The Enduring Popularity of the Cabinet of Curiosities: Why French Guiana's Museums will not be Decolonized

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Abstract

This article considers the persistence of 'cabinet of curiosities' style museums in French Guiana, France's largest overseas département [department], within the wider context of decolonizing agendas found in mainland France and the Global North more generally. The central claim is that it is impossible to truly engage in decolonial praxis in places where colonial forms of governance still exist. It also suggests that to understand how and why the museum cannot fully be decolonized requires moving focus from institutions found in metropolitan centres to those located at the peripheries. Two museums will provide the focus of the analysis here – the Musée Alexandre Franconie in Cayenne and the Musée du Planeur Bleu in Cacao. The article will explore the ongoing local popularity of these museums where other larger scale 'postcolonial' museum projects have failed or stalled. The article will conclude by suggesting that while there do exist examples of museography in French Guiana that offer alternatives to both types of project, these are limited in scope and public engagement.

Keywords: French Guiana, Museum, Colonialism, Cabinet of Curiosities, Decolonial

Introduction

We are here because you were there. This is a key refrain from the 2018 short film *The Museum will not be Decolonised* [1] adapted from the 2017 essay of the same name by curator Sumaya Kassim.[2] Kassim was one of a group of co-curators involved in the Past is Now exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, a project looking at the colonial origins of the city's museums, collections and memorials. Like many European cities, Birmingham might be defined as an 'entangled city',[3] one whose former political and industrial leaders – its so-called founding fathers – are equally bound up in histories of empire and colonial oppression, including the transatlantic slave trade. These are cities, moreover, whose present-day population bears witness to postwar migration from across former European empires. While Kassim concludes that perhaps the museum cannot be decolonized, initiatives to 'decolonize' the museum taking place across European cities, metropolitan hubs (often former port cities) such as Bristol, Marseille, Liverpool and Nantes, as well as capital cities like London and Paris, continue to develop forms of praxis which not only call into question the 'right' to possess objects and collections taken from elsewhere but also the wider structures and systems defining the museum, its displays, activities, labour, governance and publics.[4] As Marine Schütz (2021) has suggested,

> The decolonization of the museum, henceforth, can no longer be situated in a post (colonial) moment. It operates with the aim of acting on social life, in the present. It reveals the specificity of decoloniality in relation to other corpus taken up with the critical study of colonial heritage, starting with the field of postcolonial [studies] [my translation].

However, if decolonial thinking and praxis within and beyond the museum space is well-documented (and analysed) across Europe's metropolitan centres (along with comparable examples in North America), what happens in spaces which unsettle the refrain 'we are here

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because you were there', replacing it with 'we are here because you are (also still) here'?

This article takes up the question of what decolonial praxis means in the context of spaces that have remained to all intents and purposes colonial territories attached to France. The aim here is to switch perspective from the recent attention given to decolonizing museum collections and praxis in metropolitan centres such as Paris and Marseille, to consider museography in a former French colony that never underwent decolonization. Taking France's largest overseas department, French Guiana, as the focal point, the article explores how key collections and their interpretation continue to perpetuate a colonial understanding of the museum as an assemblage of extracted goods and obscure bizarre objects. Two key examples will be explored – the Musée Franconie in Cayenne, the territory's oldest and best-known museum; and the Musée du Planeur Bleu, a small privately owned museum located in the Hmong village of Cacao. Both museums will be considered in terms of traditional 'cabinets of curiosities' and thus as providing a riposte to more recent reactivations of the form as both contemporary art and decolonial tools adopted by museums and universities to rethink the colonial origins of their collections and epistemologies.

This article does not purport to offer an exhaustive account of French Guiana's various museums or built heritage. Beyond their collections, the two sites chosen exemplify a colonial mindset due in part to their respective locations and the way in which they engage visitors. Other museums worth noting briefly here include the Space Museum located in Kourou and the Ecomuseum in Kaw. Arguably, the space museum and the space station tour emphasize techno-heritage and a form of colonialism that extends beyond the limits of the Earth (Redfield 2000). The Ecomusée municipal d'Approuague Kaw combines an exhibition of rural life in the region with archaeological work to preserve the industrial and agricultural heritage linked to the area's history as a site of plantation and goldmining (Wood 2015). Additionally, the territory bears witness to multiple other heritage sites associated with slave plantations and the penal colony. These sites have themselves been subject to ongoing processes of forgetting, remembering, restoration and ruination which have been explored at length elsewhere (Chamoiseau and Hammadi 1994; Fuggle 2021).

It is also beyond the remit of this article to suggest what decolonial praxis might look like in the context of French Guiana's museums. It is at odds with the author's own positionality as a researcher based elsewhere to offer to speak on behalf of the complex populations of French Guiana. The need to 'decolonize' knowledge is not new to French Guiana but was already being evoked by the Pou d'Agouti environmental collective in the 1990s and 2000s (Vincent 1992: 19). More recently, Olson Kwadjani (2021) has defined the cultural and epistemological stakes of life for the Maroon and Amerindian populations living along French Guiana's two rivers, the Oyapock and the Maroni, in terms of what he calls a 'marronabilité contemporaine' [contemporary marronability]. Consequently, the aim of bringing French Guiana to the centre of museology around colonial histories and collecting practices is to provide a timely reminder that colonies continue to exist, and their museums still operate within a colonial or neocolonial framework of knowledge and wealth accumulation.

