AIBR
Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana
www.aibr.org
Volume 15
Number 2
May - August 2020
Pp. 211 - 232

Madrid: Antropólogos Iberoamericanos en Red.
ISSN: 1695-9752
E-ISSN: 1578-9705

Making Exhibitions of Ourselves

Nigel Barley
British Museum

Submitted: June 01, 2018
Accepted: March 01, 2019
DOI: 10.11156/aibr.150202e

ABSTRACT
Museums are time machines that bring objects of different periods together then freeze them in a perpetual present so that all the resources of a museum are bent towards preventing change. However, these objects resist the initial destiny and they end up creating their own lives. It is a commonplace of museums, that objects should be allowed to speak for themselves but, of course, the sorts of stories they are allowed to tell are tightly controlled. In this article, by the use of irony and critique, Nigel Barley narrates a multitude of stories collected during his experience as curator of the British Museum.

KEY WORDS
Museum, exhibitions, objects, archeology, stories.

EXPOSICIONES DE NOSOTROS MISMOS

RESUMEN
Los museos son máquinas del tiempo que juntan objetos de momentos distintos y los congelan en un presente perpetuo, de tal manera que las fuentes y recursos quedan cuidadosamente preservados para prevenir el cambio. Sin embargo, estos objetos se resisten a tal destino inicial y acaban desarrollando sus propias vidas. Es un hecho aceptado que en los museos se debe permitir a los objetos que hablen por sí mismos, pero, por supuesto, el tipo de historias que se les permite contar son estrechamente controladas. En este artículo, a través de la ironía y la crítica, el escritor Nigel Barley nos relata una multitud de historias recogidas durante sus décadas de experiencia como curador del Museo Británico.

PALABRAS CLAVE
Museo, exposiciones, objetos, arqueología, historias.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, fellow anthropologists and fellow human beings. When he invited me to come to this meeting, Sergio Lopez mentioned that the AIBR had become a highly respected organisation. I don't know whether I was asked because that made me fit right in or in the hope of putting a stop to that process of gentrification but thank you for inviting me to talk to you, especially as I must represent everything that you battle against since I don't read or speak Spanish and know little of South America. But anthropology is the broadest of subjects and if anthropologists can't talk to each other, despite cultural and linguistic differences, then who on earth can?

The subject of 'Stories from the South' is one that has personal appeal. Most of my life has been as a museum anthropologist at the British Museum which hasn't precluded a fair amount of fieldwork since, in anthropology, as in sex, an excessive concern with theory in the absence of adequate practice tends to lead to sterility, impotence and frustration. Of course, the major difference between museum and university anthropology is that, in the former, the audience is not simply that of the academic community but also the general public and is, in fact, the main point at which the public encounters anthropology at all — though certain lessons can be carried over. When I first became a junior lecturer, my professor took me aside and explained to me the threadbare secrets of the lecturer's profession. 'Say everything three times,' she said. 'Tell them what you're going to say, say it and then tell them what you've said. Oh and don't put on the reading list the book you're stealing your lectures from and you'll do just fine. If you run out of stuff, tell them a fieldwork story.' Perhaps that's a good guide to museum life too but I promise I shall not be using those insights on you all today — or will I?

My academic career, after all, began with a seer study of the ritual system of a North Cameroonian people with lots of nice diagrams and abstract formulae. I wrote it over two years and it didn't feel right. I rewrote it again and again and again and still wasn't happy and each time it got shorter, so I thought I should stop before it totally disappeared. And then I suddenly understood what was wrong. There were no human beings in it, no sounds, no smells, no sensations, no stories. I sat down and wrote another book, *The Innocent Anthropologist* (1983). It took just six weeks so it must have all been in there, waiting to come out and I sent it to every publisher in the UK. They all wrote back with much the same answer. 'It made us laugh,' they said. 'I'm sure you can understand why we couldn't possibly publish it.' And so it spent five years on top of my wardrobe until I joined the museum. As the new boy, I was invited to lunch with the director and, sitting down the end of the table was a man from British

Museum Publications. 'We're a bit short of titles this year,' he fussed. 'I don't suppose you've got anything…?' and so *Innocent* was published. The Association of Social Anthropologists of Great Britain and the Commonwealth responded by considering a motion that I should be flung out of the organisation for bringing the entire subject of anthropology into disrepute. It's moments like that that prove a book was worth writing.

