National Museums and their Societal Roles: A Case Study of Finland and Japan

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Abstract

In this article I focus on interviews carried out in 2020 and 2021 with professionals from Finnish and Japanese national museums. In these interviews I asked what museums mean to them, and what they think about the role of national museums today. The elements discussed in this article are varied, covering topics including current diversity and inclusion movements, inconvenient national history, national institutions, challenging ideas of "nation" and "national", and indigenous perspectives on museums and decoloniality. Acknowledging that each topic could be treated as an article in its own right, the range of these issues demonstrates how the study of museums and heritage is complex, requiring a multiperspectival and multifaceted approach. In this case I examine Finland and Japan, and show that these nations share the same goals, with the exception that Finnish museums show more flexibility than Japanese museums, demonstrating how national museums can serve as a place for communities and broader conversations both within the museum and beyond. As national museums take on an enormous role within contemporary societies, the people who work there are presented with an extraordinary task.

Keywords: national museums; national museum professionals; Finnish national museums; Japanese national museums; roles of the national museums

Introduction

> A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.[1]

Based on an interview with a museum professional at the National Museum of Finland (NMF), conducted in 2023 by museum education researcher Momoko Yamamoto, ICOM's 2022 definition of the museum was nothing new to the NMF. The themes of inclusion, diversity, and sustainability had been the norm at the museum for more than a decade (Yamamoto 2023: 64). Indeed, the NMF has worked on inclusion, diversity, and sustainability with or without ICOM's new museum definition. This was evident in the NMF's repatriation of the Pueblo tribe's ancestral remains in the United States in 2020,[2] as well as in the museum's repatriation of Sámi insignias to the Sámi Museum (Siida) in Finland in 2021. This is in addition to the solidarity of flying the LGBTQ flag during for Pride Month in 2020,[3] as well as opening a new permanent exhibition, *Toista maata* [Otherland] in 2021, which challenged the idea of what it is to be Finnish.[4] The situation of national museums in Japan is different. There is governmental and societal pressure to avoid exhibition content about the nation's diversity and multiculturalism, such as exhibitions on resident foreigners and LGBTQ+ people.

Finland and Japan's national museum professionals have aspirations for their institutions

to be places for communities and conversations, including "inconvenient" national history (e.g. the imperial and colonial past). Although the influence of *The New Museology* (Vergo 1989) and postcolonial outlooks has led to a re-examination of the role and practice of museums, the institutions themselves have long been criticized for ongoing coloniality. As ICOM's new definition shows, museums continue to face pressure to democratize their narratives, acknowledge inconvenient histories, and repatriate cultural heritage materials.

Many national museums have been shifting their focus to diversity, and to narratives that fit contemporary societal narratives, whilst nationalism, anti-multiculturalism, and anti-immigration sentiments have risen, including in Finland and Japan. In this article I discuss interviews conducted with national museum professionals in Finland and Japan between 2020 and 2021, focusing upon what museums are to them, and how they see the role of national museums today. I discuss topics brought up by the interviewees, including national museums and nation-building, efforts to achieve diversity and inclusivity, as well as indigenous perspectives. However, the article also demonstrates how studying museums and heritage is a multiperspectival, multidisciplinary, and multifaceted task in which all those elements are intricately intertwined.[5]

Positionality

My views on modern museums reflect Tony Bennett's (2018: 2) observation that institutions are often the product of 'racist and colonial histories', formed between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Western Europe, in order to instil the nation-state ideology (Bennett 1995). They have staged the feeling of belonging to an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006), often led by a hegemonic master narrative of national history. National museums represent the modern state's identity, but their representations of the past and their various collecting practices, such as the "nationalization" of materials from the past, are politically situated (Poulot 2012: 4-6). To control a museum is 'precisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths', possessing the 'power to define and rank people, to declare some as having a greater share than others in the community's common heritage – in its very identity' (Duncan 1991: 101-2). In this sense, museums 'spontaneously reproduce exclusionary relationships', unless museum professionals seek to change this situation (Coffee 2008: 271).

Benedict Anderson (2006: 3) has articulated the power and the ambiguity of "nation" as such: 'nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time', but nation, nationality, nationalism are 'notoriously difficult to define, let alone analyse'; however, they have had 'immense influence' on the modern world. With national museums' increasing responsibility for social and cultural diversity, and the need to deal with their inconvenient past, as well as rising nationalism, I question what professionals who work in such institutions think about the role of national museums in societies today.

In this respect, I follow Peggy Levitt's approach to understanding how curators, educators, and museum directors think about the role of museums 'rather than how museums are organized and run' (2015: 2). In relation to Finland and Japan specifically, this article can be linked to Lily Díaz's work in 2008, in which she interviewed Finns who work in cultural sectors to discuss Finnish identity and multiculturalism in Finland. I also share a similar focus with Yamamoto (2020), who interviewed educational curators in Finnish museums, and the museum professionals' approach to multicultural coexistence. Furthermore, Eika Tai's (2005) research on the exhibition *Multiethnic Japan: Life and History of Resident Foreigners* at the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) is of relevance to my study, shedding light on the project team's struggles to tackle sensitive topics that are typically avoided in Japan. My article can be seen as building upon these studies.

