrong. And since in reality large numbers of Indians lived through the battle, the students were distressed over the designation of the horse as the sole survivor of the Little Big Horn. [...]

A committee representing the native American students met with the museum director and asked that the Comanche exhibit be closed until a more accurate label was written. The director and other officials complied [...] Recalling those events, the museum director told me, 'Comanche was one of the greatest learning experiences of my life.' In November 1971, a celebration sponsored by both Indians and whites accompanied the reopening of the Comanche exhibit. There was now a long text that began by explaining that the horse stands 'as a symbol of the conflict between the United States Army and the Indian tribes of the Great Plains that resulted from the government's policy of confinement of Indians on reservations and

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extermination of those Indians who refused to be confined,' and detailed the Indians' struggle to retain their land and way of life. The Battle of the Little Big Horn was designated as an Indian victory, and the 1890 engagement was accurately termed 'the Massacre of Wounded Knee Creek'.

Although the Indians had first wanted the horse permanently removed from the museum, they compromised [...] Comanche could be a 'learning tool' for both sides. Thus he was transformed from an object representing a federal defeat to a subject articulating the Indian peoples' way of life and struggle for existence.

[...]

Now, the horse was not just 'a symbol of the Indians' past victories, but 'what modern Indians can accomplish' ('Comanche Once Angered Indians', *Olathe Daily News*, January 10, 1978).

[...] Comanche, in his new role, led the way for further beneficial changes within the museum. [...] Indian exhibits were disassociated from those dealing with 'primitive man'. Native American religious objects, previously appearing as 'curios', were labelled in a more respectful manner or removed. The whole idea of how best to exhibit cultural relics and artifacts was [...] re-examined and addressed. [...]

[...] Comanche has continued to be a highlight for the 120,000 annual visitors to the Dyche Museum [...]

Although artifacts such as guns and arrows whose provenance can be traced to the Little Big Horn are highly valued [...] Comanche still surpasses all battle relics. As a once-living creature whose posthumous existence is even more meaningful than his cavalry career, [...] he has an image of courage and endurance with which people continue to identify, adapting it to their own ethos and times. Beyond [Comanche's] capacity to lend a sense of immediacy to Custer's Last Stand [... and] more than a battle relic from a bygone era, 'his very silence speaks in terms more eloquent than words', articulating a timeless message protesting human kind's aggressive domination of nature, the oppression of the weak by the strong, and even the universal barbarity of war.

Source: Lawrence, 1991, pp. 84–94.

READING C:
Michael O'Hanlon, 'Paradise: portraying the New Guinea Highlands'

Collecting in context

[M]aking a collection itself proved to be more interesting than I had naively expected. It confronted me with my own taken-for-granted assumptions as to the nature of the transactions I was engaged in, the definition of 'material culture', and what actually constituted a 'Wahgi artefact'. [...] I did not find myself a free agent [...] My collecting was constrained by local processes and rules, with the upshot that the collection I made partly mirrored in its own structure local social organisation. And while many comments on collecting have focused upon the 'rupture' involved in removing artefacts from their local context to install them in the rather different one of a museum or gallery, this was not necessarily the way in which the Wahgi themselves chose to view the matter.

[...]

[W]hat I had in mind was the full repertoire of portable Wahgi goods, including personal adornment of all kinds, clothing, netbags, household goods, weaponry. Possibly I could also commission a *bolyim* house and *mond* post. The emphasis was to be on completeness, with contemporary material, such as the contents of a trade-store, represented equally with traditional items. [...]

[T]he money which I had available to purchase artefacts and assistance still represented a substantial local asset. I worried that it might prove difficult to manage the tension between the demands of the immediate community, who would be likely to want me to buy exclusively from them, and my own wish to purchase a wider range of artefacts than they would be likely to possess [...].

My concern was largely misplaced: Kinden proved to have quite clear ideas as to how to proceed. There should, he declared, be a specific order in which people should be entitled to offer artefacts for sale, particularly in the case of the most valuable category, netbags. [...]