Museums form themselves around a collection of objects that take on a special quality. The woven quiver that you carried down the mountain in the pouring rain, stuffed with your dirty socks, becomes a museum object with a computer record and can only be dusted by a conservator with three university degrees, wearing rubber gloves. But museums do not just consist of objects. They also swarm with stories, stories from the North and from the South, official stories, unofficial ones, stories that institutions try to keep outside their front doors. In fact, museums are meeting places for those stories. It is a commonplace of museums, that objects should be allowed to speak for themselves but, of course, the sorts of stories they are allowed to tell are tightly controlled and objects have a nasty tendency to 'speak with forked tongues'. Those stories that our institutions choose to promote and disseminate are seen as knowledge but, of course, knowledge comes in many forms. It's in books, in exhibitions, it's built into the very fabric of the buildings. Museums are far from being culturally neutral spaces in which pure, crystalline truth is recounted. In exhibitions we always tell as much about ourselves as about The Other.

The official stock of knowledge, the cultural capital of any museum, is attached to the collection that is seen as eternal though its servitors come and go — a little like the Catholic Church. Museums are time machines that bring objects of different periods together then freeze them in a perpetual present so that all the resources of a museum are bent towards preventing change. When I joined the British Museum such knowledge was to be found in leatherbound registers, made of acid-free paper and recorded in Indian ink (Fig. 1) that were kept in fireproof, steel cabinets and could be tracked back to 1753 and intended to last till Judgement Day. It was clear that these were sacred texts. Only curators had the authority to write and draw in them. Any change in them had to be countersigned underneath. And they employed a special sacerdotal vocabulary. Things with many colours were 'polychrome'. Anything carved from a single block of wood was 'monoxylic'. And any depiction of the sexual act was to be described as a 'wrestling couple'. Things would occasionally go wrong, of course. One registrar went through an excessively Freudian period and described every key, spear and cane as 'a phallus' until detected and sent away with pen confiscated. Since English has no proper sub-

junctive or hierarchy of moods, one obsessed curator developed a system of square and round brackets and single and double quotation marks to show up different kinds of knowledge such as 'the seller told me this and I don't believe it' or 'whatever else is written here, this is what I think.' And only rarely did the human penetrate these august pages such as in the description of an Oceanic woven mat whose pattern was 'so complicated that the weaver could not finish it and went mad'. In such a world, curators traditionally acted as policemen of authenticity, rooting out spurious knowledge and old wives' tales and patrolling the borders to detect fakes and copies that were as shocking in a museum as counterfeit money in a bank.

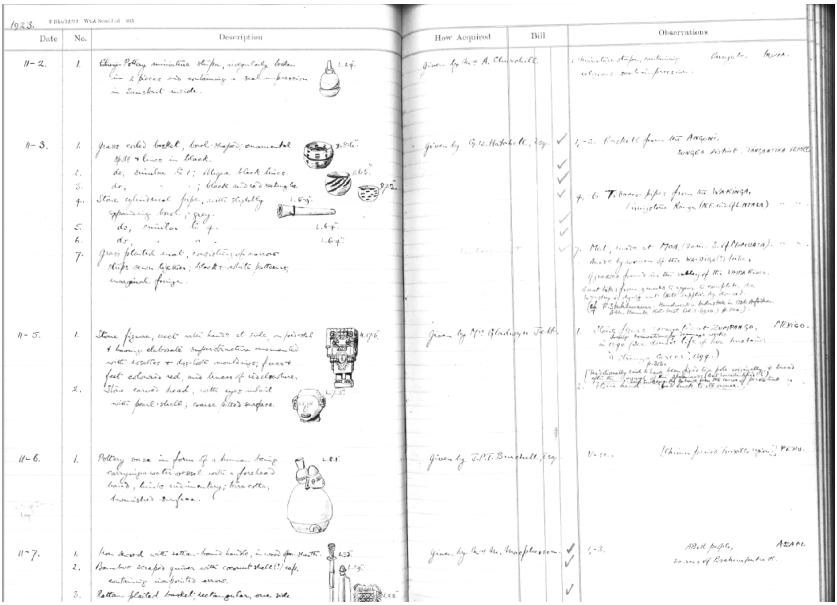

Fig. 1. British Museum Files.

But beneath this formal knowledge, museums have a rich oral culture just like any African village. They are full of things that someone once said and have sunk into the collective consciousness and are regarded as gospel truth, as that which is 'simply known'. The famous Benin sculptures (Fig. 2) from West Africa received their name, 'Benin Bronzes', within the British Museum — no one knows who from — although they are actually made of cheap brass and that naming was part of their being seen as naturalistic high art — and as high art that therefore could not possibly

have been made by Africans themselves. And the name supported stories that proliferated within museums of their being made by Portuguese, Indians, Ancient Egyptians or Greeks from lost Atlantis — anyone but the Africans who lived where they were found — as part of the racist fallout of the 18th century idea that art was the measure of a nation's level of civilization. It should not be forgotten that the statuary above the main door of the British Museum represents 'The Progress of Civilisation' as its foundation myth and we know whose idea of civilisation we are talking about and that leaked into the holy registers too. Every block of wood from Benin brought to the museum would be 'the executioner's block' and every blade that cut firewood be described as 'used for human sacrifice'. The newspapers of the late 19th century were not alone in seeing the triumph of civilization in the building of a golf course for the use of consular officers on what had previously been the Benin place of sacrifice. Nowadays the official alibi of such museums is 'the celebration of diversity and human creativity' and the bringing together of objects that can 'talk to each other'. But other views are always possible. I once wrote a history of the museum as seen by the museum cat where the collection is interpreted as documenting the craziness of the ideas to which humans have lent passionate faith through the centuries and so the inferiority of humans to sceptical and practical cats (Barley, 2013).

