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## How to become a living museum? Cultural performances and touristic borderzones<sup>1</sup>



In 1905 the first European settler on Melville Island was the buffalo hunter Joe Cooper. Immediately, in the same year, he started organizing tourist camps on the islands. Cooper was quick to pick up the Western interests in presentations, which communicated the evidence of the islanders' authenticity and distinctiveness. Hence, for the islanders this was the beginning of the long museumification process of their local culture.

Almost from the beginning, after the first West contact, the islands were treated as an open-air museum with "a stream of European visitors".<sup>2</sup> "European visitors tended to regard the islanders [of Bathurst and Melville] as a relic of the early childhood of mankind. These Aborigines 'hitherto practically uncontaminated by European influence',<sup>3</sup> provided a unique opportunity to come face-to-face with humanity's contemporary ancestors. Coopers' ... guests witnessed the performance of dances and ceremonies by the islanders, [and] were shown burial sites .... Furthermore, the visitors were given demonstrations of primitive technology, took photographs, and obtained ethnographic artefacts from the islanders in exchange for trade goods."<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, to participate in the world wide "ethnographical market" with constant fascinating, traditional artifacts implied the "production of difference". The outcome was the creation of distinct ethnic groups as source communities for the wanted items. In practice this meant for the islanders, that the process of museumification was extended to themselves, being subjected to the gaze of the visitors who quested to witness and document pristine, authentic Aboriginal culture before it was "too late". "The formation of such a 'destination culture', an intercultural space, however, implied a shift in the context of indigenous cultural practices. In particular, the change in function and meaning of objects, dances and so forth, entailed their museumification."<sup>5</sup>

As the anthropologist Eric Venbrux documented (2008), the islanders cannot be seen as helpless victims in this process of defining otherness. But, from the beginning they were actively involved in the global process of museumification connected with the branding of their culture - as being distinctive from the mainland Abo-

rigines. According to the anthropologists Johannes Fabian, the European interest in ethnic artifacts matched the "islanders 'mercantile ambitions',<sup>6</sup> resulting in a commodified display of culture"<sup>7</sup>. For the islanders, this process included at least the following four steps.

1. Selection and configuration of performances and rituals
2. The tagging of distinctive, unique artifacts
3. The naming of the islanders as TIWI
4. Creating a mythological background

### First step: Selection and configuration of performances and rituals

According to the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli<sup>8</sup> performances and ceremonies are a sort of litmus test of otherness and authenticity. Within the traditional performances of the islanders one could differentiate between public, semi-sacral and sacred performances. Consequently, a decision was made regarding which traditional dances and rituals would be most suitable to be performed any time and in any place without provoking insurmountable conflicts with traditional taboos. Two performances came into consideration: the *corroboree* and the post-funeral rituals known as *pukumani ceremonies*.

The islanders adjusted the choreography of the *corroboree* or so-called "welcome dances" with the timetable of the tour agencies and performed them whenever tourist arrived on the islands - even still today. According to Venbrux this new choreography of the *corroboree* can be taken as a clear example of the islanders' adjustment to this expectation for public performances.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in exchange for tobacco and trade goods, the Islanders were used to posing for photographs, even in the anthropometric style.

Whereas variations of this welcome dance could be shown at any time and in any place, religious ceremonies usually are connected with special rules and regulations. However, postfuneral rituals of the islanders could be performed after two months up to two years after a death. Because these *pukumani* ceremonies

were originally / traditionally a public one, the ritual was selected for the tourist shows.

Besides singing and dancing, this post-mortal ceremony, included also the use of different ethnic “mobile” artifacts like decorated armbands and painted bark baskets which usually were left on top of the painted funeral poles. Traditionally, after the last songs, the grave was deserted and the burial poles – together with the other items – allowed to decay. In this way it would be given back to nature, respectively to the spiritual world. But, after the make-believe ritual performances, these second-hand desirable “authentic” objects (or pictures) could be transacted to the visiting Europeans, who collected such items – “used in ritual”.<sup>10</sup>

According to Venbrux<sup>11</sup>, the flexible timing of the visitor-attending post-mortal rituals together with an offer for sought-after photo opportunities, can also be seen as an indigenous strategy of generating an instant collection of artifacts – in exchange for their own profit.