Context

Departmentalization in 1946 saw France's colonies become overseas departments. Colonial subjects were given a new status as citizens of France, a status which, despite its promises of equality and inclusion, did not yield up the same rights and recognition as were afforded to those born in Metropolitan France. Some former colonies became special overseas territories with certain administrative powers ceded to local government. This is the case with New Caledonia, where the indigenous Kanak population led multiple campaigns for independence resulting in the Noumea Agreement of 1998. Following the agreement, increased autonomy has been granted to local government over a transitional period of twenty years, culminating in a series of independence referendums that have taken place since 2018. Designed by Italian architect, Renzo Piano, and inaugurated in 1998, the Jean-Marie Tjibaou cultural centre provides a visual symbol of the agreements whilst also centring Kanak art and cultural activity. More recently, the museum's remit has expanded to include representation of the other Pacific and non-European communities which make up the population of the territory.

As such, its main role has been as a 'postcolonial' museum aimed at smoothing over tensions in the territory. As Puel and Van Geert (2021) have argued, the museum is financed by the French government and as such continues to impose an idea of what it means to be 'New Caledonian' from outside. They also ask whether perhaps the insistence on a 'common destiny' shared amongst New Caledonians is itself another form of paternalism enacted on the territory by France.

In contrast to New Caledonia's relative autonomy, the overseas department of French Guiana has remained heavily dependent on mainland France both in terms of economic subsidies and political governance. Despite multiple large-scale development projects, the territory remains largely unsustainable in terms of agricultural production and thus dependent on France for imported goods. There is a lack of infrastructure (especially public transport) and the elevated cost of living means salaries are approximately 40 per cent higher than those in France for those in official employment, creating significant social inequalities. The ethnic make-up of the territory is particularly complex, composed of Creole, Amerindian (Pahikweneh, Lokono, Téleuyu, Wayampi, Teko, Wayana and Apalaï), Maroon (Aluku, Ndyuka, Saramaka and Paamaka), White European, Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, Brazilian, Surinamese and, more recently, Syrian and Lebanese populations. The territory is separated from neighbouring Brazil and Suriname by the Oyapock and Maroni rivers, which act as natural borders. While many communities live and work on both sides of these rivers, anxieties about illegal immigration, including those involved in illegal goldmining and drug trafficking, have been seized by a right-wing political agenda.

As Wood and MacLeod (2018) have argued, French Guiana should not be seen as peripheral but at the centre of how we understand contemporary France – this means how we understand its geographies, its history and the valuation of that history, its relationship with its multiple populations and so on. Not only is French Guiana the largest department in France, it also contains the biggest area of forest – making it a significant ecological asset. Yet, the reason we should look at French Guiana's museums rather than ignore them is precisely because of the way in which French Guiana is largely ignored and sometimes written-off by those in metropolitan France. In understanding its museums, including local attachment to them, we can get closer to the challenges of decolonial praxis in the wider, global context of museum and heritage management. In other words, it is not enough to focus on sites of international renown which benefit from global tourism and a disproportionate amount of public and private funding. Decolonial praxis necessarily involves re-centring that which is situated at the margins.

It also requires recognition that such praxis is not simply about telling a more inclusive story of colonization and its aftermath that shifts attention away from the white European colonizer. In the case of French Guiana, it also involves recognizing that decolonization never occurred. It should also consider the difficult task of challenging deep-rooted perceptions of its history and geography which are organized around colonial fantasies of 'Eldorado' and virgin rainforests juxtaposed with visions of 'green hell' and the abject nothingness that defined the territory's use as a penal colony between 1852 and 1953 (see Spieler 2012). In the context of the territory's museums, affirmations of cultural and ecological diversity continue to be filtered through a colonial gaze underpinned by finance and endorsement from the French state and metropolitan conceptions of 'patrimoine' [heritage]. Despite a longstanding failure to develop a successful and sustainable tourist industry, ethno- and ecotourism initiatives are nevertheless conceived for an imagined audience of visitors from elsewhere.

The return of the 'cabinet of curiosities'

The cabinet of curiosities dates from the seventeenth century and is often considered the precursor to the modern museum. The cabinet of curiosities has seen a resurgence over the past two decades. It has been adopted by artists interested in re-imagining traditional taxidermy and preservation practices, arguably first made popular by Damien Hirst's sheep and shark in formaldehyde. It has also emerged as an alternative to text-heavy, overly curated and narrated exhibitions, and is aimed at stimulating more creative engagement with collections. Recent projects have used the concept to confront colonial collecting

and acquisition practices previously obscured or glossed over by museums. Writing of the phenomenon for The Guardian back in 2014, Phillip Hoare made the point that this celebration of collecting draws our attention to the global extractive practices of capitalism and the rapid loss of species occurring each year.

