

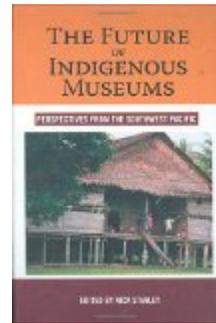
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nick Stanley, ed. *The Future of Indigenous Museums: Perspectives from the Southwest Pacific*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. ix + 268 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-188-2.

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Published on H-AfrArts (January, 2008)



Museums and Cultural Centers in Melanesia and Northern Australia

Drawing together the voices of scholars and practitioners from diverse national, cultural, and professional backgrounds, this volume discusses indigenous museums and cultural centers—the difference between the two is debatable—by offering a wide range of ethnographic case studies set in a rigorous historical and theoretical framework. The book is divided into three parts examining museums in Island Melanesia, Northern Australia, and New Guinea with a fourth part reflecting on the future of indigenous museums. A number of general themes can be drawn out of the discussions of specific situations in particular geographic settings. It is therefore relevant to discuss the chapters according to their most prominent themes and not in order of appearance. Of course, most articles do touch on several themes.

The introductory chapter as well as chapters 3 and 13 treat mainly theoretical issues, addressing such ideas as “indigenous,” “Western” museums and “museological” behavior. Nick Stanley’s introduction sets the theoretical voice of the book. To what extent can the concepts of museological classification and display be used outside Europe and North America? Can one discern any systematic difference between indigenous Western Pacific museums and European museums? Stanley concludes that indigenous museums are fragile institutions functioning in a different way from their Western models and often encountering problems sustaining their momentum.

In the third chapter, Sean Kingston juxtaposes and

examines the techniques that Lak (southern New Ireland) funerary ritual and Western museums use to transform the intersubjective spatial and temporal relationship to the past. Unlike the other authors, Kingston does not discuss an actual museum. Instead, using rich ethnographic data, he suggests methods that can be employed to reveal how indigenous concepts and approaches to heritage preservation are rooted in cultural forms, practice, and knowledge systems that on the surface may not appear to have museological dimensions.

The thirteenth and last chapter is truly a concluding chapter, providing a theoretical perspective based on the themes and issues discussed in this anthology. Christina Kreps contextualizes how critical and comparative museological forms and practices are similar and different in various cultural settings. She also looks at motivations and processes behind the development of Pacific museums and cultural centers, using the case studies presented in the book. She makes clear that the contexts in which Pacific museums and cultural centers exist are multilayered, and shaped by larger historical, economic, political, social, and cultural influences that emanate from local, regional, national, and international sources.

Chapters 1, 5, and 6 are about the Island Melanesia and Torres Strait indigenous peoples’ role in bringing about change in local policies regarding cultural heritage, tourism, and the cash economy. In the first chapter, Lis-sant Bolton relates how female fieldworkers within the Vanuatu Cultural Center have influenced Vanuatu’s cul-

tural development through environmental law, the state structure, and the education system. The women field-worker group has been recognizing and recoding a different model for gender relations, especially relating to Vanuatu women's own perception of what constitutes women's *kastom* (indigenous knowledge and practice), thus exposing the complex gender ideas in contemporary Vanuatu.

Tate LeFevre demonstrates how the people of Lifou, an economically disenfranchised group within New Caledonia, have managed tourism using their local dance group, Troupe du Wetr, and gained control over their identity by broadcasting it to others. This uniquely Kanak way of linking their own traditions with the needs of the modern world affirms that tourism can be used as a tool for cultural revitalization and empowerment. This case study raises questions about the way many scholars approach tourism as something inherently damaging to indigenous cultures.

The sixth chapter, a joint contribution by Anita Herle, Jude Philp, and Leilani Bin Juda, examines the Torres Strait Islands' multifaceted Gab Titui Cultural Center. The authors relate how the cultural center addresses cultural, social, and revitalization issues. They stress that the indigenous population's increasing self-determination and knowledge of national and international museum collections was instrumental in setting up the museum. In so doing, diverse local interest and national and global systems within the center were addressed and reinforced.