Fig. 2. Sculpture from Benin.

There are other stories that soak through a hundred cracks in the museum's classical *façade*. I once passed through the Egyptian gallery where a warder was holding a Japanese audience spellbound with his revelation that the Ancient Egyptians hailed from outer space, a hidden secret recently disclosed to him in a movie starring Bruce Willis. Traditionally, curators have regarded such stories as a sort of verminous infestation to be crushed underfoot, rather as architects regard the humans that infest the pure buildings of their designs.

Yet it is precisely the ability of objects of the South and the stories they evoke to stimulate our imagination that is the key to their power. Fig. 3 is a pot that has dominated my anthropological life. It was made by the Dowayo people of North Cameroon and was my own water jar while I lived there and is the loose end of a whole knot of associated ideas that hold over vast swathes of Africa where humble pots are all about female power and sexuality, a philosophy of female cool and damp versus male hot and dry, the passage of time, life and death and all of it wrapped up in a neat story. 'The first woman in the world,' they tell you, 'was very old and felt death approaching. No one had ever died before. She called her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren to her and said. "I am going to die soon but we must decide exactly how people should do that. Should they die like pots or like calabash gourds?"' "Like pots," they said. "Wrong answer," she replied. "If you had said "like gourds" dead people could have been brought back to life just like a broken gourd can be stitched back together and mended and serve again. But now people will die for good and not come back, for once a pot is broken, who can mend it?" Well, the simple answer is any decent museum conservator but that's to miss the point. The story makes a whole range of beliefs and practices fall into place, the making of new pots for marriage, the smashing of old pots at death, the role of the potter as midwife and initiator of girls, the ornamenting of pots and women's bodies with the same patterns, the view of aging as one of firing and drying out, of sterility as caused by the smashing of a woman's water jar, and even the belief that boys will end up gay if they lick the spoon that has stirred the contents of a woman's pot. It's the best sort of story from the South that carries a whole world of meaning within it.

Fig. 3. Dowayo pot from North Cameroon.

While curators are often hostile to stories from 'outside the box', there has always been one privileged area — that of 'art'. Western museums wallow in stories of how primitive art has inspired Western art of the 20th century. The heroic myths of Picasso, Nolde and Ernst allow museums to project backwards the prestige of contemporary art onto their ethnographic collections so that it is not uncommon to find 19th-century African sculptures described as 'worthy of Picasso'. This is perhaps the only area where curators are willing to whole heartedly embrace the idea that ethnographic objects not only have function within the context of their creation but that they move on to new careers and acceptable new meanings in a Northern context. 'Art' is a way of resacralising profane objects, a sort of nature reserve within the bubble of the museum and affords enchanted stories from the North, but about the South, a place to live, while actually erasing other stories from the South. One director from the New York Museum of Modern Art once visited me and said, 'Show me some African sculpture but under no circumstances tell me anything about it, no ethnography, no collection data. It would ruin it for me as art.' Nowadays, it must be admitted, this is less insidious than it was since the Northern idea of art has changed, focussing less on the aesthetic and more on the conceptual.

Yet curators still speak of a mystical quality called 'the eye' that they acquire magically through contact with the world's great art treasures. By

this, they mean not the evil eye that figures so prominently in anthropological discourse but a special insight and ability to evaluate an object offered to them, to assess its cultural and artistic value in a way that lays it bare of pretension and secondary elaboration. It was explained to me, as a young curator, that this was the special gift of one of my forebears, a man who prided himself on being able to locate any African object in time and space, classify it immediately, and probably tell you the individual who had made it. On one occasion, he was tested to the full with a piece of no known provenance. He looked at it, weighed it in his hand, examined from every possible angle and declared gravely. 'I have absolutely no idea what it is but it is a very fine example of its kind.' That is the eye and it outlaws other senses so that — until recently at least — galleries have been zones of the eye alone, zones of sensory deprivation. Yet 'the eye' can render its possessor blind and deceive them into forgetting that objects from the South have a terrible habit of breaking out into the real world of the North. I once organised a special exhibition for the blind. The idea was that, in a special, tightly-controlled dispensation, the unsighted would be allowed to actually touch. I chose some Central African pieces of sculpture with fine, sinuous curves that alternated smooth surfaces with intricate raised designs depicting bodily scarification and elaborate hairstyles, completely unaware, through habituation, that they were all depictions of the human form with exaggerated sexuality. My eyes were opened when the doors were flung open to admit visitors and in came a party of blind nuns.