## Second step: the tagging of distinctive, unique artifacts

The tangible heritage of items, which were adequate for collectors and travelers, had to be of low weight, small enough for suitcases or handbags and in the best case connected with an exotic story. In case of the islanders’ material culture, the criteria of otherness became generally fulfilled in the ordered ornamental decoration which they started to use in general, not only for the funeral posts but also for the bark containers, bark paintings and the barbed spears. Together with the already mentioned armbands and various body ornaments, they had the potential for commoditisation<sup>12</sup> and became the preferred collected items.

## Third step: the naming of the islanders as Tiwi

To be definitely distinctive from the rest of Aboriginal mainland societies, it became necessary to have an own tribal name for the islanders of Bathurst and Melville.

The anthropologist Charles William Merton Hart suggested the notion Tiwi (meaning “human beings”)<sup>13</sup> as the name for the islanders as an own “different” ethnic tribe. Gradually, the islanders themselves accepted the designation Tiwi as an expression of their communal identity, the dances, the ceremonies, the distinctive artifacts, and their painting style. All together they became to be seen as cultural icons of Tiwi-ness – also by the islanders themselves.

## Forth step: creating a mythological background

In the 1950s Charles P Mountford from Adelaide, a trained electrical mechanic who, as a photographer and a self-trained anthropologist, was intensely interested

in Aboriginal societies, instigated mythological themes as background stories for the artwork of the Tiwi – although he had been unable to detect such themes in either islander design or ceremony.<sup>14</sup> This new emphasis on myths about creation time respectively dream time demonstrated in European perception that the islanders were “genuine” Aborigines.

## How are times changing?

After the assimilation politics of the Australian Government until the 1970s, they changed in 1977 toward self-determination or self-management. Hence, a Tiwi Land council was formed by delegates of the islands traditional owners. Being freed from official steady observation, the Aboriginal societies in Northern Australia underwent a cultural renaissance. Now, rituals could happen in daylight – no missionaries intervened. From the 1980s onwards, the islanders were involved in developing a local tourist industry. “Over the years [the travel agency<sup>15</sup>] Tiwi Tours has contributed greatly to the museumification of the Islander life-world. It has been run mostly by European managers or operators in joint venture. It focuses on cultural and eco-tourism.<sup>16</sup> The idea of an open-air museum is strongly suggested by the promotional pamphlet.”<sup>17</sup> The style of the visitations of the camps hasn’t markedly changed. It includes the demonstration of art production, dances, and ceremonies, after a swim in the scenic waterhole. Some islanders are still specialized in guiding the Europeans around. In this way the source community has continued to exist as a living museum.<sup>18</sup>

## Are living museums part of a global theatre?<sup>19</sup>

For my closing analysis, I want to introduce the noun: touristic borderzone. According to the anthropologist Eduard Bruner (1996) those borderzones are characterized by a recurring wave of temporary travelers of an ever-changing moving population. The native population is more or less permanent; these residents have to break out of their normal routines to meet the needs of the tourists: to perform for them, to sell souvenirs, or to display themselves and their cultures for the tourists gaze and for sale. The touristic borderzone is like an empty space “waiting for performance time, for the audience of tourists and for the native performers. The natives, too, then, move in and out of the touristic borderzone. But the perceptions of the two groups are not the same, because what for the tourists is a zone of leisure and exoticization, is for the natives a site of work and cash income.”<sup>20</sup>

What is advertised as unspoiled and undiscovered in the touristic borderzone has been carefully manufactured and sold. E. g. the Balinese in Indonesia and other participants in performances of living traditions recognize worldwide the touristic thirst for the exotic and the unpolluted. They present themselves and their cultures





Top: Barong in Bali.