> Cabinets of curiosities were a strange bridge between atavistic myth and dawning scientific reality. As such, their revival speaks to our own vexed relationship with the natural world, at a time when we seem bent on destroying it – partly as a result, some might say, of the schism between science and art.[5]

The specific aims of recent restagings of the 'cabinet of curiosities' vary between institutions and artists/curators. Following projects based around the concept of a cabinet of curiosities at other universities, including Ohio State University and the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota (Sheehy 2006), artist Mark Dion held a residency at Vassar College in 2016 that culminated in the creation of a giant cabinet of curiosities bringing together objects found in the university's collections. The project was the outcome of a course co-taught with anthropology professor Anne Pike-Tay entitled 'From the Natural History Museum to Ecotourism: The Collection of Nature'.[6] Students were encouraged to explore previously forgotten collections, fostering collaborative work between different academic disciplines. One of the objectives was to demonstrate the university as a space of collecting which often presents arbitrary or serendipitous juxtapositions in terms of scientific organization. Returning to the cabinet of curiosities evokes the idea that all objects can be placed into dialogue or narratives with other objects, whether this is via visual patterns or disjuncts, for example, or through the figure of the collector as a unifying figure. In turn this can lead to a more critical appreciation of the arbitrary origins of academic disciplines and their claims to objective scientific knowledge and truth. However, this form of engagement depends on cultural codes and an awareness of current debates around the links between science and colonialism.

The Victoria and Albert Museum's large scale research project 'Opening the Cabinet of Curiosities' (announced in 2017) focused on nineteenth century interest in the Renaissance Wunderkammer, exploring how this interest shaped the museum's own collecting and display practices.[7] The second part of the project was dedicated to identifying the links between museums and the slave trade, which provided absentee slave owners with the wealth to acquire, commission and collect.[8] The project is part of recent and ongoing work by the V&A to 'decolonize' its collections. This approach is less about the repatriation of 'stolen' objects as a form of reparation and more about revealing the lives of those who were implicit in the creation, circulation and, ultimately, acquisition of the objects by museums in Britain and elsewhere in the West; in other words, the populations whose unpaid labour (i.e. slaves) either allowed for the creation of such objects or for the accumulated wealth that led to the creation of many of Britain's museums. Artist-in-residence Victoria Adukwei Bulley was commissioned to produce a series of films entitled A Series of Unfortunate Inheritances as part of the project, to give face and voice to those rendered invisible by colonial forms of extraction, accumulation and collecting.

It is important to situate our analysis in relation to current engagements with and 'returns' to the cabinet of curiosities as a form of presentation due to the wider impact these have on museological practice. Such approaches can inspire different forms of creativity via the idea of strange and unusual juxtapositions, as well as the invitation to fill the gaps in the knowledge about the objects and their provenance with different stories to those commonly told about collectors and colonial wealth. Nevertheless, it is key to note that the museums of interest in French Guiana are not part of this 'return' and cannot be considered to be informed by contemporary interpretive practices taking place in urban centres such as London, Paris and New York. Instead, these museums have displayed the same collections in roughly the same configurations for several decades. If objects have been acquired, these supplement the existing displays rather than requiring new exhibition design or different narratives. The displays tend to feature simple captions rather than more extensive panels. Hence while these museums are not 'cabinets of curiosities' in the original sense of the term, they are nevertheless examples of forms of museography that have long been considered outmoded elsewhere in the world.

The 'Local' Museum

Situated in between the Place des Palmistes and the town hall on the Rue de Rémire, the Musée Alexandre-Franconie enjoys a prime location in the centre of Cayenne. Inaugurated in 1901 in the former Franconie residence, it is affectionately known in French Guiana as the 'Musée loca'. Most children from the Île de Cayenne region (and beyond) will make at least one school trip to the museum. The museum's status as 'local' institution is in part built upon its 'cabinet of curiosities' format – the multiple histories, complex flora and fauna of French Guiana are presented in an ad-hoc manner. While the ground floor largely focuses on natural history, the first floor includes objects linked to slavery, the penal colony and traditional forms of architecture. A climate-controlled room at the back of the ground floor contains an extensive collection of insects. The tendency to use small labels rather than more extensive panels (although these do appear), together with traditional displays including taxidermy and dioramas, contribute to the overall impression of a museum untouched by more recent museological innovation.[9]

Housed in a traditional creole building, the museum's architecture lends itself further to this idea of a personal, private collection. The museum is divided into sections using heavy dark wood, producing a very different effect to the white cube format favoured by other institutions. This makes the museum gloomy and mysterious.[10] The upper floor window opens out onto one of the main streets in Cayenne with views of the 'Libre Service' grocery store (Figure 1) and the Bar des Palmistes. Standing at the window or sitting on one of the benches, one has the impression of being in the rooms of an eccentric collector.

Figure 1. Musée Franconie. Mannequin in convict uniform. Photograph by the author (2018).

Writing about the museum back in the mid-1990s, anthropologists Richard and Sally Price cite at length an earlier account by French journalist, Louis Doucet, who visited the museum

over a decade before (Price and Price 1994). The Prices emphasize that little has changed since Doucet's account and I would argue that the same applies today, over forty years later. Doucet's description of the museum focuses on the plethora of animals and strange juxtapositions between objects. However, if we take the upper section of the museum dedicated to the history of convict transportation, it is possible to offer up a near-exhaustive inventory of the artefacts on display:

1. Display cases featuring a small selection of objects associated with the penal colony. These include bricks, coconuts carved by convicts and a cast of a convict's foot and ankle demonstrating the effects of the long-term use of manacles.[11]

2. A diorama in a glass tabletop case of the Salvation Islands.

3. A poster rack featuring pages from L'Illustration's coverage of Alfred Dreyfus's five-year imprisonment on Devil's Island.

4. A mannequin dressed in the stripy pink and white convict uniform and straw hat issued to convicts on arrival in French Guiana (see Figure 1).