[...] While at one level [the collection] certainly reflected my own conception of what 'a collection of Wahgi material culture' should include, at another level the collection necessarily embodied local conditions and processes. The fact that it was constituted predominantly of Komblo artefacts reflected the *realpolitik* of field collection, and the order in which the artefacts were acquired partially reproduced local social structure, including its characteristic tensions [...] I suspect that most ethnographic collections contain much more of an indigenous ordering than their contemporary reputation – as having been assembled according to alien whim and 'torn' from a local context – often allows. A final arena of cultural negotiation related to what should be given in return for artefacts acquired [...].

[R]eluctance to specify a price stemmed from the fact that the transactions were rarely purchases in any simple sense. They had as much the character of local exchanges, in which precise amounts are not necessarily worked out in advance. [...]

As people became clearer as to what I wanted to collect (once they had internalised my stereotype of their material culture), they began to become interested in the collection's contents and representativeness. Some speculated that it would not be possible to obtain such discontinued items as aprons ornamented with pigs tails [...] Men began on their own initiative to make examples of abandoned categories of artefact [...]

Other artefacts, for example the *geru* boards believed to promote pig growth and to alleviate sickness, I knew I would have to commission. [...]

I also found that the practicalities entailed in making a collection of artefacts revealed complexities which I had not previously appreciated. Sometimes, these were minor social and technical details which I had observed before but never really seen [...] At other times, collecting highlighted variations among Wahgi themselves in their approach to artefacts. [...]

On occasion, collecting artefacts threw up points entirely new to me. While I did know that Wahgi men, like many other Highlanders, consider women to be polluting in certain respects, I had not realised that skirts were potentially defiling, or that washing rid them of their polluting qualities (worried women told me that my 'skin' would become 'ashy' if I handled unwashed skirts).

[...]

The way in which people react to the making of a collection tells us, in fact, something about their historical experience. In such areas as the Southern Highlands, which were subjected to colonial pressure that was even more sudden and overwhelming than was the case in the Western Highlands, making a collection may precipitate an emotional rediscovery of what was lost or suppressed in local culture. [...]

The Wahgi instance was rather different. Certain items, such as the *bolyim* house which I thought I might commission, most men were simply not prepared to make. Equally, after reflection, people abandoned their initial enthusiasm for staging a mock battle to mark my first departure from the field. Both *bolyim* houses and warfare remain sufficiently integral to on-going culture for it to be dangerous to invoke them without due cause. But the many cultural practices which *were* re-enacted in the context of making the collection did not seem to me to be done in any mood of emotional rediscovery. Rather, demonstrations of how stone axes used to be made, or of how highly pearl shells were formerly valued, tended to be carried out with a caricatured seriousness which collapsed into laughter. There was sometimes a sense that people felt they had been absurd to esteem shells in the way they had, to have laboured as long as they did to grind hard stones down to make axes. Now they knew better. Making items for the collection and demonstrating their use was, for the Wahgi, less a rediscovery of culture from which they had been estranged than a marker of how far they had come. Indeed, it was in the context of my collecting that some younger people encountered such items as wooden pandanus bowls and *geru* boards for the first time: such artefacts were becoming museum pieces in a double sense.

The notion that such older material cultural forms are becoming 'museumified' is supported by the recent establishment of the remarkable Onga Cultural Centre at Romonga, just to the west of the Wahgi culture area (Burton 1991). [...]

Its focus is entirely upon traditional material culture, narrowly conceived. [...]

As my period in the Highlands drew to a close, I felt a growing sense of interpenetration between Wahgi frames of reference and my collecting. [...]

[...] The crates which Michael Du had made for the collection had to be painted with the Museum of Mankind's address, and labelled as 'fragile'. It was important that this should be done legibly to minimise the risk of damage, or of the crates going astray. The only practised painter I knew was Kaipel, who had decorated many of the shields which the crates now contained, and he spent an afternoon meticulously labelling them. [...]

The extent to which my collecting activities had been partly assimilated to local frames of reference, emerged when the first of the collections I made in the Wahgi was being packed. On the one hand, the collection was a project which, in being exported, would be launched on a wider stage. It would 'be revealed', as Wahgi say of items like *geru* boards and ceremonial wigs. Before such objects are publicly revealed, those launching them solicit ghostly support through consuming a private sacrificial meal. As he outlined the arrangements for the meal he organised for the collection's departure, Kinden commented that he did not know who *my* ancestors were: the unspoken implication was that it would be *his* ancestors whose ghostly help would be sought.

