

Book Review

Paul Basu and Wayne Modest (eds.), *Museums, Heritage and International Development*, New York: Routledge, 2015, hardcover £90.00, pp. ix+345.

Paul Basu's and Wayne Modest's edited volume *Museums, Heritage and International Development* builds on and critically considers a premise that most heritage and museum professionals will be familiar with. Culture and heritage can - and should - be engaged with as part of an international development agenda, as this fosters economic and social development and adheres to the view that freedom of cultural expression is a fundamental human right. As many of the authors that contribute to *Museums, Heritage and International Development* demonstrate, this is certainly not an unrealistic goal - but as is often the case when a universal principle or idea is applied in diverse local contexts, the underlying motivations for and outcomes of such engagements vary dramatically.

Growing out of a 2011 symposium on this theme and with the intention of bringing together practitioners and academics from a range of disciplines and regions, the sixteen chapters in *Museums, Heritage and International Development* are balanced between pragmatic observations from the field and broader reflections on the past, present and future of the cultural heritage-international development relationship. While museums are not the central focus of every chapter, there are a number of contributions that discuss the practicalities and challenges of museum programmes in an international development setting. Two such chapters fruitfully assess some of Tropenmuseum's programmes, for instance: Van Hout describes the collaboration with the Sintang community in Indonesia to create Museum Kapuas Raya, and the lessons about community engagement and social cohesion that emerged from this; while Hilderling, Modest and Aztouti reflect on Tropenmuseum's funding, policies and exhibition history in the post-colonial period. Both contributions highlight the intensely political nature of the museum-international development relationship, and the 'entanglements between colonial relations, museum ethnography and development cooperation' (Hilderling, Modest & Aztouti: 312) that are evident in many of the examples featured in the book.

Another theme that emerges clearly from *Museums, Heritage and International Development* is the sometimes-incompatible nature of 'universal' cultural development concepts and principles when applied in local settings. Basu's and Zetterstrom-Sharp's consideration of 'dysfunctional heritage' in Sierra Leone draws on three examples of traditions (urban masquerade traditions, lantern parades and female genital cutting) that are of clear cultural significance but are 'harmful' in practice and thus do not fit into universal heritage and cultural development conventions in their original forms. In some cases this friction has been negotiated and 'sanitized', rendering it 'safe' for inclusion in a development agenda. Such examples highlight the contradiction embedded within international guidelines such as the World Commission on Culture and Development's *Our Creative Diversity* (1996), Basu and Zetterstrom-Sharp argue, whereby a 'relativistic view of culture and a universalist view of ethics' is promoted, 'ignoring the fact that cultural self-determination may conflict with global ethics' (59).

This local negotiation and/or resistance of 'global' standards is taken up in Nardella and Mallinson's insightful chapter on a World Bank-funded project in Aksum, Ethiopia. In this instance, however, the authors describe how the local ultimately prevailed over the global: the regimented systems and protocols imposed by the World Bank for the Aksum Museum development failed to accommodate the specific conditions and attitudes on the ground, and were quickly replaced with local solutions (e.g. local materials, vernacular building crafts, a

different site and greater input by the community). Reflecting on the challenges that arose from this global-local relationship and their own experiences as external 'experts' brought in for the project, Nardella and Mallinson remark that they now believe that the procurement processes and reporting expectations common amongst development funds and NGOs 'crystallizes richer countries' attitudes about giving to poorer nations, in that it reflects the fears of corruption, inefficiency and confusion; the desire to control the process paradoxically results in promoting what it aims to avoid' (200).

'Thus,' they go on, 'one could argue that the [World] Bank puts in place cumbersome procedures to make itself necessary to sort things out rather than actually supporting the client in its learning process' (201).

On the whole the contributing authors are upfront about their involvements in the projects they describe, though some achieve greater critical reflection than others. This kind of analysis is one of the strengths of chapters by McLeod and McKrew, regarding museum development in Ghana and health education in Malawi respectively. McLeod opens his chapter with the somewhat apologetic remark that much of what he has to say about museum development in Ghana is 'obvious' (143), but the questions and contradictions he subsequently raises are compelling. 'If we do not know how much money has gone into the system or how it fits into some general strategy, how can we judge how well it has been spent?' he asks (144). In acknowledging this issue, McLeod unfolds another layer: 'So why do donors spend money on museum development? Again there is a problem: those involved in specific projects rarely make explicit their motives, nor do they define what they hope to achieve except in the most general of terms' (144). Rather than trying to assign monetary value to development outcomes, McLeod concludes, perhaps we would be better off determining the success of cultural development projects on the basis of skills gained, employment maintained, museums developed and improved, and government commitments made (148). A similar argument is made in McKrew's chapter, where she describes efforts to engage Malawians on a range of health issues via museum exhibitions. This project, while a modest success in some respects, revealed an underlying skills and knowledge gap in Malawi about museums generally – and in doing so, also highlighted a way forward for cultural development strategies in the country (226).

Lessons learned and future directions to take are identified by many authors in *Museums, Heritage and International Development*, only a few of which have been mentioned in this review. The book leaves an impression of being caught in the midst of an important, ongoing conversation that is perhaps - in some instances, as Basu and Zetterstrom-Sharp note in their chapter (79) - fundamentally unresolvable. This is in itself a valuable idea that museum and heritage practitioners and academics should embrace, and is integral to the aim of Modest and Basu in compiling the volume: 'the true power of culture as a force acting in relation to development has yet to be fully explored and understood,' they note, but 'by pairing the temporalities and values of development with those of its ostensible opposite – heritage – we hope to have begun a conversation that provokes new ways of thinking about both' (26). *Museums, Heritage and International Development* is a multifaceted congregation of ideas, experiences and questions that warrants consideration by practitioners and academics alike.

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