Below: Damara Living Museum in Namibia, 2012 © Rein

conform to the tourist image.<sup>21</sup> If they stop to collaborate and step out of their assigned roles in exotica, they may lose their major source of income. They are very much aware of playing a “traditional role” for the strangers, usually organized by globally operating tour agencies.<sup>22</sup>

The meetings between travelers and residents are structurally identical: they are programmed and publicized in advance; they are temporally and spatially framed; furthermore, they are communal and with a display.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas in former times for the “Völkerschauen” the people were brought to Europe or the USA to perform their cultures, nowadays the tourists are traveling worldwide to visit “cultural villages”, “living museums”, or “culture centers” where they are confronted with similar programs of performances, representing imagined stages of pre-

contact lifestyles or “primitive” arts in a framed way.

However, the question of vital importance remains: do we see everywhere the same or can we still differentiate the performances of cultures? How do we experience diversity, indigenous agency and creativity? Furthermore, can the global concept of “living museums” and “living traditions” be compared with the McDonaldization?

According to the anthropologist Jan Nederveen Peterse, within the different approaches to explain globalization: “there is a widespread understanding that growing global interconnectedness leads toward increasing cultural standardization and uniformization, as in the global sweep of consumerism. A shorthand version of this momentum is McDonaldization.”<sup>24</sup> The McDonaldization is “the process whereby the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world ... The process through which this takes place is rationalization in Weber’s sense, that is through formal rationality laid down in rules and regulations. McDonald’s formula is successful because it is efficient (rapid service), calculable (fast and inexpensive), predictable (no surprises), and controls labor and customers.”<sup>25</sup>

However, while auditing the global efficiency the projected unifying concept, researchers discovered many varieties, each case adapted to local conditions and lifestyles. “This matches the argument in business studies that corporations, also when they seek to represent ‘world products,’ only succeed if and to the extent that they adapt themselves to local cultures and markets. They should become insiders; this is the principle of ‘insiderization’ .... For which the term glocalization or ‘looking in both directions’ was coined.”<sup>26</sup>

Besides their standardization in the organization and programs of display the touristic borderzones, as a global phenomenon, have their specific local diversities also. They have a hybrid dimension, where creative mixing is wanted. “The tourists are the ones who desire the uncontaminated pre-colonial past, the so-called pure culture, so versions of that hypothetical past are invented and presented for tourist consumption. ... [most of the] Tourists do not travel to experience the new postcolonial subject, the emerging nation in process of economic development; they yearn for their image of a precolonial past — a fantasyland of Western imaginery.”<sup>27</sup> And everybody plays their role in this glocal theatre — tourists as well as residents.

## Endnotes

- 1 Revised form of my paper presented at the ICME conference in Windhoek, Namibia, 12 September 2012 under the title: “The performance of culture and tradition: Are living museums part of a global theater?” A longer version of the paper will be published on the website of ICME: <http://icme.icom.museum/>. Many thanks to Dr. Anne

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Venbrux 2008:120

Frazer 1912:73

Venbrux 2008:121

Venbrux 2008:121

Fabian 2001:129

Venbrux 2008:121

1993:74; quoted in Venbrux 2008:121

Venbrux 2008:122

Venbrux 2008:122. Venbrux 2001:67

Venbrux 2008:122

Venbrux 2001:67

Hart 1930, quoted in Venbrux 2008:124

Mountford 1958:110, 160; quoted in Venbrux 2008:125

Addition by the author

Venbrux 2000a

Venbrux 2008:127.

Venbrux 2008:127f

"International tourism is an exchange system of vast proportions, one characterized by a transfer of images, signs, symbols, power, money, goods, people, and services". Bruner 1996:157

Bruner 1996:157f; See also Neunteufel 2011:29

Bruner 1996:157f

Nederveen Peterse 2009:44

Milton Singer 1972. Fuess & Hill 2000:111; quoted in Raposo 2008:2

Nederveen Pieterse 2009:44

George Ritzer 1993:19 quoted in Nederveen Peterse 2009:15

Nederveen Peterse 2009:52

Bruner 1996:158f

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