On the other hand, the completion of the collection was also a leave-taking. If there is a single model for leave-taking in Wahgi society it is that of marriage, when a girl departs her natal kin to live among her husband's clanspeople. [...]

[Anamb] proposed that the collection should undergo the ceremony of beautification which is performed for a bride the evening before her departure. This was a suggestion with considerable political spin on it, a point I also noted when the same idiom of kinship was invoked in negotiating what was to be paid for artefacts. For if the collection was like a bride, then what I had paid for it was like bridewealth; and the point about bridewealth is that it is only the *first* of the payments which are owed to a bride's kin. [...] Anamb's comparison was his way of highlighting my continuing relationship of indebtedness to those who had helped me, as well as a specific attempt to constitute himself as the 'source person' of any benefit which might flow to me from the collection.

Exhibiting in practice

Exhibition outline

The gallery in which the exhibition is to take place lies at the end of a corridor. [...] the antechamber should include the only component of the exhibition specifically suggested by those Wahgi with whom I discussed the exhibition. Their main wish, as earlier noted, was that a contingent of performers should visit the museum to dance and to demonstrate traditional cultural practices. [...] In the absence of the sponsorship which might make such a visit possible, the only specific proposal they made was that the exhibition should have at its start the large stones, painted posts and cordyline plants which mark the entrance to an area that is in some way special or restricted (as Kinden had marked off my field-base). Kulka Nekinz even painted and presented me with two such posts. In part, I think it was felt that since Wahgi themselves traditionally mark special territory in this way, it was appropriate so to mark the entrance to a Wahgi exhibition. This was reinforced in Kinden's mind by a visit he and I had made a decade earlier to the ethnography exhibitions at the National Museum in the capital, Port Moresby. Kinden had observed near the museum entrance a row of posts or bollards which he had interpreted as similarly delimiting the exhibitions there.

[...]

Visitors to the earlier *Living Arctic* exhibition, which had also used such quotations from Native Americans, repeatedly recorded their approval at the provision of such an 'indigenous voice' – even though the selection of that voice is, of course, the curator's.

[...]

My argument in fact has been that the exhibition is itself a large artefact, whose manufacture merits a measure of the interest usually confined to the component objects included within it. [...]

[A]t the end of the exhibition, there is [...] vacant wall space [...] where an acknowledgement of the fabricated nature of the exhibition might be made.

This could best be done by including a miscellany of photographs to illustrate the artefacts' passage from field to museum display. The photographs

[...] would [...] acknowledge the exhibition's own 'sources' [and include] a picture of the crates leaving Mt. Hagen; an illustration of the artefacts being unpacked upon arrival in London; photographs of the gallery [...] showing its refitting for the present exhibition.

No photographic record remains, however, of the moment which for me illustrated an unavoidable contingency attached to collecting and preserving some artefacts but not others. In the museum's repository, the process of unpacking the crates in which the collection had travelled was complete. The crates' contents, now safely swaddled in tissue paper, awaited fumigation, conservation, registration and careful storage as Wahgi artefacts. Meanwhile, other Wahgi artefacts – the crates themselves, no less carefully made by Michael Du, painted by Zacharias and labelled by Kaipel the sign-writer – awaited disposal.

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Source: O'Hanlon, 1993, pp. 55–93.

READING D:
James Clifford, 'Paradise'

The only consistently non-contemporaneous times signalled by the *Paradise* photographs are explorer Mick Leahy's black and white records of the 1933 'first contact' and the final 'Making of an Exhibition' panels. The former are appropriate [...] The latter seem more problematic. Why should a Wahgi man crafting objects for the exhibition be in small black and white, while other Wahgi performing at the pig festival ten years earlier are in full colour? Why should the work of the museum staff appear to be taking place in some different time from the complex, contemporary, real, historical times presented elsewhere in the show? Given the limited size of the exhibit, and its somewhat minimalist touch, 'The Making of an Exhibition' panels register the appropriate people and activities. But given the lack of color and size in the photos they risk appearing as an afterthought. Even at its current scale, the section might have included a large color image of the women who made many of the adjacent netbags, instead of a modest black and white. And I, at least, would have found a way to show Michael O'Hanlon in the highlands – an image missing from both exhibition *and* catalogue. How are modesty and authority complicit in this absence? [...]