5. A series of paintings produced by convict-artist Francis Lagrange depicting various scenes from the penal colony.

Together these objects offer a snapshot of life in the penal colony (which operated for 100 years and saw 70,000 men and 1,000 women sent to the territory) which is as much about artistic representation as it is political history. The choice of objects appears arbitrary and the accompanying panels offer limited insight into the complexity and longevity of the penal settlements. In contrast to the smaller, more recently inaugurated Musée du Bagne located in Saint Laurent du Maroni,[12] the text panels do not draw on extensive archival research and visual materials nor have they been organized into either a chronological or a thematic set of narratives. Instead, the exhibits tend to affirm established discourse and iconography. Notably, the diorama of the Salvation Islands perpetuates the common misconception held by many unfamiliar with French Guiana's geography, that the penal colony consisted only of the Salvation Islands.[13] The convict-mannequin represents a form of interpretation which has long been problematized in European museography (see Weber 2016). Its use in the Musée Franconie positions the figure of the convict as a problematic European 'Other' alongside the diorama natural history scenes found on the ground floor. As Appadurai (2020: 46) has argued in relation to museums elsewhere, this juxtaposition embodies 'the tectonic struggle […] between ethnological museums and natural history museums, since they do not agree on how and where to draw the line between human and non-human others'. What emerges here, moreover, is the failure of the museum to transform its curiosities into tools for greater understanding of either the territory's multiple populations (which do not fit easily into the binary of European 'self' and 'colonized, objectified other' identified by Appadurai) or its biodiversity (as part of the Amazon).

From 'museum' to 'maison' – a series of failed projects

Before picking up the theme of the 'cabinet of curiosities' again in relation to the Musée du Planeur Bleu in Cacao, it is useful to explore some of the attempts to replace the Musée Franconie with larger museum projects aimed at showcasing French Guiana's history, cultures and biodiversity. Understanding the stakes and challenges faced by such projects goes some way to making greater sense of the persistence of the cabinet of curiosities model from a local perspective. Moreover, these challenges are symptomatic of wider impediments to development within French Guiana.

French Guiana is often presented in terms of a series of failed development projects. Attempts to establish plantations using slave labour during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had limited success (Mam Lam Fouck 1982). With the abolition of slavery in 1848, convict transportation, based on the earlier Australian model (Forster 1996), was proposed

as an alternative form of cheap labour and the first convicts were sent to French Guiana in 1853. The huge costs of maintaining the penal colony and the loss of life incurred were not offset by agricultural sustainability or the development of significant infrastructure. During his visit to the territory in 1923, investigative journalist Albert Londres described the work carried out to establish a road between Cayenne, the capital, and Saint Laurent du Maroni, a purpose-built town where the penal administration was based, as 'Route Numéro Zero' due to the excruciating lack of progress (Londres 1923). Camps established to clear the forest were frequently abandoned due to disease outbreaks. Following post-war departmentalization and the closure of the penal colony, various migration projects from France and other overseas territories sought to develop the territory via its 'peuplement' [population], something Aimé Césaire referred to as 'genocide by substitution' during a French Assemblée Nationale [parliamentary session] on 13 November 1975 (Césaire 2013). Large scale plans for agricultural development, forestry – including a significant paper pulping industry – and mining were announced as part of the 'Plan Vert' in the mid-1970s. These were subsequently either abandoned or hugely reduced in scope and ambition and the 'Plan' was declared yet another resounding failure. The promise of development offered by the space station which was established in 1964 following the closure of the Hammaguir launch site in Algeria produced little employment opportunities for the local population beyond low level service industry roles. The pronounced social inequalities between local communities and those recruited internationally for high level engineering and related roles has led to the space station being described as a 'cancer' (see Redfield 2000: 133). Nevertheless, dismissing all these and other projects as failing to 'develop' the territory also works quite deliberately to produce an ongoing image of French Guiana as an empty space, an untapped natural resource still awaiting exploitation. It is this colonial image of French Guiana, moreover, that is further maintained by the interpretation at the Musée Franconie, which echoes the observation Appadurai makes about larger natural history museums elsewhere:

> The dioramas in major natural history museums express the heart of this confusion in their effort to capture the living environments, in which various objects of material culture may have had a social life, but their effect is to create strange spaces which look more like cartoons or caricatures of non-modernity (Appadurai 2020: 46).

One might argue that the notion of a 'postcolonial' museum, one that adequately privileges the complex postcolonial cultures and communities in former French colonies (before one even gets to the question of decoloniality), is also a utopian ideal doomed to failure in contemporary French Guiana. Considering how the history of Algerian colonization and independence might be adequately acknowledged and understood in Metropolitan France, Bancel and Blanchard (2017) have suggested that a museum dedicated to France's colonial history might be 'politically impossible'. Both the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (Lebovics 2006; Demissie 2009; Thomas 2013) and the Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration [formerly Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration] (Green 2011; Dixon 2012) in Paris have received widespread scrutiny over their approaches to the display of artefacts acquired and funded through colonial occupation and the narration of migration histories which fail to centre immigrant experience or address the ongoing impact of displacement and dispossession caused by French colonialism.[14]