The professionals interviewed for this article come from diverse backgrounds, including different national and regional origins. They also possess different native languages and ethnic identities, and work within different research fields. Based upon a close-reading analysis, I pay particular attention to the ways in which the interviewees' answers may expose their "complex cultural embeddedness",[6] as well as the way 'social relationships, social groups, or entire communities' may have influenced answers (Denzin 1970: 99).

My own personal and professional identity inevitably impacted my role as an interviewer. Born and raised in Japan, I lived in Oklahoma City in the United States for more than 17 years as an "outsider". I am a curator with nine years of experience, six of them within an academic institution. I have worked as an educator for 12 years in the US, teaching a range of ages, from kindergarteners to graduate school students. In combination with having lived in Finland for more than two years between 2020 and 2021, the 20 plus years spent in Western nations has undoubtedly shaped my sensitivity to living as an "other". This has without a doubt also forced me to reflect upon my own ways of thinking, and the way I behave towards other people and cultures. While I may criticize others and their power systems, I am not entirely innocent either.

Following Donna Haraway's critical reflections in her article 'Situated Knowledges' (1988), and Charlotte Aull Davies's ideas about "reflexive ethnography" (1999), I further add to the significance of different "ways of knowing" (Atalay 2008), as well as the pursuit of decolonizing the mind raised by Aimé Césaire in 1955. I see museum and research practices as processes through which to continuously learn from various ways of thinking and life experiences. The aim of this article is not to criticize or tell the national museums "what they should do" but instead to continue conversations relating to one of many perspectives when thinking of/about museums and heritage in Finland and Japan today.

Methods

The data used for this article consists of interviews with 13 national museum professionals, as well as three researchers from fields related to museums, specific to the context of Finnish and Japanese societies and national museums. All the interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the Finnish interviews were conducted in person, but the rest of the sessions were carried out online. I provided a summary of my research plan and most of the interview questions to all of the interviewees one week prior to the scheduled interview.

The interview sessions deliberately proceeded in the form of a conversation, under the assumption that knowledge is "situated and contextual". Thus, my task was to ensure that the 'relevant contexts are brought into focus', allowing "situated knowledge" to be produced (Mason 2002: 62). Although the interviewees knew the questions and had time to prepare their answers beforehand, I still assumed that a loose interview structure would provide "social situations" in which the participants' answers could be read as 'contextual, situational and interactional' (Mason 2002: 63-4).

In Finland, the data was drawn from five national museums: the National Museum of Finland (NMF), the Finnish National Gallery (FNG) – which consists of three art museums: Sinebrychoff, Ateneum and Kiasma – the Finnish Museum of Natural History (LUOMUS), and one nationally responsible museum (which takes care of a nationally significant collections), the Sámi Museum and Nature Centre (Siida). I included Siida to account for ongoing negotiations regarding Sámi identity in relation to broader Finnish social and cultural identity. In total, nine museum professionals and two researchers were interviewed. The Finnish participants graciously agreed to be interviewed in English, whereas the Japanese interviews were conducted in my native language, which I translated into English. Interview invitations were sent to 11 Japanese national museums, one prefectural museum, and two researchers. However, I ended up interviewing only four national museum professionals – from the National Ainu Museum and Park (Upopoy), Nara National Museum, Kyoto National Museum, and Kyushu National Museum – as well as one researcher. Finally, to preserve anonymity, the museums that interviewees work for – as well as their position within the museum – have not been revealed; instead they have been given pseudonyms. The educational backgrounds of participants include the fields of anthropology, archaeology, palaeontology, geology, biology, ethnology, indigenous studies, art history, education, studio art, and law. Their positions within museums vary between roles such as director, curator, educator, visitor engagement officer, and researcher. My priority was preventing the identification of individuals in such close-knit museum communities. I followed necessary due diligence to protect the participants' identities, while providing as much information as possible for readers. Before discussing the article's main topics, I briefly introduce the situation of museums in Finland and Japan.

Museums in Finland and Japan: A brief presentation

Museums are popular leisure-time destinations in Finland and Japan. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 300 million people visited museums in Japan in 2017.[7] Finnish museums have boasted record-breaking numbers of visitors every year since 2015, with numbers reaching 7.6 million visitors in 2019.[8] This is thanks to the Museum Card (*Museokortti*), which gives unlimited access to more than 300 museums in Finland for an affordable annual fee.