O'Hanlon's original plan called for the prominent use of Wahgi quotations in the 'first contact' section. Arguing for this strategy, he noted that an earlier exhibit at the Museum of Mankind, *Living Arctic*, made extensive use of quotations from Native Americans, and that these had been much appreciated by visitors. In the current exhibit, Wahgi are very little 'heard'. Very brief quotations, often with allegorical resonances, are placed at the head of each long interpretive plaque, but these have no independent presence. Nor do we read, in the catalogue, any extended Wahgi intepretations of exhibit topics or process. Wahgi agency, stressed throughout, has no translated voice. As the *Living Arctic* experiment showed, this could be a powerful means of communication, albeit always under curatorial orchestration. Why was the tactic dropped? So as not to overcomplicate the message? So as not to privilege certain Wahgi? In order to avoid the awkwardness, even bad faith, that comes with 'giving voice' to others on terms not their own?

The staging of translated, edited 'voices' to produce a 'polyphonic' ethnographic authority has never been an unproblematic exercise. But represented voices can be powerful indices of a living people: more so than even photographs which, however realistic and contemporary, always evoke a certain irreducible past tense (Barthes 1981). And to the extent that quotations are attributed to discrete individuals, they can communicate a sense of indigenous *diversity*. One of the exhibit's scattered Wahgi statements chastises young women for their new, unrespectable, net bag styles. We immediately 'hear' a man of a certain generation. What if longer, more frequent, and sometimes conflicting personal statements had been included? My point is not to second-guess O'Hanlon and his collaborators at the Museum. There were trade-offs, and one cannot do everything in a small, or even in a large, exhibit. I wish, simply, to underline significant choices constituting both object and authority in *Paradise*, choices revealed but not analysed in the catalogue. [...]

[A] poignant scene ends the catalogue. Museum basements are revealing places, and here collecting is seen to be an act of both retrieval and disposal. The scene illustrates, for O'Hanlon, 'an unavoidable contingency attached to collecting and preserving some artefacts but not others.' But the phrase 'unavoidable contingency' may not quite do justice to the specific institutional constraints and (not-inevitable) choices at work. The custom-made crates could have made striking additions to a show differently conceived. Space considerations, conventions of proper collection and display, a concern not to overcomplicate the message – all these no doubt conspired to make their disposal seem inevitable. [...]

Paradise is directed at a certain London museum public and at a sophisticated (in places specialist) catalogue readership. That it is not addressed to the Wahgi is obvious and, given who is likely to see and read the productions, appropriate. This fact does not, however, close the personal and institutional question of responsibility to the Wahgi. It may be worth pushing the issue a bit farther than O'Hanlon does, for it is of general importance for contemporary practices of cross cultural collecting and display. What are the relational politics, poetics and pragmatics of representation here? In what senses do the

Paradise exhibition and book reflect Wahgi perspectives and desires? Should they? [...]

O'Hanlon offers a sensitive account of all this, portraying himself yielding to, and working within, local protocols. He tends, overall, to present a potentially fraught process as a steady convergence of interests – a fable, if not of rapport, at least of complicity. He also gives glimpses of the relationship's more problematic aspects. As the collection is about to depart for London, it is ritually treated like a bride, departing to live with her husband's people (marriage being the primary model of leave-taking for the Wahgi). [...]

O'Hanlon closes his second chapter with Anamb's power play, an incident that reveals how dialogical relations of collecting both include and exclude people. Moreover, Anamb raises, Melanesian style, a far-reaching political question. What do O'Hanlon, the Museum of Mankind, and indeed the visitors and readers who 'consume' these artefacts owe the Wahgi who have sent them? Payment does not end the connection with 'source people'. Quite the opposite: in collecting relations money, objects, knowledge, and cultural value are exchanged and appropriated in continuing local/global circuits. How should the benefits of these relationships be shared? If collecting is conceived as exchanging, what ongoing constraints are imposed on exhibition practices? The catalogue chapter on 'Exhibiting in Practice' drops these political issues.