In response to the inauguration of slavery museums during the opening decades of the twenty-first century, Achille Mbembe (2013) offers the provocation that to place the figure of the slave within a museum is to repeat the gesture which contains, controls and reproduces the suffering of those enslaved. According to Mbembe's logic, the slave is, in fact, the figure of the anti-museum; in other words, the figure that exposes the colonial continuities that persist within today's museums. We might further extend this provocation to include, alongside those subject to forced migration and labour, those who were dispossessed of their lands, livelihoods and cultural identity as a result of settler colonialism. Indeed, the ongoing representation of such peoples as ethnological curiosities continues to plague French museography. In a recent interview, Anne-Christine Taylor, curator at the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, identified a lack of genuine engagement with indigenous forms of knowledge as one major obstacle to decoloniality within the museum:

> Even when "native" curators are invited to exhibit in museums, the discourse they are implicitly or explicitly encouraged to develop about "their culture" is heavily marked by a Western way of thinking about culture as objectified patrimony. Instead of colluding with this kind of toothless ethnicism, museums should be less condescending and more exigent with their indigenous interlocutors: not let them put forth statements such as "this object is sacred to us", but instead push them to formulate what is at stake in this claim, how whatever they translate as "sacred" reconfigures and challenges what we mean by the sacred. In short, anthropological exhibitions should be about equivocations, about veiled misunderstandings, not about presumed convergence of experience (Taylor 2020: 100).

Despite Taylor's intention to foster more transformative conversations within the museum space, her statement risks reproducing the same 'condescension' towards 'native' curators she is trying to move beyond and as such emphasizes the impasse of the museum as inherently colonial. The alternative to a model of museums based on exoticism and extraction is to think of an altogether different form of space, not one of accumulation and framing but, rather, one directed towards hospitality. Mbembe leaves it up to the reader to think through what that might involve in material and practical terms. However, Françoise Vergès, in her discussion of the 'postcolonial museum' as a museum 'without objects', comes closer to a more concrete understanding. For Vergès (2010), the notion of 'museum' might be replaced with that of a 'Maison' aimed at welcoming all members of the population and, notably, those who might feel excluded or alienated by a traditional museum. Her focus is on the specific context of Réunion (another overseas French department) and the proposed Maison des Civilisations et de l'Unité Réunionnaise (MCUR). The project constituted part of the 2010 election campaign of her father, Paul Vergès. Yet, despite the underlying ethos of the Maison as a space aimed at bringing the diverse communities of Reunion together, and public support for the project, it was condemned by political opposition as a vanity project and an inappropriate use of funding during a period of economic crisis (Ford 2010: 660-1). When Paul Vergès failed to get elected, the project was shelved. I mention this here as it offers some wider context to similar projects in French Guiana, including the ambitious Musée Régional project of the early 1990s and, more recently, the proposed restoration of the former Jean Martial colonial hospital as the 'Maison des mémoires et cultures de la Guyane' [House of Memories and Cultures of French Guiana].

Richard and Sally Price (1994; 1995) have described their involvement with the Musée Régional during the early 1990s. They had participated in 'collecting' activities intended to ensure the different populations of the territory and their respective heritage were represented in the museum:

> We had participated in a collecting expedition to the Aluku Maroons, deep in the interior of French Guiana, on behalf of the future museum. In carefully chosen words, we had told each potential donor/seller about the "Big House" which was soon to be built near the capital and which would serve as a permanent repository for their cultural treasures, permitting their children and grandchildren (whose way of life and thinking were being radically transformed through a crash program of French education and welfare programs) to appreciate their ancestral culture (Price and Price 1994: 3).

However, the Prices go on to explain how financial crises affecting the Conseil Régional had led to the suspension and ultimate abandonment of the museum project. Since 2010, the plan for a regional museum has been reactivated in the form of a Maison des Cultures et des Mémoires de Guyane (MCMG) focused on two sites – a new archival and collections building in Rémire-Montjoly (inaugurated in late 2020) and the repurposing of the former Hôpital Jean Martial, a former colonial hospital located on Cayenne's coastline, as a museum. However, the viability of the hospital site has come under scrutiny, with planned budgets being reduced from an initial 60 million euros (in 2010) to 23 million euros in 2023. Earlier proposals for the site suggested a multi-purpose approach including, notably, a casino. The rationale was that a museum alone would not be economically sustainable nor meet the needs for alternative

forms of cultural and leisure activity required to re-energise the town centre of Cayenne. The restoration work has been suspended since 2020 despite more recent declarations from the Collectivité Territoriale de Guyane (CTG) and the apparent endorsement of various government ministries.[15] Meanwhile, a temporary exhibition space situated in the hospital's reception building (Figure 2) provides a series of displays dedicated to the museological, conservation and archaeological practices underpinning the restoration and museum project.

Figure 2. Temporary exhibition at the former Hôpital Jean Martial. Photograph by the author (2018).