As of 2023 Finland has approximately 1,000 local museums and 326 professionally managed museums.[9] The museum sector's general development at the national level is the responsibility of the Finnish Heritage Agency (FHA), under jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Culture. FHA is responsible for the development of the museum sector in Finland, including policy and legislation.[10] The agency identifies the National Museum of Finland (NMF), the Finnish National Gallery (FNG), and the Finnish Museum of Natural History (LUOMUS) as national museums. The FNG is an umbrella organisation consisting of three art museums: Sinebrychoff, Ateneum, and Kiasma. Sinebrychoff houses the artworks of European traditions from the fourteenth century to the 1850s; Ateneum emphasizes Finnish art from the eighteenth to the twentieth century and it also houses other European artworks; and Kiasma showcases contemporary art, including artworks from the Baltic and Nordic countries, as well as from Russia. The NMF is a national "cultural history museum" that houses archaeological and cultural heritage materials. Collections include folk culture, Finno-Ugric culture, and other areas such as Ancient Near East, Alaskan, and Asian materials. The museum also documents 'contemporary culture in Finland', and operates in ten locations, including Häme and Olavinlinna Castles.[11] In addition to the national museums, Finland has 32 regional museums, and 17 nationally responsible museums.[12] According to the FHA, a nationally responsible museum should 'represent a nationally significant industry, be necessary from the point of view of the industry, take care of a nationally significant collection and perform the duties assigned to a responsible museum by law'.[13] Siida is one of these 17 nationally responsible museums.

Similar to the NMF in Finland, Tokyo National Museum (TNM), the first Western-style cultural history museum in Japan, was established in the late nineteenth century. The museum currently operates from three buildings: the Japanese Gallery (the main site), Toyokan as the site for the Asian Gallery, and Heiseikan, which is responsible for Japanese archaeology and special exhibitions. The Asian Gallery includes cultural objects from "West Asia" (Iraq, Syria, and Greece for example) and ancient Egypt – regions that 'gave rise to some of humanity's earliest civilizations'.[14]

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and the Agency for Cultural Affairs, as of 2021 there exist 5,771 museums in Japan.[15] Of these, 228 national museums/centres were run by multiple national agencies or other governmental institutions, rather than being governed by a single ministry (Kurihara 2021: 34). With the exception of Upopoy, which the Foundation for Ainu Culture manages, the other three museums interviewed for this article are under the jurisdiction of the Independent Administrative Institution (IAI). The IAI oversees four national museums,[16] six national art museums,[17] and one national science museum.[18] Curiously, these national museums were not considered museums; they were instead understood as facilities equivalent to a museum, according to the Museum Act (Japanese Association of Museums 2008: 2; Science Council of Japan 2017: ii).

Japan's Museum Act, which was first published in 1951, was partly revised in 2008, and then again in 2022. With the new revision of the Museum Act, enforced most recently in April 2023, those national museums mentioned above have been re-labelled as examples of a "designated facility", which is still under the categorization of the facilities equivalent to a museum.[19] The Museum Act in Finland was first enacted in 1989 (Vilkuna 2018: 97), and was revised in 2019. It emphasizes the importance of promoting a 'sense of community, continuity and cultural diversity' as well as 'education, wellbeing, equality and democracy' (Ministry of Education and Culture 2019: 1). Finland and Japan consider museums to be life-long learning institutions that benefit surrounding communities (Salminen et al. 2012: 249; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2007: 4).

Museums, material reality, and social space for dialogues

The question "what are museums?" was intended to be about museums in a general sense rather national museums specifically (I also asked interviewees about this at a later stage). However, since most interviewees worked in national museums, discussions about general understandings of the objectives of both museum and national museum often became intertwined. Moreover, the question itself was broad and abstract. Not surprisingly, interviewees often perceived it as a "big question". Interviewees in Finland had understood the basic role of museums as being to collect, preserve, study and exhibit. Aada noted that one of the museum's official roles is to organize, archive, and preserve those physical remains of the past that represent the nation's history. Museums function as a place in which to both understand historical continuity within a particular geographical location and place, and to better understand 'what it means to be human'.[20] Some interviewees used the term "keeper" of memories and heritage, as well as "custodian" of collections.[21] Some Finnish interviewees further added that collections are the main reason for a museum's existence.[22] As Leo elaborated: 'we preserve them because the collections tell us about our past'. However, museums must offer something more, such as exhibitions, to engage with visitors and facilitate discussions about 'why we have these collections'.[23]

The Japanese interviewees similarly emphasized the museum's role as an archivist and preserver of cultural heritage, describing it as the 'most critical element and the institutional contribution to society'.[24] Two interviewees noted that museums satisfy 'intellectual curiosity' by offering new knowledge outside of school.[25]