A third theme (chapters 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 12) considers how museums, set up by westerners, either fail or succeed in becoming "indigenous museums." Lawrence Foana'ota explains in the second chapter that the Solomon Islands National Museum, set up in 1969, was initially seen as an institution created by outsiders. However, it became part of local dynamics through awareness programs. In addition, early twenty-first-century ethnic tensions had sparked interest in cultural centers and museums among those social groups that were the hardest hit by the disruption. Foana'ota argues that the museum involves the local population in several ways: first, powerful still objects are deposited, and, second, these objects are brought to life in the Cultural Village built on the museum grounds, thus lending credibility to the institution as a custodial entity. Third, the museum ensures an appropriate form of tourism development that engages Solomon Islanders and is not solely aimed at tourists.

With the New Caledonia Tjibaou Cultural Center, Diane Losche examines the challenge Pacific cultural centers and museums face in representing, acknowledging, and memorializing the often violent historical circumstances of their creation. She argues that the spectacular architecture of the Tjibaou Cultural Center, a gift from the French state, might have a negative community impact, because it overwhelms the exhibits and swallows them. Ostensibly standing for modernity and Kanak identity, it becomes a monument instead to the Western idea of the beautiful object, missing the opportunity to effectively build up a dialogue with the indigenous Kanak peoples and their history.

Eric Venbrux discusses, in the seventh chapter, the processes of "museumification" undergone by the Bathurst and Melville islands in northern Australia since sustained contact with Europeans started in 1905. The indigenous population responded actively to all things "traditional": ceremonial scenes appeared as subjects of paintings and carvings in the postwar era; and the local tourist industry and local strategies of salvage ethnography developed.

In chapter 8, through a number of case studies, Sebastian Haraha examines how the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery, initially an independence gift from Australia, is being perceived as a house of the ancestors or a *Haus Tumbuna* with the director as its embodiment. Haraha discusses what he perceives the different functions the museum has and the complex relationship among indigenous people, objects, and the local museum. The museum is, first, an institution that tries to preserve traditional knowledge by having knowledgeable people study the collections. It also preserves objects that are handed over from communities to the museum, objects that may play important parts in land disputes. Finally, there is the problem of how the museum deals with the issue of the secrecy surrounding particular objects.

In chapter 11, with the case study of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, Stanley poses the question of whether museums can become indigenous. He sees the role of the indigenous curator (of the Asmat Museum) as essential in bridging the gap between Western museum culture and local cultural systems. In turn, the curators from the museum act as hosts to Western museum professionals. The Asmat Museum is not a cultural center; yet the yearly carving competitions in which the museum is deeply involved bring the museum and the carvers into direct relationship.

Robert Welsch considers the situation of cultural centers and museums in Papua New Guinea by first discussing the National Museum and Art Gallery, which knew a number of forerunners—Sir William MacGregor’s collection, Sir Hubert Murray’s collection, and the collection made by government anthropologist E. W. Pearson—before being established in 1954. He raises the question of whether or not a museum can be considered an indigenous institution after an indigenization process in which the museum staff becomes fully indigenous. Welsch contrasts this with the situation outside the capital of Port Moresby where the indigenous cultural institutions, such as the J. K. McCarthy Museum at Goroka in the Eastern Highlands, the Gogodala Cultural Center, and specifically the Madang Cultural Center and the family-run Engawel Cultural Center, are distributed unevenly.

A fourth theme in this publication is how Christianity has become interwoven with local customs, politics, and the cash economy, playing a positive role in the revitalization of cultural heritage. Alison Dundon analyzes the Gogodala Cultural Center, built in the mid-1970s and modeled on the local longhouse. She explores why the center disintegrated, then revived in the late twentieth

century. The author demonstrates how the complex interplay of evangelical Christianity, customary ways, and issues of development of this Papua New Guinea area inform and frame the display and sale of cultural artifacts in Gogodala and concludes that the increasingly stable union between Christianity and custom are promising for development in the region.

In the tenth chapter, Christin Kocher Schmid traces the history of the Babek Bema Yoma cultural center (and museum), demonstrating how the setting up of the center was entangled with local and national politics, local church structures, and ways of accessing the cash economy. The author makes clear that the center is more focused on activities than objects, concluding that it has become an accepted vehicle for nation building and economic development.

This book is an important contribution to the literature on museums in different cultural contexts, and recommended for anyone who wants to have a better understanding of the complexities of “indigenous museums.” The examples make it clear that there is no fixed model and that museums and cultural centers are constantly adapting to the needs of their societies.

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Citation: Fanny Wonu Veys. Review of Stanley, Nick, ed., *The Future of Indigenous Museums: Perspectives from the Southwest Pacific*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

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