To transform a colonial hospital into a space of hospitality embodied in the concept of museum qua 'maison' posited by Vergès is an interesting proposition. Nevertheless, the challenges of developing the extensive space of a former hospital building and finding ways to include the territory's diverse and complex populations in a meaningful way whilst also valorizing existing natural history collections is an immense challenge. Moreover, in light of the previous failed projects such as the Musée Regional, local buy-in to a new large scale museum project faces limitations, especially from those based outside of Cayenne. It may well be that a hospital can never be reimagined as a home.[16]

The Hmong Village of Cacao

Reflecting on the proposed and subsequently shelved Musée Régional project, Richard and Sally Price (1994; 1995) highlighted the planned showcasing of the Hmong within the museum. They pointed out that promoting the ethnic minority offered a means of celebrating diverse cultures whilst sidestepping the ongoing issue of illegal immigration that continues to concern Guyanese society and politics: '[T]heir "picturesque" cultural traditions and colorful ethnic dress enhance even further their suitability to museum vitrines in a land de Gaulle dreamed of making "France's show-window in America"' (Price and Price 1995: 98). It is worth noting, therefore, that while this project, which juxtaposed romanticized images of traditional, artisanal Hmong culture with displays celebrating the space station as a marker of future technology

and innovation was suspended and ultimately abandoned, other museums did open but on a different scale and with different stakeholders. This includes the privately-owned Musée de l'Association Planeur Bleu in Cacao in 1995.

Cacao was a site which housed a slave plantation and later one of the earliest convict sites known as the bagne Saint-Augustin.[17] Today the village maintains the name of its original agricultural production which thus acts as a reminder of its complex, layered histories of colonial occupation and forced labour. In 1977, 500 Hmong from Laos were resettled there as part of a wider series of migration projects (BIPIG, BUMIDOM and the Plan Vert) aimed at developing French Guiana's agriculture and forestry. The Hmong village, along with a similar settlement (named Javouhey after the missionary Anne-Marie Javouhey) near Mana on the West coast of French Guiana, became and remains the primary producers of fruit and vegetables across the territory. The village holds a market on Sundays which attracts tourists from elsewhere in the territory, especially Cayenne (about 90 minutes away by car) and this is the only time the museum is open (except by appointment).

Guided tours of the small museum take place several times over the course of the day. Tours are popular and the one I joined one Sunday morning in June 2022 attracted about 20-25 people, including around five children. An article on the museum and its owner appearing in Une Saison en Guyane in 2012 put the annual number of visitors at about 12,000.[18] This is not an insignificant figure given French Guiana's small population and suggests over 200 visitors each Sunday.[19] The popularity of the museum is largely linked to the absence of other activities for visitors besides the market and the covered street food stalls serving pho and nems. Most of the visitors on the guided tour, although not all, were white Europeans. The museum is only open on Sundays except by special appointment and is not large enough to accommodate big school groups. The tours are primarily focused on the museum's extensive insect collection composed of creatures caught in the territory. The white male guide and museum owner, Philippe Soler, takes on the role of both expert bug-hunter (amateur entomologist) and comic raconteur.

The location of the museum within the Hmong village is not insignificant. The transfer of approximately 500 Hmong refugees in 1977 was an operation loosely linked to Le Plan Vert, the wider plan for agricultural and economic development in French Guiana launched in 1975. Also known as 'Le Plan Stirn' due to its being the brainchild of minister Olivier Stirn, the plan invited applications from French farmers to migrate to the territory. The intention was to provide land concessions and, where necessary, subventions to around 30,000 farmers and their families. Given the population in French Guiana at that time was only 50,000, the project was met with suspicion and disapproval by the local population. Claims by Stirn and then Prime Minister Jacques Chirac that the Plan Vert would be 'un projet de mise en valeur complet, harmonieux, méthodique, équilibré' [a complete, harmonious and methodical valorization project] and undertaken 'pour les Guyanais, avec les Guyanais' [for Guyanese, with Guyanese] were dismissed as hyperbole.[20]

French Guiana has a long history of independence and anti-colonial movements, and it is possible to see a flurry of activity in the mid to late seventies notably in the form of several publications such as Caou Ca, Fo Nou Libéré la Guyane and La Voix des travailleurs. Frequently these publications drew on anti-colonial struggles occurring elsewhere, notably Algeria and Vietnam. Within this wider global context, the arrival of Hmong refugees was seen as an especially dirty tactic on the part of the French administration since this would ensure a population who, out of gratitude and because of their own refusal to take part in the anti-colonial struggle back in Laos, would always take the side of the French government in relation to policy on French Guiana. Partly due to the isolated geography of Cacao, their own close-knit culture and the hostility with which their arrival was met, the Hmong population in Cacao has remained largely separate from the rest of the Guyanese population. While hostility has largely dissipated or, at the very least, been transferred onto other 'less desirable' populations such as illegal Brazilian goldminers, the Sunday market in Cacao offers a form of ethnotourism whereby the village sells an image of timeless Laotian culture and heritage to predominantly metropolitan visitors keen to affirm their interest in cultural diversity (Géraud 2002).

The creation of the Musée Planeur Bleu by Philippe Soler benefits from the isolation

of the village and the exoticism that continues to frame the Hmong population living and working there. It is also worth noting how the museum's multiple and disparate collections of objects and preserved insects produce an intriguing yet uncomfortable juxtaposition of different layers of colonial history. The collected insects attest to the one-time popularity of hunting and collecting natural objects linked to the territory. For example, convicts would often try and capture butterflies, notably the extremely beautiful blue morpho which is endemic to French Guiana. While this activity was banned amongst convicts, it nevertheless constituted a popular trade given the value of the butterflies back in France and elsewhere.