Perceptions of museums as places for collecting, preserving, studying, and exhibiting heritage materials appear to be common grounds for Finland and Japan, and they are in alignment with ICOM's definition of the museum. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, museums are 'agents of heritage' (2004: 73). The relationship between an institutions' existence and the material reality they preserve makes the museum one of the most potent heritage and educational institutions. Stuart Hall (1997: 3) noted the importance of cultural practices in which people give materials meanings. Laurajane Smith (2006: 29) has stated that the 'past is not abstract' and 'cannot simply be reduced to archaeological data or historical texts', but instead has 'material reality as heritage', and this materiality is 'someone's heritage', shaping their 'identity and belonging'. Museum use is a cultural practice (Coffee 2008: 262). Visitors are often motivated by satisfying their 'identity-related needs', and this often makes the relationship between heritage material and the person emotional (Falk 2006: 119-21). Sharon Macdonald (2003: 3, 11) has noted that museums and exhibitions are 'material performatives'; their 'physical presence' performs 'national and civic identity and pride'. The performed meanings then become the 'material basis of heritage' (Smith 2006: 3, 48), such that tangible and intangible heritage cannot be separated (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 75; Smith 2006: 3). Heritage-making is a repeated practice of social and cultural meaning-making for those in the present (Smith 2006: 1-3), often (re)constructing the identity of "we". As a result, museums become an 'identity-enactment system', which is 'situated within the larger sociocultural context of both the individual and tourism venue' (Bond and Falk 2013: 439).

According to the interviewees, this meaning-making process has become more democratic in Finnish museums. The "power" of the role of sole interpreter of cultural heritage has admittedly shifted,[26] although some interviewees are still confident in their expertise and authority as museum professionals who preserve and manage material culture.[27] Väinö suggested that there are many frameworks through which a museum might operate, depending on the type of collections and programmes it offers: for example, providing a shared learning space about the past and present for various communities, as well as a space for exprimentation.[28] This leads to the idea of museums as a social space and a forum, echoing the emphasis of Duncan F. Cameron (1971) and Stephen Weil (2002) on making institutions matter to the public. Exploring this view, most Finnish interviewees acknowledged museums as mediating spaces between collections and communities. The idea of the museum as a forum and social space for dialogues differs in a crucial way from prior perceptions of museums as "towers of authority" that only produce a one-way discourse.[29] Another interviewee, Jussi, observed that museums have turned their attention to the public in recent years, consulting

them as a source of knowledge.[30] This reflects the idea of a community-based museum (Karp et al. 1992; Wilson 1999), drawing attention to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's (2000: 31) discussion of the integration of 'collections and audiences', which represents a new approach to museum practice. Leo mentioned that people tend to think that they will 'find the truth when they come to museums', but also observed that museums 'do not have the truth'. As he puts it, 'we [museums] actually have lots of questions [but] we don't really have the right answers'. For Leo the most important task is to pose questions to the audience without providing any answers; he insisted that it is up to audiences to 'find out for themselves'.[31] Jussi echoed this pedagogical approach, adding that museums are not so much about the past as about meaning-making in the present, by and for audiences.[32]

Kyoko noted that museums in Japan represent their locality and are also the 'face of the nation', while Motohiko stated that they should be places in which to 'engage social issues, although Japanese museums rarely tackle such topics'.[33] It was not only Motohiko but indeed most of the interviewees in Japan who discussed the difficulty of creating exhibitions that touch upon current social issues. Diversity and the view of a multiethnic Japan is one of those sensitive topics, as Eika Tai (2005) wrote about an exhibition in 2004 at Minpaku, which promoted "multiethnic co-living". Most of the Minpaku faculty distanced themselves from the project because it was highly political and 'dangerous to get involved in' (Tai 2005: 44-57). Motohiko, and most of the interviewees in Japan, noted that exhibition topics such as gender, ethnic, racial, and LGBTQ+ themes are still difficult to plan because of the pressure from "above".[34] It's 'too early' and 'not really possible to talk about those topics yet in Japan'.[35]

Four of the five Japanese interviewees mentioned that museums are 'still seen as prestigious institutions by the general public', underlining the general public's view of museums as socially and economically elite institutions. They continue to be understood as "towers of authority", thus differing from Finland in this way. The high entrance fees for national museums may further discourage people from visiting.[36] Museums are not well-integrated into people's everyday lives compared to Finland's museums.[37] Although the entrance fees decision was beyond museum workers' authority, all the interviewees in Japan expressed a desire to make museums a 'forum and social space for dialogues'.[38]

Interestingly, the major national museums in Japan (Tokyo, Nara, Kyoto and Kyushu) are not centralized in one city as in Finland. All Finnish national museums (not including nationally responsible museums) are located in the area of the capital. Sofia commented that this offers a critical advantage in portraying and influencing Finnish culture and society. Naturally, Helsinki dominates the arts scene and represents the nation, acting as a crossroads between Finland and the world.[39] It is convenient to visit all the major national museums in one trip to Helsinki, using a single card. This means that one city has great power to narrate its idea of the nation. In contrast, visiting the Japanese national museums in Tokyo, Nara, Kyoto, and Kyushu takes multiple trips as they are not centred in one city such as Tokyo. This takes away the power of one city to narrate its idea of the entirety of Japan.