According to O'Hanlon, those who helped him in the Highlands made few specific requests about the nature of the exhibit. They did, however, want the personal and political relationships involved to proceed properly. Anamb's attempt to ensure a 'continuing relationship of endebtedness' doubtless had more to do with keeping the exchange going and sharing the wealth than with faithfully representing his viewpoint or giving him voice. Independent of exhibit content, the issue of reciprocity remains. Does the Museum officially recognize any ongoing exchange connection with Wahgi tribes or individuals? [...] What is the nature of the responsibility incurred in the making of this exhibit? Do Wahgi understand it primarily as a personal, kin-like relation with O'Hanlon? Or is there an institutional, even geo-political dimension? These questions, opened up by the catalogue, encourage more concreteness in our

discussions of the politics of collecting and representation. [...]

The most specific Wahgi request concerning the exhibition was, in fact, passed over. In the highlands, special or restricted places are marked off by small clusters of 'taboo stones' and painted posts. O'Hanlon's sponsor Kinden marked his highland collecting camp in this way, to keep the acquisitions safe. He and others asked that the exhibit be identified as a Wahgi area by placing similar stones and posts at the entry. Indeed, two posts were specially painted for the purpose and given to O'Hanlon. But no stones or posts appear at the entrance to *Paradise*. Apparently the museum design staff thought they might obstruct the flow of visitors (large school groups, for example) at a place where it was important that people move along. In this instance, practical concerns that were surely soluble (the stones are only a foot or two high) were here able to override a clearly expressed Wahgi desire for the exhibition.

London is distant from the New Guinea Highlands. There is no Wahgi community nearby that could constrain the exhibit organizers' freedom. It is worth noting this obvious fact because in many places, today, it is no longer obvious. An exhibition of First Nations artefacts in Canada will be under fairly direct scrutiny, often coupled with demands for consultation or curatorial participation (Clifford 1991). [...] O'Hanlon's rather scrupulous reciprocity in collecting did not have to be reproduced in exhibiting. A general intent to do something that would not offend the (distant) Wahgi was enough. Thus if the Taboo Stones were 'impractical' they could go.

How far must an exhibition go in reflecting indigenous viewpoints? Some Wahgi urged O'Hanlon not to emphasize warfare in the exhibition. The exhibit does feature war (dramatic shields and spears) but compensates by following with peacemaking. Would this satisfy the Wahgi who asked that fighting be played down? And would we want to satisfy them on this score?

[A]ssuming requests come from individuals of wide local authority, should they be followed without question? Is the decision by a more powerful institution to override or supplement indigenous views always 'imperialist?' Yes *and* no. In a structural sense, large metropolitan museums stand in a relation of historical privilege and financial power with respect to the small populations whose works they acquire and recontextualize. This geo-political position is determining, at certain levels.

[...] O'Hanlon's pointed corrective, in its focus on collecting and exhibiting in practice, risks over-reacting, omitting more structural, or geo-political levels of differential power. Thus his lack of attention to the disappearance of Wahgi agency when discussing the work in London. [...]

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Source: Clifford, 1995, pp. 92–117.

READING E:
Annie E. Coombes, 'Material culture at the crossroads of knowledge: the case of the Benin "bronzes"'

In 1897, a series of events took place in Benin City, in what was then the Niger Coast Protectorate, which ended in the wholesale looting of royal insignia from the court of Benin. These incidents, and the resulting loot, gained instant notoriety across a range of British journals and newspapers which serviced both a mass popular readership and a professional middle class. They also received coverage in the more specialist journals serving the emergent 'anthropological' professionals. Such a spread of coverage provides the basis for mapping the configurations of interests in Africa [...] and the possibility of understanding the interrelation of knowledges produced in what were often presented as discreet spheres [...]