Fig. 4, according to official records, is (Am1923,1105.1) a small stone sculpture depicting a standing deity, possibly Chicomecoatl, wearing a very elaborate, four-layered head-dress, decorated with four flowers. The arms lay flat on both sides of the body and there are traces of a red pigment on face, feet and parts of the head-dress. Possibly Aztec. 15th-16th century, from Zumpango Lake, Mexico.

Fig. 4. Aztec deity sculpture.

This according to the holy registers. But there is another story hidden in another place. Information on objects that does not fit the categories of the registers is stored elsewhere, in my day in a set of rusty, old filing cabinets downstairs in a dark, locked cellar — the sort of place where Victorians kept their mad aunts. These are the so-called 'ethnographic documents', a set of brown envelopes containing all sorts of weird and wonderful stories that the objects bring with them. I always found these much more interesting than the sacred registers and these are stories not just from the South but from the North that break down the segregation of narratives and seem to bring us closer to a universal humanity.

It is clear that Edward Said did not invent Orientalism. What he really invented was a monolithic caricature of the North as the home of Occidentalism — a mindset of rationality, science and empirical factuality. But there is a very unoccidental tale associated with this object (Fig. 4). The reference in the register refers us to a book printed in 1894

— carefully held offstage — by the donor, Mrs Jebb, A Strange Career, telling the story of her late husband Jack who spent much of his life in South America and recounts an incident in Mexico City. Let me quote from it.

'[Jack] worked steadily early and late, making new combinations and planning fresh schemes when the monotony was disturbed slightly by two events. One of these was the advent of a little son, and the other the acquisition of a new idol. Not new in an opprobrious sense, for its pedigree was unimpeachable, and Jack had long sighed for it in vain. It was about two feet high, of grey stone, tinged in places with pink, and its complacent ugly face was where in a proper anatomy its chest should have been. It had been dug up in the excavations for the great drainage works, amidst great excitement of the native mind, and was recognised by the Indians around as an ancient god of sacrifice said to have been buried in that spot by their forefathers, when the Spanish priests were sweeping the land clear of its temples and its gods. With their usual memory of tradition, the Indians could point out the very spot on which a tall pole had stood with this idol fixed upon its top, while around the base was a grinning pile of skulls, mounting ever higher and higher as fresh victims were given to the silent, insatiable image. There is seldom a chance nowadays of finding any antiquity not hailing from Birmingham, and naturally when Jack heard of this discovery and its unquestioned history he was wild to possess the idol. But it was in vain that he offered bribes or promises; one of the native officials had taken it, and refused on any terms to give up anything so rare and interesting. Jack returned again and again to the siege, but with no result. Judge then of his surprise when one day an Indian appeared suddenly on the stair of the house, bearing the idol on his back. No price was asked for it, nor was any explanation given of this sudden change of mind on the part of the owner. The idol was simply put down and left. No reason was ever volunteered for this strange conduct, but in time Jack came to have his own opinion about the matter. Meanwhile he was delighted with his new possession, set it upon a sort of throne in the corner of a room, and paid it about as much homage as even an idol could demand, for there were reasons for believing it to be the only god of slaughter still extant. A bygone chronicler has referred to the fact that when the Spaniards reached the city of its abode, they found the pole and the skulls, but of the idol there was no trace… It is an absolute fact that from the day he became the owner of that placid-looking lump of stone, everything that Jack touched went wrong. One piece of business after another, which up to that date had been satisfactorily progressing, fell through and failed. Negotiations

which he thought completed had to be commenced all over again, only after long suspense to be broken off finally. His own health gave way, three of his best and dearest friends died one after another, and the strange perversity of his affairs was such that he felt no surprise when, once having to raise money on a reversion to which he was entitled, the very day after he had sold his expectations for a third of their value the holder died, and Jack would have come in for the whole had the signing of the deeds been delayed for twenty-four hours. Of course it did not occur to him to connect the idol with these mischances; but it is a strange thing that when, broken in health and fortunes, he went to London with his family, the first night the Aztec god spent on foreign soil was signalised by loud noises all over a house hitherto warranted to be of the quietest by its owners. Nor did the trouble stop here, for every night, with other unpleasing manifestations, loud knockings took place at a particular door as long as the idol remained in the house. So noisy were they that some people could not sleep for the sounds, though others heard nothing at all. Nothing can be proved against a stone image, but it seems within the bounds of imagination that an unconscious figure looking down on centuries of bloodshed should become in a manner saturated with the malignant atmosphere around it, and should give forth the spirit of its victims' agony and curses. Whatever the cause might be, the effects were as has been stated, and from the day when he joyfully accepted it to that of his death three years later, the idol sat and smiled, while Jack struggled bravely, but went down-down! One is glad to think that the Aztec deity also had its vicissitudes; for after a lady visiting the house which it graced with its presence had been kept awake three nights by the unearthly noises constantly going on in and about her bedroom, its owner decided that he must reluctantly make up his mind to part with it. To submit it to the indignity of sale was out of the question, so Jack offered to give it to one after another of his friends who had frequently admired its dubious charms. Rather to his surprise, none of them seemed to yearn for the joys of possession, although they had all laughed at the malign influence stories told of its proceedings. For some time there appeared to be little chance of finding it a "comfortable home," although one gentleman offered to take it to his country-house and put it in the pig-killing shed, where it could have as much gore served up to it daily as it required. But this plan was put a stop to by the fact that the gentleman who made the offer was the husband of the lady who had vainly tried to sleep through the idol's nightly perambulations. It was not the little god she objected to so much as the loss of her natural rest, she was careful to explain; still she flatly refused to