One of the museum employees focused on the theme of a multiethnic and multicultural Japan from an indigenous perspective, one of the crucial elements of the thinking museum today. 'It must be [this way], and I want the museum to be the first institution to initiate social changes', Yukiko explained, adding that museums, as institutions, should act as a mediator between the public and various social situations. Her museum has been educating people about the need to view Japan as an ethnically complex and diverse society.[40] Aside from one interviewee expressing the view that Japan is a monoethnic nation, all the others agreed with the idea that Japan is in fact a multiethnic and multicultural nation. Nonetheless, Yukiko observes, 'it is more difficult to talk to Japanese visitors about a multiethnic and multicultural Japan than to foreign tourists. We receive some complaints and heinous messages from Japanese visitors as well…many people [with Indigenous heritage] are still afraid to talk about their heritage openly'. She further noted that it is a 'constant negotiation' as to how the museum represents diversity and Japan's difficult history; it is 'not as simple as just laying everything out for visitors to see'.[41]

Finland faces a similar history with its indigenous community, although the present situation seems to be significantly better compared to Japan. Still, some interviewees outside of national museums in Finland engaged in discussion about the museums' ongoing coloniality.

Kai noted that the 'brilliance' of museums is that they are 'believed to be good' and that they are 'political, working for some goals that are not always visible'.[42] This reflects the views of Neil G. W. Curtis (2006) and Madina Tlostanova (2017), who connected Theodore Brameld's (1950) notion of essentialism, with the essentialists (i.e. those in power) establishing modern knowledge-producing mechanisms (e.g. universities, museums) that purportedly hold a monopoly on the truth, claiming to be universal and "good". Another interviewed researcher added to this an observation about the national museums' reluctance to engage with the nation's difficult past, such as the forced assimilation of Sámi people, or cooperating with Nazi Germany (co-belligerents against the Soviet Union) during the Second World War.[43] Museums are institutions that need to respond to contemporary social needs, observed Tuuli, adding that 'intentions are, I think, always good, but practices reflect something different', and courage is needed when exhibiting and discussing the 'roots of problems', since 'giving air' to the problems makes them 'less [of a] burden'.[44]

Japan's dark history, especially the nation's imperial and colonial expansion during the twentieth century, was a subject that was absent in the interviews. This also extended to the issue of the repatriation of cultural insignia brought about during this era. However, some perspectives are slowly changing. In January 2023 the TNM posted on its website a request for public opinions on the new management policy for Ainu human remains, reflecting that the Act on Promoting Measures to Realize a Society in Which the Pride of the Ainu People is Respected, part of the new Ainu Law passed in 2019.[45] Motohiko also mentioned that his work environment has become more open, which may not be the case with many other Japanese museums. I replied: 'well, that is a very good sign...since it is extremely hard for the changes to be accepted in Japan'. Motohiko laughed and said: 'well, we just force our way through; otherwise nothing will change. National museums have to take the lead in tackling difficult social and cultural issues, and we have started to provide elements that were left out before'.[46]

In Finland such social and cultural issues are more freely discussed than in Japan's museums. Museums take on many roles to be relevant in society, reacting to issues like social injustice and climate change.[47] Interviewees mentioned that the perspectives of different social and cultural groups, such as Swedish-speaking Finns, Sámi, Roma, refugees, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities, provide a way for museums to strengthen their engagement with the public. Leo noted that 'we have been quite multicultural, always'. The national museums have become more open to representing a diverse range of people who have been living in the present-day Finnish territory for a long time.[48] Väinö questioned the Eurocentric construction of the Finnish state and its identity, now bringing in various 'non-European perspectives'.[49]

Museums are places to collect, preserve, research, and display cultural heritage, and they are also places for different communities, dialogues, and discussions, sometimes reconciling difficult histories. The following section further discusses those elements, specifically from the perspectives of museums with the "national" titles.

National museums and their societal roles

'It's a very epic question', Sofia in Finland responded smilingly to my question about the roles of national museums today. '[My museum] is an agent of a larger conversation that is not permitted only to [the] arts…but [also the] "art of the social body"', Sofia explained, which also makes the national museum a public museum. The institution provides a space for open conversation in support of social causes, and it has an international mission to interact with neighbouring countries and beyond. Therefore, national museums assume many roles and have a 'bigger agenda' than non-national institutions.[50] Most interviewees in Finland insisted that the national museums' roles must be diverse. Leo also smiled at the question and said jokingly, 'go to [the] street and ask people what is this [the national museum], and they have different opinions'. He recommended taking all such responses as an answer to the question. The term o*sallisuus* is often used.[51] According to Leo, it expresses how 'you belong to something. You are part of something. That is what we want to emphasize'.[52] Aada noted that 'it is a national museum, so we talk about the history of the state and its geographical location in northern Europe'. Echoing Leo, she added that museums had been reaching out to various communities, such as Roma and Sámi. Therefore, the national museum has become a place of various

communities and their stories, even engaging with Native American, Australian, Alaskan, and Siberian collections, opening discussions that were avoided before.[53] Jussi and Noora expressed that the national museums are places for togetherness with various cultures and their mutual influences.[54] National museums in Finland at present are more about the diversity of the nation: 'many people live here, and their cultural heritage can be anything. Officially, the national museums represent the state's history, not necessarily people's everyday lives. But what is the state anyway?', Leo asked.[55]