If the valourisation of cultural production has any impact on a reassessment of the general culture and society of the producer, then the influx of sixteenth-century carved ivories and lost wax castings from Benin City onto the European art and antiquities market, together with the subsequent proliferation of popular and 'scientific' treatises which their 'discovery' generated, should have fundamentally shaken the bedrock of the derogatory Victorian assumptions about Africa, and more specifically, the African's place in history. Yet [...] this was certainly not the case.

[...]

Those museums whose collections were enriched as a result of the punitive raid on Benin received their share of public attention in both the 'scientific' press and in the local, national and illustrated press. The Benin collections acquired by Liverpool's Mayer Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and London's Horniman Free Museum and the British Museum, all featured prominently in the press over this period. [...]

The objects [from Benin] acquired by the Horniman Free Museum in London were among some of the earliest examples of artifacts from the expedition which claimed any attention in the general, as opposed to the scientific, press. Almost immediately after acquiring the Benin artifacts, Richard Quick, the curator of the Museum, began to expose them to a variety of publics, developing what was to become a very efficient publicity machine for the Horniman collection. Photographs of items in the Horniman collection appeared in the *Illustrated London News*, and other illustrated journals in both the local and national press. These were not the carved ivory tusks or bronze plaques which had already received so much acclaim, but consisted of a carved wooden 'mirror-frame' with two European figures in a boat, a hide and goat-skin fan, and two ivory armlets rather poorly reproduced. Described by the *Illustrated London News* reporter as 'relics of a less savage side of the native life', and noted for their 'fine carving' and 'antiquity', they were none the less accompanied by the inevitable descriptions of 'hideous sacrificial rites'. [...] Such sentiments, and the expression of regret concerning what was perceived at this early date as a dearth of relics from a lost 'civilisation which dates back far beyond the Portuguese colonisation of three centuries ago, and probably owes much to the Egyptian influence', are common in the early coverage of material culture from Benin. Quick's own publications on the collection favour the argument concerning Egyptian influence, which he goes to some lengths to substantiate. Significantly, at this early date of 1897, there is less astonishment or curiosity over the origin of the objects than emerges in later writings from the 'scientific' or museums establishment. [...]

One of the factors which transformed the terms of discussion of Benin material amongst emergent museum professionals, and which fired the interest in the origin of the bronzes, was the exhibition in September 1897, at the British Museum, of over three hundred bronze plaques from Benin City. By 1899, it is clear that the British Museum exhibition, together with the publications of Charles Hercules Read and O.M. Dalton (those curators at the Museum responsible for ethnographic material) and of H. Ling Roth, had extended the significance of the Benin artifacts beyond their original association with the bloody events leading up to their acquisition. Ironically, one of the results of this was to open up the possibility of an African origin for the bronzes.

To corroborate this, we have only to compare some of Quick's earlier statements with the radical changes of opinion and increased significance concerning the Benin material that appear in his writings published *after* the British Museum exhibition and publications. By 1899, he felt confidently able to describe the objects in the Horniman collection as 'valuable works of art' (Quick, 1899, p. 248) [...]

[...] Quick hoped that by demonstrating any similarities between some of the iconographic details of the objects in the Horniman collection, and those in the possession of the British Museum, he would register their importance and consequently increase the public profile of his own museum. This instance should signal the institutional allegiances and strategic negotiations that were partly responsible for the shift in terms used to describe and categorise Benin material, and, more specifically, its transformation from the status of 'relic' to 'work of art' in museum circles, with repercussions in other less specialised spheres.

[...]

In 1898, [...] H. Ling Roth, director of the Bankfield Museum in Halifax, and an individual who figured prominently in the history of interpretations of Benin culture, published his 'Notes on Benin Art' in the *Reliquary*. [...] Ling Roth's chief contention was that it was possible to define two phases or periods of Benin casting. [...] Ling Roth was not interested in setting up a hierarchy, since both phases were credited with equal workmanship and skill. [... He] makes clear his admiration for the work of both proposed periods, on the grounds of technical skill, elegant and thorough detailing, clarity and sharpness of design, and variety of illustration and ornamentation, together with what he perceived as an artistic sense of the balance between foreground relief and decoration, and background ornamentation. [...] Ling Roth also established a long history, from an early date, of iron smelting and gold casting amongst different African societies. Furthermore, while emphasising that there was a world of difference 'between the crude castings of the average native African and the beautiful results' from Benin, he emphasised that there was no evidence extant to suggest that there was any such 'high-class art' in the Iberian

Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century, and certainly not elsewhere in Europe. This, therefore, called into question the argument of a Portuguese origin for the bronzes.