When I join the tour, the guide is in the middle of explaining how it is now illegal to take natural objects (and indeed historical materials) from the territory. He cites the number of visitors to French Guiana (a relatively small number compared to other destinations) and the considerable impact that each would have if they were to take an insect or a stone away with them. This warning seems to be part of an act of mea culpa linked to earlier practices that have resulted in the museum. When Soler left French Guiana to study biology in Montpellier in the late 1970s, he took with him a suitcase containing over 200 insects from the territory.[21] His current warning echoes that of other museums that feature extensive taxidermy collections acquired through colonial hunting practices.[22] It is also a way of affirming the value and exceptionality of the collection. Indeed, Soler's collection of other objects such as those linked to the penal colony far exceeds those on display in other official museums, for example the Musée du Bagne in Saint Laurent which depends largely on loans from private collectors. This is partly due to the relatively late restoration initiatives from the 1990s onwards – a point at which most objects associated with the penal colony had been distributed amongst private collectors. But it also reflects the different agendas of the museum where the ad-hoc organization of display cases and objects allows Soler to develop his own narrative arc, unconstrained by excessive classification or more formal interpretive techniques.

Figure 3. Butterfly Display in Musée du Planeur Bleu. Photograph by the author (2022).

Where one of the main aims of the original cabinet of curiosities was to organize and classify scientific knowledge, another aim was to shock, surprise and, sometimes, delight. The latter was certainly the case with Soler's tour. The museum displays several old maps of French

Guiana featuring the believed whereabouts of the mythical 'Eldorado'. Soler explains how this was a trick used by Amerindians to draw explorers deeper into the territory. 'However', he adds almost as an afterthought, 'this did not prevent the massacre of thousands of Amerindians by Europeans'.[23] He points out a range of coins and tokens fabricated by convicts, who were prohibited from handling money. He asks the audience what they think the tokens bearing women's names were used for before announcing that they provided access to the brothels that served the penal colony. There is further dark humour to be had from asking people where they thought convicts hid their 'plans' – metal tubes used to store tools and money for escape purposes.

The tour moves seamlessly from tales of French Guiana's dark colonial history to a more hands-on display of its large insects. Live insects, including beetles and butterflies, are used to explain wingspans and nocturnal flying habits. Soler also places a mid-sized scorpion on his arm to demonstrate how to avoid being stung. The tour concludes with visitors exiting via a small butterfly enclosure which, no doubt, contains future stars of Soler's tours.

Beyond any personal revulsion towards spiders, scorpions and oversized beetles, there is something unsettling about the combination of living and preserved insects within the space of the museum. The idea of a living museum extends out to the village where the inhabitants perform a prescribed role for Sunday visitors. This role is less about the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and more about conforming to an image imposed from without. In this sense the village and its museum evoke French imaginaries about its colonies, their flora, fauna and peoples reminiscent of the 1931 colonial exhibition in Paris. The popularity of Soler's own performance can be found in the myth of the explorer – the bug hunter – whose esoteric charm lies in his passion for collecting and enthusiasm for explaining his findings to anyone who will come and listen.

Conclusion

The focus of this article on the Musée Franconie in Cayenne and the Musée de l'association Planeur Bleu in Cacao sought to provide a snapshot of museums and their collections within the wider Francosphère. Where the Musée Franconie has a longer colonial history, the Musée de l'association Planeur Bleu, founded by a private collector from Metropolitan France, showcases one of the largest collections of objects related to French Guiana's 100-year history as a penal colony. The juxtaposition of the two museums is intended to emphasize how the different contexts of their locales play on different interests and attachments within the department. In the case of the Musée de l'association Planeur Bleu, its situation within the Hmong village 200km from Cayenne capitalizes on regional ethnotourism and the requirement of the small Hmong population to perform a certain form of ethnic identity as 'good' or 'desirable' migrants. The collections held by the Musée Franconie are the subject of ongoing plans for a larger cultural offering in the department's main town, Cayenne, which would ultimately decouple the collections from their location within the museum's traditional Creole house that forms part of local attachment to the museum.

In the introduction to *Postcolonial Realms of Memory* (2020), a collective endeavour to re-imagine Pierre Nora's epic Les Lieux de mémoire (1984-92) project from a wider, postcolonial Francophone perspective, the editors point out that postcolonial and decolonial frameworks for thinking through French culture and society are frequently met with vehement opposition (Achille et al. 2020: 1). They also identify the ongoing tendency to privilege Paris within the Francosphere given that, due to 'the city's dual status as both urban geopolitical and imperial/colonial centre where national, transnational and postcolonial cultures coalesce, it is indeed possible to conceive of the capital as the archetypal French postcolonial site of memory' (Achille et al. 2020: 10).

In focusing on the oft-overlooked overseas department of French Guiana, this article has sought to emphasize the enduring popularity of its colonial-style and, indeed, colonial-era museums, contrasting this popularity with the challenges faced by new museum initiatives seeking to adequately validate the complex cultures and histories of the territory's different populations. It is hard to assess the extent to which the enduring popularity of the museums discussed is the result of limited options within the department or whether new museum

projects will succeed where earlier large-scale projects have typically failed. It is also difficult to see how the proposed new museum projects can adequately centre the voices of the department's multiple, complex populations. Indeed, the very concept of 'decolonial praxis' seems to fall short when confronted by Kwadjani's call to refuse 'assimilation' or accept the borders and limits imposed by France upon the territory. If museums cannot be decolonized via more inclusive curatorial practices, then perhaps it falls instead to smaller, longstanding museums to 'showcase' colonial histories in a way which lays bare ad-hoc collecting and classification practices. The persistence of Empire via the departmentalization process together with numerous post-WWII migration projects, including the relocation of the Hmong to French Guiana, makes the task of decolonization here impossible and, yet, all the more urgent. At the same time, the examples cited from French Guiana alongside New Caledonia and Réunion make a call to look beyond metropolitan, urban hubs for a different articulation and understanding of the stakes of decolonial praxis in and beyond the museum.