The ambiguity of the nation-state has already been pointed out in this article, but several participants raised the point that Finland is an especially a young country: 'it's a new state, but an old place to live'.[56] The national museums offer a romanticized version of the past that shapes people's identity, such as the Golden Age of Finnish Art. 'We don't have a great history behind us', said Aino, we 'constructed and invented' a 'great poetic narrative history'. The *Kalevala* was 'like a proof…even though those poems, where [they were] collected from, was the region that belongs now to Russia, Eastern Karelia'. The Finnish national Romantic movement and its proponents constructed an idea of Finland and what it means to be Finnish.[57] One interviewee elaborated that there is an idea that Finland has somehow always existed throughout history, situated between Sweden and Russia. Finland as a nation is a modern creation, but some have argued that Finland always existed.[58]

Jason Lavery notes that the 'creation of a national identity relies, in part, on establishing a strong sense of tradition: the longer a nation can prove its existence, the more securely people seem to uphold their national identity'. However, unlike neighbouring Sweden and Russia, Finland 'cannot build a national identity based on hundreds of years of visibility as an independent polity on the map of Europe' (Lavery 2006: 17). Nation-building processes in Finland and Japan during the nineteenth century relied on the Western model of creating master narratives. Both nations looked back to a perceived mythical past to construct an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006), which served to define a contemporary "we". In Finland, the *Kalevala* (1835), edited by Elias Lönnrot, served just this purpose, whereas in Japan the *Kojiki* (712), edited by Yasumaro Ōno, and the *Nihon Shoki* (720), achieved the same ends. The nation-building process (even in Japan) also incorporated European-centric, scientific racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Jackson and Weidman 2005/2006; Baker 2010), solidifying a sense of "us" and "them", as evident in the forced assimilations of the Sámi in Finland (Lehtola 2015), and the Ainu in Japan (Hanazaki 2001).

Nineteenth-century national history museums were 'powerful instruments of national politics' (Berger 2015: 28), reconstructing the "national" past and its imagined continuity, whilst simultaneously visualizing a model of human hierarchy and the notion of human progress as measured by Western industrialization and the idea of modernity (Bennett 1995). National museums legitimized nations and became an 'international standard of nation-claiming and nation-branding' (Aronsson and Elgenius 2015: 1). Japan is no exception, since both ideas of "nation-building" and "national museum" were imported from the West to legitimize Japan's imperial and colonial expansion.

Despite the ambiguity of "nation-ness", the notion of nation still casts a spell that is difficult to escape given that modern historical perspectives are largely based on the idea of a nation and its national existence (in other words, the product of historical and cultural continuity and their linear historical developments). Fred Dervin (2018: v) has noted that the resulting instability of nation-state identities in postmodernity is pushing people to identify their "roots" and seek out 'solid identities to protect ourselves against this fast-moving world and the loss of buffer zones between "us" and "them"'. Consequently, anti-multicultural and anti-migration sentiments have grown in Finland. Miika Tervonen (2014: 137-8) has observed that the idea of the Finnish people united as a monocultural (and increasingly monoracial) group has become a self-evident truth for many, a hegemonic discourse, a 'national self-understanding myth'. The impact of this myth has been visible in both the humanities and social sciences as well as in political decision-making since the nineteenth century. Pasi Saukkonen (2018: 69) has noted that Finnish identity during the 1980s and 1990s was 'often defined and described in terms of ethnic and cultural homogeneity and as a unique cultural community'. The 1990s saw the rise of political populism and neo-nationalism in Europe, which targeted immigration, criticized the European Union for promoting internationalization,

and emphasized 'law and order and the idea that all states should be monocultural or at least led by the traditional majority community' (Saukkonen 2018: 70). Although the Finnish political atmosphere was still moderate in the 1990s and 2000s, this came to an 'abrupt end' in the 2011 Parliamentary election, in which a nationalist party gained 19% of the vote (Saukkonen 2018: 70). Finally, the election of April 2023 indicated the success of the political right parties, defeating the political left as had been expected.[59]

As for Japan, until the 1980s government officials widely acknowledged the multiethnic origins of the nation. The idea of a "monoethnic" nation started to dominate discussions in the late 1980s (Okamoto 2014: 34-48). Japan experienced two phenomena in the 1980s: on the one hand the rise of internationalization, and on the other hand the 'clarification of Japanese identity' (McCormack 2001: 2). At the opening of the Kyushu National Museum in 2005, the minister of internal affairs and communications made the following statement: '[Japan is] one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture, and one ethnicity. There is no other nation like this' (Okamoto 2014: 42). Many perceive Japan as a 'monocultural society' (McCormack 2001: 1). Masataka Okamoto (2014) has discussed these myths of monoculture and monoethnicity in terms of language, highlighting the fact that the contemporary Japanese language is a product of the early twentieth century. Various languages (not dialects) were spoken prior to this (Okamoto 2014: 7-8, 57-67).