[H]e advanced a hypothesis completely at odds with the ethnographic curators at the British Museum, Read and Dalton. [...] Ling Roth suggested that, because the Portuguese figures were later additions attached to the surface of many of the bronze plaques, this method of casting must have pre-dated the Portuguese colonisation of Benin (Ling Roth, 1898, p. 171). [...] The unsettled conclusion he arrived at, in 1898, was that this sophisticated art existed in Benin prior to the advent of the Portuguese, and was therefore entirely of African origin.

Lieutenant-General Pitt Rivers, whose substantial collection Ling Roth used to illustrate much of his article [...], supported Ling Roth's hypothesis in private. In a letter to the eminent Oxford anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor, in August 1898, Pitt Rivers suggested that, 'It does not follow that because European figures are represented that it all came from Europe. Most of the forms are indigenous, the features are nearly all negro, the weapons are negro' (Pitt Rivers Museum, 1898).

[...]

In September 1900, Charles Kingsley transferred Mary Kingsley's collection of objects from Benin and other parts of West Africa to the Pitt Rivers Museum. [...] The Benin material was highly prized by the Museum, the donation being praised as an example of 'the now extinct artistic bronze work of Benin, which has created so much stir of recent years, since the punitive expedition first brought these forgotten treasures to light' (Pitt Rivers Museum, 1900, p. 3). [...]

In 1903, this material was the subject of a special display in the lower gallery to demonstrate ironwork processes with particular reference to the *cire perdue* method associated with Benin, and illustrated in this instance with examples from both Benin and Ashanti. The display seems to have been a fairly permanent feature in the Museum [...] The entry in the annual reports for [1910] testifies to the consistent interest in Benin material from the point of view of the technological processes involved.

[...]

By 1898, Read and Dalton had already lectured at the Anthropological Institute exhibiting some [...] carved ivory tusks and also photographs of the brass plaques in the British Museum's collection.

[...]

[Read and Dalton (1898, p. 371) acknowledged] that these complex and detailed figures, cast with such skill and expertise, 'were produced by a people long acquainted with the art of casting metals'. The authors go so far as to compare their mastery of the *cire perdue* process to the best work of the Italian Renaissance, not only in relation to the plaques but because of the demonstrated facility for casting in the round. [...] Any question of the bronzes actually being contemporary, however, was immediately dismissed with reference to the inferior quality of contemporary casting. There was no danger here of transgressing the image of Benin as a degenerate culture.

Significantly, the point at which ethnologists decided to intervene in the debate over the origin of the Benin bronzes was precisely the moment when the paradox of technical sophistication versus social savagery threatened a break with the evolutionary paradigm, which up to that time had also supplied the classificatory principles under which most collections of material culture from the colonies were organised. Consequently, the concept of degeneration was summoned up as an aesthetic principle, to appease anxiety over these recalcitrant objects which refused to conform to comfortingly familiar taxonomic solutions.

[...]

In 1899, Read and Dalton published a special presentation book entitled *Antiques from the City of Benin and other Parts of West Africa in the British Museum*. This contained several significant shifts from their earlier 1898 argument regarding the origin of the bronzes. [...] Read and Dalton [...] had initially rested their case on a Portuguese or Egyptian origin for the bronzes. However, by 1899, Read felt obliged to warn the reader that one of the dangers of this hypothesis was that, since Europeans were better acquainted with Egyptian material, there would inevitably be a tendency to compare other lesser known cultures with Egyptian civilisation. More importantly, Read and Dalton

were now both prepared to concede what Ling Roth had suggested in 1898, that although certain aspects of the ornamentation might still be attributable to the Egyptians, the Benin castings may well have preceded, or at any rate come into being independently of, Egyptian predecessors! [...] Why were the two spokespeople from the national collection prepared to concede such a thing, when by this date there was effectively very little additional empirical data available than the previous year?