tolerate its presence on any premises over which she ruled. Finally it found a refuge with a lady and gentleman sufficiently enamoured of its appearance and antiquity to overlook its bad character and to risk the consequences of its wrath. They took it and have so far stuck to it manfully in spite of the fact that from the date of its advent in their domestic circle their affairs have gone as crookedly as those of its former owner. But the end is not yet; and whether the malign influence exercised by the exiled god, the undoubted relic of the most bloody ritual the world has ever known, or the incredulity of his owners, will conquer at the last, remains yet to be seen.'

Well, it seems that this pacific god of agriculture continued to play a gory role in the British imagination, since it was clearly returned to Mrs. Jebb who decided to earth it by giving it to the British Museum where it lives in peace to this day. But the interesting thing is that the anonymous gentleman with the pig slaughterhouse who offered it a gory home is well-known to us. It was the writer Rider Haggard, (author of *King Solomon's Mines*, *She* and other tales of exotic romance and adventure), one of the primary creators of the myths that sustained British imperialism and the early days of psychiatry through his influence on Freud and Jung. Rider Haggard did not just write romances, he lived them around the world in a life full of incident, exploration, war and treasure-hunting. He was a leading spiritualist, a haunter of Egyptian temples who had been frightened by an encounter with a mummy as a child, wore rings plucked from the fingers of Peruvian bodies and held himself to be the reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian priest. I suspect that it is because of this link with literature — a form of art — that the tales around this figure have been preserved, though carefully segregated.

Because of their insistence on the freezing effect of museums, it is not unusual for them to be used as dumping grounds for objects that are too hot for their collectors or even their original creators to handle but some objects seem destined to eradicate clear lines between Us and Them in that they are truly the result of dialogue. The Kalabari are a people from the infinite creeks and rivers of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. In the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, they went from being poor fishermen to having so much wealth they hardly knew what to do with it as the middlemen between the African interior and Europe. They pushed the slaves — later the ivory — out and the guns in. Since they were split into fiercely-competing canoe-houses — Southern Nigeria being a searing hothouse of entrepreneurial talent — they adopted the best slaves into the business. The slaves were circumcised, given a new name, a new mother and father

but if they could not rapidly learn to respond in Kalabari to a challenge from the night watch, they would be swiftly sold on to the Americas. In the course of this process, Kalabari society was transformed. At the same time as the US was inventing 'the American way of life' from fragments of European culture, the Kalabari were forging a new identity from mixed African and European elements. So top hats became the mark of chiefs, the national goddess, Owamekaso, was a European ship's figurehead with bare breasts and long, flowing hair to whom offerings were made of ship's biscuit and sweet, milky tea. Dances were based on British naval drill and, when they wanted the young men to go to war, they offered them the right to carry walking sticks. Finally, inevitably, a man of slave origins became king. Since he could not approach the traditional, ancestral shrines, new ones were made. Fig. 5 is the shrine of a Kalabari chief, based on European portraits and the group photographs that were all the rage in the area at the time. The key to their form is that they were made by the family who provided the pilots for European vessels, so they had access to ships' interiors and observed foreign ways of life such as drinking toasts to royal portraits. It seemed obvious to them that these images must be the sailors' ancestors and so they made new versions of these Northern images, carved screens complete with frames, for the new Kalabari and made offerings of drink and blood to them. The screens show the chief in the masquerade headdress that he habitually performed with his face concealed. Here the faces are visible in a sort of selfie from beyond the grave. Some of these masking traditions are of considerable age and we have a sketch from the early 19th century of an African performing a Kalabari masquerade outside the Tower of London as street theatre. In some Kalabari club houses the screens can be seen to this day, stood around the walls like portraits of former CEOs exhibited in US company boardrooms. The difference, of course, is that house members are not looking at them. They are looking at house members. Some houses no longer have them for, not surprisingly, as with everything else, the Kalabari did not simply accept Christianity as supplied. They reworked it and especially powerful during WW1 was a charismatic preacher called Garrick Braide. He stirred up so much social disorder that the British District Officer, called Talbot, finally put him in jail. The Kalabaris tell two versions of Braide's ultimate fate. Some have it that he rose directly to heaven in a whirlwind like the prophet Elijah, others that he died of venereal disease. What is clear is that he urged local people to destroy their ancestral shrines and that Talbot, in an effort to keep the peace said, 'Give them to me and I'll send them to the British Museum and you'll never have to see them again.' Now, of course, they are a great attraction to Southern Nigerians living in the UK but it will