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Notes

1 https://vimeo.com/302162709, accessed 19 March 2024.

2 Sumaya Kassim, 'The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised', Media Diversified 2017. https://mediadiversified.org/2017/11/15/the-museum-will-not-be-decolonised/, accessed 19 March 2024.

3 Lorena Sancho Querol, Marcia Chuva, Astrid Nonbo Andersen, Giuseppina Raggi, Cristiano Gianolla and Paulo Peixoto, 'Entangled Cities', ECHOES: European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities 2018. https://keywordsechoes.com/entangled-cities, accessed 19 March 2024.

4 See, for example, the UK Museums Association's declaration of an ongoing commitment to decolonizing museums and accompanying case studies and resources: https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/.

5 Philip Hoare, 'Museum and Gallery Curators Reopen the Cabinet of Curiosities Concept', The Guardian 13 January 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jan/13/cabinet-curiosities-taxidermy-retro-museums, accessed 19 March 2024.

6 Vassar, 'A Monumental Cabinet of Curiosities', 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Br2vpv0fjqc&t=19s, accessed 19 March 2024.

7 For a detailed discussion of the Renaissance origins of the 'museum' and the different rationales underpinning Wunderkammer and chambres des merveilles [cabinets of curiosity], see Falguière (2003).

8 V&A, 'Opening the Cabinet of Curiosities Part II', 2017. https://www.vam.ac.uk/research/projects/opening-the-cabinet-of-curiosities-part-ii, accessed 19 March 2024.

9 On the significance of both taxidermy and dioramas in presenting so-called 'objective truths' within the natural history museum, see Aloi (2018) and Geismar (2018).

10 This is partly practical as, apart from the insect room, the museum is not air-conditioned but relies on large fans to keep the building cool.

11 Doucet suggests that the head of the executed convict D'Chimbo preserved in formaldehyde might have once been on display in the museum but has since been removed and buried.

Otherwise, most of the objects listed appear in his account.

[12] Saint Laurent du Maroni was the purpose-built administrative centre of the penal colony established in 1858. The Musée du bagne is located in a former kitchen building within the Camp de la Transportation heritage site.

[13] Over 80 sites belonging to the penal colony were found across French Guiana. The three islands comprising the Salvation Islands held a relatively small convict population and were generally reserved for political prisoners, violent criminals, and escapees.

[14] The new permanent exhibition at the Musée National de l'Histoire d'immigration opened in June 2023. No reference is made to convict transportation and very limited attention is given to post-war mobility between France and its former colonies.

[15] Collectivité territorial de Guyane, '[Visite Ministérielle] Projet de réhabilitation du site Jean Martial: un comité de pilotage a été annoncé et le plan de financement sera arrêté en juillet 2023', 10 December 2022. https://www.ctguyane.fr/visite-ministerielle-projet-de-rehabilitation-du-site-jean-martial-un-comite-de-pilotage-a-ete-annonce-et-le-plan-de-financement-sera-arrete-en-juillet-2023/, accessed 19 March 2024.

[16] One small-scale example based around the idea of 'home' is the exhibition dedicated to residents located in one of the former 'case' buildings in the Transportation Camp in Saint Laurent du Maroni. The exhibition repurposes former cell spaces as living rooms decorated with objects, photographs and audio-visual oral histories provided by members of the town's different ethnic populations.

[17] Bernard Montabo, 'Cacao, ou les premiers temps du bagne', France-Guyane 16 March 2021. https://www.franceguyane.fr/actualite/culture-et-patrimoine/un-nom-une-histoire/cacao-ou-les-premiers-temps-des-bagnes-3942.php, accessed 19 March 2024.

[18] M.B., 'Un collectionneur devenu "éducateur de l'environnement"', Une Saison en Guyane 19 April 2012. https://www.une-saison-en-guyane.com/n08/des-assos-qui-font-avancer-la-guyane-un-collectionneur-devenu-educateur-a-lenvironnement/, accessed 19 March 2024.

[19] The population of French Guiana was around 240,000 in 2012. INSEE, 'Évolution et structure de la population en 2017: Département de la Guyane (973)', 2020. https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4515315?geo=DEP-973#ancre-POP_T1, accessed 19 March 2024.

[20] Ian Hamel, 'Il y a 40 ans, la France voulait developer la Guyane…sans les Guyanais', Le Point 4 April 2017. https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/il-y-a-40-ans-la-france-voulait-developper-la-guyane-sans-les-guyanais-04-04-2017-2117172_23.php#11, accessed 19 March 2024.

[21] M.B., 'Un collectionneur devenu "éducateur de l'environnement"'.

[22] This is the case, for example, at Wollaton Hall in Nottingham, a site which has consolidated multiple collections with its original collection of taxidermy, and which currently presents its collection in terms of a 'Museum of a Museum'.

[23] I am paraphrasing the exact quotation which was delivered in French.

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