Unlike the TNM, which represents Japan as a modern "nation", the Nara and Kyoto national museums were established in the late nineteenth century for one specific reason: to protect Japanese Buddhist art after the 1868 Meiji Restoration (Kurihara 2021: 215). During this period governmental authority was "returned" to the emperor, who symbolized the living god and represented the highest authority of the Shinto religion (one of Japan's native religions). The new power worked to segregate Shinto from already well-hybridized Shinto-Buddhist practices (the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism) – which dated back more than 1200 years (Shouji 2013: 106) – by destroying and burning Buddhist statues, scriptures, and other sacred objects, and exporting others overseas (Mizoue 1998: 77). However, temples in the two former capitals, Nara and Kyoto, possessed historical relics, and there was a movement to protect these cultural materials. As a result, the Nara and Kyoto national museums were established. Their origins differed dramatically from that of the TNM, founded in the modern capital city as a symbol of the nation-state. This makes the collections in the Nara and Kyoto national museums more regionally specific, although they are also categorized as national treasures, thus making the museums national in scope.[60] The Kyushu region in southern Japan also differs from the purpose of the TNM in that Kyushu has a long history of maritime trade and overseas relationships. Therefore, the Kyushu National Museum is about a 'global relationship, especially with other Asian regions', celebrating the nation's identity from a more transcultural and transnational – and therefore multiethnic and multicultural – point of view.[61] Notably, there are different ethnic identities, such as the Kumaso in Kyushu, who counter the imagined majority Japanese perspective of the Yamato. As Motohiko noted, the 'reason for building this national museum was the community's desire to have such an institution for this particular region. This comprises one of the museum's most critical missions: highlighting co-existence with diverse peoples and cultures throughout this region'.[62]

The interviews with Japanese professionals indicated the extent to which major national museums, except the TNM, focus on specific localities, regional cultures, and histories. Thus, even though multiethnic and multicultural topics are silenced, the existence of the institutions is itself a statement on Japan being historically multiethnic and multicultural. However, such a perspective may still be limited in terms of who it includes or excludes, including ethnic Koreans or people from other Asian countries and elsewhere.

The 2001 IAI Law has placed a new emphasis upon education in Japan's national museums. However, as Hiroto has explained, Japanese national museums 'have focused more on research' and the educational component has a long way to go.[63] In contrast, Finland's public museums and libraries have assumed basic educational roles at the state and municipal levels for many years (Salminen et al. 2012: 249), and museum educators have a significant role in Finnish museums. Yamamoto (2020) has discussed how educational curators in Finnish museums create space for open conversations and social dialogues, respecting the diversity and individuality of the visitors, whilst in Japan, museum workers with education backgrounds

are not (yet) common. There are differences between national museums in Finland and Japan, although their aspirations are similar. While national museums represent nations, the idea of "nation" is not the same as the nineteenth-century's monocultural and monoethnic master narrative origin. Knut Kjeldstadli (2008: 172-86) has suggested that museums could present a new perspective of the nation as a collective, with unity in variety. Although this idea broadly applies to the interviewed museum professionals in Finland and Japan, Japanese museums have more restrictions placed upon what they can present. Representing diversity plays a critical role in the museums of today, although most Japanese institutions do not tackle the theme due to unspoken rules and pressure. In addition to this, Finnish national museums have been taking on educational roles. Japanese museums are only slowly catching up in this regard, and scholars such as Yamamoto suggest that Japan can learn from the Finnish institutions.

Conclusion

The interviews carried out with museum staff in Finland and Japan show that national museum workers in Finland face fewer hurdles in opening up diverse dialogues on museum practices compared to Japan. However, it is still not easy to know how to tell stories about "all the different people living here", with several interviewees in Finland noting that it is challenging to "make everybody happy". Nevertheless, they continue to tackle this challenge because museums are places for conversations, and Finland is about democracy and equality, and they want to emphasize this point.[64] Museum professionals are simultaneously privileged and responsible, because 'people expect that what is present here is relevant and based on fact' and because 'we have a say [in] what to get [sic] attention: only very few are chosen to be present here'.[65] This is an incredible responsibility that national museum workers hold, influencing how a nation is narrated in one of the most prestigious heritage research and educational institutions. The function of the national museums demands, as Peter Aronsson (2015: 172) states, being able to 'negotiate' different worldviews, and the 'nature and realms of knowledge' through the 'representation of unity and difference, to the ability to handle change'.

ICOM's new definition is also a product of this negotiation. Japan may be working towards this updated definition, as it is seemingly catching up with what Finnish museums have already been working on for some time. ICOM's new museum definition covers an enormous range of topics, including communities, ethics, accessibility, inclusivity, diversity, and sustainability, as reflected in the interviews included in this article. National museums are not only places to collect, preserve, research, and exhibit "national" heritage (from the ancient to the contemporary), but also places that engage in diverse conversations, question what the nation is, and to look back at the history of the nation from the perspective of contemporary narratives of diversity.