I would argue that the degree to which the Benin aesthetic is assigned an African origin corresponds partly to the stepping up of pressure from ethnologists and anthropologists in the museum for government recognition and financial support. Furthermore, the course of Read and Dalton's argument for an African origin is inextricably linked to the fortunes of the Ethnographic Department within the British Museum itself. Unlike the already thriving department of Egyptology (the other tentative 'home' for the bronzes if an Egyptian origin were proven, and an autonomous department within the museum by 1886), ethnography was only granted the status of an autonomous department in 1941. The fact that so many commentaries could so confidently claim an Egyptian source for the Benin bronzes was not at all surprising, given the extent to which Ancient Egypt had made something of a comeback in the popular imagination of nineteenth-century Europe.

[...]

In September 1897, a series of some three hundred brass plaques from Benin were put on public exhibition in the British Museum. The provincial and national press almost unanimously described the exhibits as remarkable and extraordinary examples of skilled workmanship, often repeating the opinion that such work would not discredit European craftsmen [...] In the British Press, coverage of the exhibition positions the significance of the Benin bronzes as primarily relics of the punitive expedition [...] The same obsession with the origin of the exhibits and their alleged antiquity repeats itself here, although the most frequently posited solution is an Egyptian origin.

There is, however, another set of discourses running through both popular and scientific

reports which suggest controversy of a different order [...] Initially, it was assumed that the vast hoard of brass plaques, temporarily on loan to the British Museum, would eventually become the property of the Museum through the Trustees' acquisition of the artifacts. The Foreign Office had agreed to the loan after official representation had been made to the government on behalf of the British Museum to secure some specimens. [...] In fact, over a third of the bronze plaques had already been sold off as revenue for the Protectorate. The ensuing public auction of items from Benin aroused much bitterness amongst those museum staff with an interest in the affairs of the Ethnographic department.

[...]

[T]he influx of Benin material culture into nineteenth-century Britain made an important impact in several ways. It generated debate amongst different communities of interest in Africa, which had the potential to shift certain popular pre-conceptions regarding the African's lack of competence to produce complex, technically sophisticated, art work. The attempts by those who saw themselves as part of the scientific community to provide an alternative context in which to interpret these finds, other than as 'curio' or 'relic' of past misdemeanours, drew public attention to a hidden history of long-established and affluent African societies. [...] Crucially, though, despite the promise of a revisionist history that such initiatives presented, whenever Benin material is discussed over the period 1897 to 1913, the writer invariably exhibits complete incredulity that such work could possibly be produced by Africans. While certain aspects of the anthropological knowledge on Benin suggested definitions and values which contradicted some of those stereotypes promulgated in the popular middle-class illustrated press, the fact that Benin was consistently treated as an anomaly of African culture by anthropologists ensured that the more racialised sense of the term 'degenerate', popularised by the press accounts, was always inherent in descriptions of Benin culture. This incredulity at the African's skill should also alert us to the fact that the degree to which the European credited a society with making 'works of art' (technically, conceptually and in terms of design) was not necessarily commensurate with any

reassessment of their position on the evolutionary ladder. Indeed, the value of the brasses and ivories was considerably enhanced by actually reinforcing their origins as African and by stressing their status as an anomaly in terms of other examples of African carving and casting. Through such a procedure their notoriety was assured. Their value as 'freak' productions in turn enhanced the status of the museum in which they were held.

[...] The ethnographic curators' decision to assign an African, as opposed to Egyptian, origin to the bronzes placed these contested and now highly desirable objects squarely in the domain of the Ethnographic department, rather than ambiguously positioned between Egyptology and European Antiquities. This highlighted the importance of ethnography as opposed to the already well-endowed Egyptology department in the Museum. How far such a hypothesis was a deliberate strategy for more recognition on the part of the ethnographers, remains a matter of conjecture. Yet one thing is certain: this history is instructive of the kinds of negotiative processes by which 'scientific' knowledge of the culture of the colonies was produced, and gives the lie to a simplistic empirical account which takes such narratives at face value, without acknowledging the institutional and other political factors at play.

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