come as no surprise to you to hear that once again priorities have been reversed and these works have been referred to in Europe as 'Pop art from Africa'. But the tension between Christian and pagan has persisted in Kalabari and, at one event that I witnessed, the only person qualified and willing to offer to the shrines was a British anthropologist, wearing a bowler hat as a mark of his membership of the masquerade society. When an Englishman wears a bowler hat in an African rite of sacrifice, all sorts of meanings fuse together as when, at an opening of an exhibition of these works in Washington, I had to creep in with a bottle of gin to slosh over the carpet so that I — as a man — could introduce a female Kalabari sculptor to these works from her own culture, she whispering the appropriate forms of greeting in Kalabari in my ear. When we do this in the North, talk is nowadays of inappropriate 'cultural appropriation' but where does a circle begin?

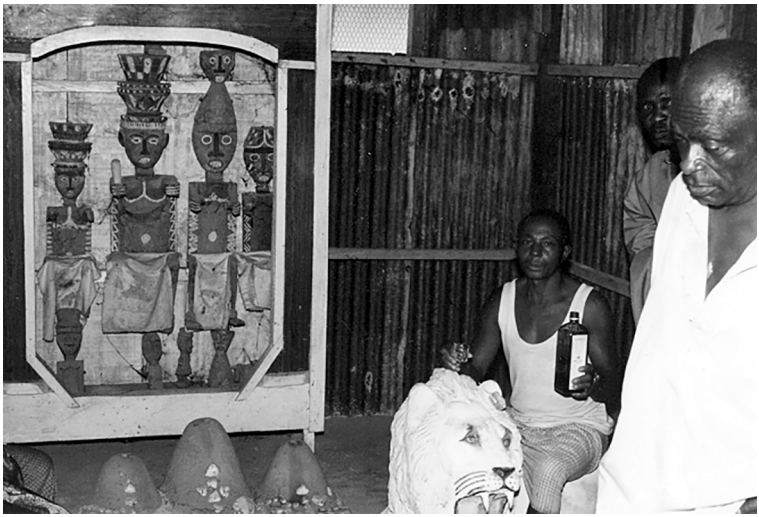

Fig. 5. Shrine of a Kalabari chief.

That mutual incomprehension is still the norm was shown recently in Indonesia by the discovery that a sex doll, found floating at sea, had been seen by local fishermen as a bidadari, a heavenly nymph (Fig. 6), clothed, worshipped and taken on boating trips. Stories rapidly circulated that it had been heard crying and its fall from heaven was linked to a recent solar eclipse. The image was finally confiscated by police, using much the same excuse of endangered public order that Talbot once

used to put Garrick Braide in jail. Much sport was made of the 'simple villagers' in the Press and by more sophisticated, citified Indonesians. 'They don't have access to the internet,' the local police chief explained, laughingly, as if the internet were the arbiter of true reality. Yet, recently, the Museum of Cultures in Milan staged a wholly serious exhibition of Barbie dolls.

One of the most famous story-generating objects from the South is perhaps 'The Unlucky Mummy' (No. 22542), actually a 21st dynasty mummy-board (Fig. 7). It came to the museum in 1889 but was purchased some twenty years before that by a man named Douglas Murray, one of a party of four or five upper-class Englishmen wintering in Egypt to escape the rigours of the British climate. Since all were interested in the piece, they drew lots to see who should retain it and the winner was Arthur Wheeler. Thereafter, the group was plagued with misfortune. A gun exploded, costing Murray his arm. Another died, financially ruined, within a year. Another wandered off into the desert and was never seen again. Wheeler lost his money and passed the lid to his sister. She was visited by the society spiritualist, Madame Blavatsky, who warned her of its occult influence. A man who photographed it was killed as was the man who moved it. The resulting plate showed, in place of the female image of the lid, a hideous man's face, convulsed with hostility. A man who was charged with deciphering the inscription on it shot himself. The piece was finally donated to the museum as too hot to handle. The whole story is enormously complex and twists and turns over decades and involves several names prominent in British society such as Conan Doyle (of Sherlock Holmes fame) and the extraordinary gun-toting curator, Wallis Budge, said to have been one of the inspirations for Indiana Jones, for Budge was an enthusiastic and aggressive collector — to the point that some of the works he collected have bullet holes in them. Perhaps I should say no more. Part of the alternative history of this object is that those who have told its tale are alleged to perish soon after doing so — such as the journalist Bertram Robinson who wrote it up in the newspaper he edited, only to die shortly afterwards. Robinson was a war hero who travelled back from South Africa on a steamer with Conan Doyle and had agreed to co-write a story about a spectral hound on the Devon moors with him and even lent him his driver named Henry Baskerville to show him the wild countryside. Conan Doyle gave a spectacular interview at the time, reprinted around the world, attributing the death to 'elementals' attached to this painted panel. For years, Budge happily retold his mummy yarns over the port around the gentlemen's clubs of London but, as a result, was hounded throughout his life by