Notes

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4 University of Helsinki, 'The History of Other than Men and Victors – Professor Tuomas Heikkikä Contributed to Script the Updated Permanent Exhibition of the National Museum', University of Helsinki News 2021. https://www.helsinki.fi/en/news/culture/history-other-men-and-victors-professor-tuomas-heikkila-contributed-scripting-updated-permanent-exhibition-national-museum/, accessed 20 October 2024.

[5] My research has been funded by the Kone Foundation (between 2021 and 2023, and again in 2024), The University of Antwerp Joint Doctoral Fellowship (2023), the Kalevala Koru Cultural Foundation (2020), and The Finnish National Agency of Education (2020). I sincerely thank my supervisors, my thesis committee members, my colleagues and my friends for their support and inspiring discussions, and excellent language checkers at the University of Helsinki. Last but not least, I thank my partner, who encourages and supports me without limits.

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[10] FHA, 'About Us', FHA. https://www.museovirasto.fi/en/about-us/, accessed 24 September 2021; FHA, 'Organisation', FHA. https://www.museovirasto.fi/en/about-us/organisation/, accessed 24 October 2024; FHA, 'Statistics Card 7/2023: Finnish Museums 2023: Facts and Figures', FHA 2024. https://museotilasto.fi/tiedostot/museovirasto/files/statistics_card_7_2023.pdf/, accessed 24 October 2024.

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22 Leo, personal communication, 30 June 2021; Väinö, pers. comm., 20 January 2021.

23 Leo, pers. comm., 30 June 2021.

24 Takuya, personal communication, 15 June 2021.

25 Hiroto, personal communication, 10 May 2021; Kyoko, personal communication, 29 May 2021.

26 Aada, pers. comm., 27 July 2020; Aino, personal communication, 26 June 2020; Jussi and Noora, pers. Comm., 28 July 2020; Antti, pers. comm., 29 January 2021.

27 Aino, pers. comm., 26 June 2020; Aada, pers. comm., 27 July 2020.

28 Väinö, pers. comm., 20 January 2021.

29 Leo, pers. comm., 30 June 2021; Aada, pers. comm., 27 July 2020; Sofia, personal communication, 23 June 2020; Aino, pers. comm., 26 June 2020; Jussi and Noora, pers. comm., 28 July 2020.

30 Jussi and Noora, pers. comm., 28 July 2020.

31 Leo, pers. comm., 30 June 2021.

32 Jussi and Noora, pers. comm., 28 July 2020.

33 Kyoko, pers. comm., 29 May 2021; Motohiko, personal communication, 12 April 2021.

34 Motohiko, pers. comm., 12 April 2021; Hiroto, 10 May 2021; Kyoko, pers. comm., 29 May 2021; Takuya, pers. comm., 15 June 2021.

35 Motohiko, pers. comm., 12 April 2021.

36 Takuya, pers. comm., 15 June 2021.

[37] Motohiko, pers. comm., 12 April 2021; Hiroto, pers. comm., 10 May 2021; Kyoko, pers. comm., 29 May 2021; Takuya, pers. comm., 15 June 2021.

[38] Motohiko, pers. comm., 12 April 2021; Hiroto, pers. comm., 10 May 2021; Kyoko, pers. comm., 29 May 2021; Takuya, pers. comm., 15 June 2021; Yukiko, personal communication, 15 July 2021.

[39] Sofia, pers. comm., 23 June 2020.

[40] Yukiko, pers. comm., 15 July 2021.

[41] Yukiko, pers. comm., 15 July 2021.

[42] Kai, personal communication, 21 January 2021.

[43] Tuuli, personal communication, 8 July 2020.

[44] Tuuli, pers. comm., 8 July 2020.

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[46] Motohiko, pers. comm., 12 April 2021.

[47] Sofia, pers. comm., 23 June 2020; Aada, pers. comm., 27 July 2020; Samu, personal communication, 21 January 2021.

[48] Leo, pers. comm., 30 June 2021.

[49] Väinö, pers. comm., 20 January 2021.

[50] Sofia, pers. comm., 23 June 2020.

[51] According to education scholar Liisa Karlsson (2021), the term *osallisuus* is multifaceted: the concept involves "participation, acting, involvement, feeling and experiencing, relatedness, belonginess, togetherness, inclusion, influencing and representation, democracy, organising, and governance".

[52] Leo, pers. comm., 30 June 2021.

[53] Aada, pers. comm., 27 July 2020.

[54] Jussi and Noora, pers. comm., 28 July 2020.

[55] Leo, pers. comm., 30 June 2021.

[56] Leo, pers. comm., 30 June 2021.

[57] Aino, pers. comm., 26 June 2020.

[58] Aada, pers. comm., 27 July 2020.

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[60] Hiroto, pers. comm., 10 May 2021.

[61] Motohiko, pers. comm., 12 April 2021.

[62] Motohiko, pers. comm., 12 April 2021.

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[64] Leo, pers. comm., 30 June 2021; Aada, pers. comm., 27 July 2020.

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