earnest enquiries and warnings about the piece. It is important to note that he died at a ripe old age, unpursued by phantoms but probably of too much good living in those same clubs. The story, if not the elementals, still haunts the museum and resurfaces regularly, intricately muddled up with stories of other mummies that stir in homicidal elephants, the first man to be killed in a mid-air collision, fatal falls down the museum's front steps, tales of curses, hauntings, spiritualist sessions, horrible and bizarre deaths. As is the nature of such objects, from sex dolls to mummy boards, this work has attached itself to any passing event. When the spiritualist, publisher and politician William Stead, who had written about the 'mummy', went down on the Titanic in 1912, it bobbed up again. Incidentally, so did he for he continued to write via a medium from beyond the grave. Stead was by far the most famous Briton to go down in the disaster and his last hours were hotly discussed. It was noted that he had heroically handed his lifebelt to someone else and given up the place in a lifeboat that would have saved his life and then urged the orchestra to play 'Nearer My God to Thee' as the ship dipped finally beneath the waves. But what captured most attention was that, the night before, he had told the story of 'The Unlucky Mummy' in the dining room, ending it to the chimes and bells of midnight. The museum, it was alleged, had sold the cursed object to an American museum or millionaire and slipped it aboard on the maiden voyage. Since then it has been reported as sold to the Kaiser to cause the First World War and in 2001, it was noted as being aboard the Lusitania, before that ship was sunk by German U-boats and nowadays 'The Unlucky Mummy', despite resting peacefully in its museum case, lives an even more vigorous life on the internet. To the continued exasperation of staff, it has become a self-generating myth machine and the online museum entry notes wearily, 'This object (is) perhaps best known for the strange folkloric history attributed to it: it has acquired the popular nickname of the 'Unlucky Mummy', with a reputation for bringing misfortune. None of these stories has any basis in fact, but from time to time the strength of the rumours has led to a flood of enquiries.' Within the museum itself, of course, so great is the emphasis on the museumised object as inert that — with a collection comprising hundreds of thousands of objects directly associated with the dead or even plucked from their graves — the only ghosts permitted an even humorous institutional existence are former staff who refuse to go away. So poor Wallis Budge, the Egyptologist who all his life argued against curses and ghosts and hauntings, has himself become a house ghost occasionally seen stalking the galleries at night.

Fig. 6. 'The Unlucky Mummy'.

But the point is that the suppression of such stories and the insistence of the inertness of things sets up the museums of the North as zones of pure Occidentalism, where official narratives of particular kinds are permitted to come only from the South, as if humanity can be divided according to sharply different modes of thought and life was not a series of entanglements. It also strips objects of their greatest power, the power to move and inspire us and turns objects into the corpses of objects. There was an enterprising young Nigerian regularly contacted the museum, saying he knew there were many hungry and unhappy objects from the South there. As a Nigerian, raised among such things, he uniquely knew how to talk to them in their own language and listen to them and, for a substantial fee, would make them happy again. And nowadays, the whole thing can be turned on its head as there emerges;

with the growing strength of the hitherto-muted voice of the South, a new and insidious form of censorship, the belief that only people from the South should tell the stories of the South, that the only acceptable form of anthropology is local history so that anthropology's essential comparative framework is invalidated and lost and the anthropologist becomes a mere scribe. What is needed is a freer not a more restricted economy of storytelling that makes us aware of the arbitrary dams and barriers we have hitherto set up against different narratives. And anthropology has shifted somewhat in that direction in recent years and our subject no longer excludes all the interesting stories that were punctuated out of the classic ethnographies — just as the ethnographer was carefully kept out of the frame of those endless collections of field photographs. Anthropologists in the field nowadays are sometimes permitted to be bored, angry, sexually aroused, beguiled and depressed — just as they are at home — and to be living human beings not disembodied academic minds.

For, what was true of 18th century Kalabari, is even more true of the modern world. Boundaries are fluid and roles shift and change and the thing about stories is that you are never sure when they are finished. Many years ago, I organised an exhibition of traditional architecture of the Torajan people of Sulawesi. The idea was for an exhibition that would not simply be about going somewhere, putting interesting things in a box and taking them away. Instead, it would publicise and encourage an ancient skill and show the building, carving and painting of a Torajan ricebarn in the very centre of London (Fig. 7). It was an impossible idea, one I would not even try now with the benefit of the wisdom that comes with age. But somehow, we got through it and it was a strange experience to be the naïve, native informant of three generations of Torajans, trying to explain to them the rules of cricket, toilet paper, taps that had to be turned OFF and why crazy people walked round the streets with dogs on the end of pieces of string. Many years later, by chance, I ran into the youngest of the carvers again, Johannis, in Singapore. The boy I had known from a wooden shack up a mountain in Sulawesi was in a huge Mercedes, chauffeur-driven and in a sharp, blue suit and was now a senior Indonesian diplomat in charge of all trade with ASEAN and it was all due to that exhibition. In order to get passports and exit visas for four, virtually undocumented Torajans, I had made contact with what we jokingly — and unjustly — called the Torajan mafia, a group of powerful Torajans in Jakarta who looked after the interests of their province in the centre of government. I won't go into detail but getting those passports seemed to involve a lot of

meeting men in airforce uniforms and passing them envelopes in bars late at night. When he returned home from London, Johannis used the money we had paid him to got to university and studied… anthropology. It had always been assumed that he would replace his grandfather as a high priest of the old religion. Instead, he wrote his thesis on him. He had used his new contacts with the Torajan mafia to get a government job and worked his way up the ladder through sheer ability and good English. As part of the modernisation package, he had become a Christian so now there was no one to take over his grandfather's learning. Johannis had used his new wealth to build a traditional, carved house back in the village, so that part of the project had worked well. But, a pessimist might say that the greatest impact of my presence was to help kill off one of the ancient religions of Indonesia.

Fig 7. Torajan ricebarn.

Let me finish with a final story, one that is still writing itself. When I joined the British Museum, staff were regarded much more as civil servants than they are now. If, for example, there was an Underground strike, making it impossible to get into work, you were required to go to the nearest government office and offer your services. In my own case, that

was Air Traffic Control who oddly never called on my skills. Part of employment was signing a fearsome document called The Official Secrets Act, which threatened you with prosecution if you revealed any information — no matter how trivial — acquired in the course of your employment. There were to be no stories from the North or from the South. Fortunately, as a rather inefficient curator I somehow lost the form before I could sign and return it. And no one ever noticed! So I am free, here today, to speak of a very great secret!

One day, I returned to my desk to find a brown envelope marked 'Highly Confidential' or possibly even 'Secret'. Inside was a single sheet of paper that began, 'After reading this, you will dispose of it in a secure manner'. I thought my moment had come. I was finally to become the new 007! Then it continued disappointingly along the lines of, 'Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State' — in other words the Prime Minister — 'has decided that, in the event of a nuclear emergency, certain objects of high cultural value shall be placed in bombproof storage for the delectation of the British public after the resolution of the emergency.' What should one make of such a revelation? It is extraordinary to think that someone — perhaps a whole department of people — somewhere in a ministry, is actually seriously worrying about such arcane matters and drawing up prioritised lists and poring over maps. Perhaps it is comforting that the existence of such a scheme surely shows that all other possible minor inconveniences caused by atom bombs raining down on our heads must have been long since resolved. Since then, I have whisperingly asked around my European colleagues and discovered that most European governments have similar measures in place, often planning to rebury archaeological relics in concrete bunkers. What an exhibition it would make if all those works could be gathered together in one place! But to choose just one object for salvation was like deciding which of your children you would save in the event of a fire and what could lift our spirits as we stagger among the smoking ruins? So I finally selected an object that was small, compact, serviceable and just happened to be the first thing you saw on entering the museum every morning, resolving that, if one day it was missing, this would be the moment to step outside and catch a plane to Tierra del Fuego.

But I have to tell you now, that the last time I visited the museum, that object was absent, replaced by a bland card that read simply, 'Temporarily Removed'. Was it being conserved? Cleaned? Photographed? On Loan? Or was it somewhere buried snugly, deep underground, having ironically ceased to be a dead object and become, instead an immortal one? I don't know. Perhaps you are already writing the end of this story

yourselves, in your heads and I leave you to do that. But it does mean that I am quite particularly glad to be with you all here today in peaceful Granada, instead of in the heart of multi-targeted London and it is with very great sincerity that I thank you for inviting me.

References

Barley, N. (2013). *Requiescat: A Cat's Life at the British Museum*. Independently published.
Barley, N. (1983). *The innocent anthropologist*. London: British Museum Publications.