Representing Culture in Contemporary Vietnam: the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology

Casual visitors to museums around the world probably do not think of museums as particularly objectionable or as sites of public debate. Museums are commonly perceived as places to visit on holiday, or where schoolchildren are taken on class trips. Yet, as “naturalized cultural institutions,” museums are not only tools of education, which preserve and display objects or images loaded with symbolic capital but are also involved in the production of national and cultural identities (Simpson 2001: 2). Over the past few decades, museums worldwide have become contested sites where diverse communities debate issues of authority, representation and cultural identity (Karp and Lavine 1991). There has been a growing interest in studying museum practices and challenging Eurocentric epistemologies of power and authority, in western and non-western societies (Bennett 1995; Clifford 1997; Kaplan 1994; Kreps 2003; Simpson 2001).

In this dissertation research, I will explore the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME), its mission, history and practices in the public sphere and its relationships with other Vietnamese museums and anthropological scholarship in Vietnam, as well as with the international museum community. I will focus on the VME’s attempts to adopt a “new museology” approach and its programs of community involvement and preservation of intangible and tangible cultural heritage. This research will contribute to a better understanding of museum practice and anthropology in Vietnam and to the literature on museology in multi-ethnic states and non-western cultures.

In the critique of museums, anthropological museums in particular have been challenged to adopt new approaches and methods. In particular, criticism has come from
indigenous and non-western communities whose cultures have been historically represented in museums, but who have been excluded from conventional museum practice (Simpson 2001: 2). Debates about rightful ownership of cultural property and human remains and the issue of repatriation have emerged since the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) by the United States Congress in 1990.¹ In her groundbreaking study, Simpson points out that these multivalent issues have transformed the anthropological museum world. Many museums have confronted the colonial legacies under which many ethnographic collections were composed and have developed new approaches in representing cultures (Simpson 2001).

In response to these challenges, a “new museology” movement has gained popularity in the international museum community over the past few decades. The “new museology” movement is rooted in the appearance of community-based museum initiatives and social protests of the 1960s and 1970s (Kreps 2003: 7). The philosophical principles, as outlined in the 1984 Declaration of Quebec, are primarily concerned with social progress, community development and challenging the conventional concepts of the museum (Kreps 2003: 9). Whereas conventional museums are object-centered, the new museology posits a people-centered approach and a moving away from the simple preservation of material culture. The new museology also asserts that culture is fluid and flexible, with a capacity for change, which contrasts with the conventional paradigm that tends to fix cultures in time and space and focus on the past.

In seeking a to increase community involvement and dialogue, the new museology stresses a participatory approach and exhorts an increased democratization of

¹ NAGPRA is intended to protect burial sites and requires federally-funded museums to make inventories of Native American and Hawaiian human remains, funerary, and ceremonial objects available, and provides the legal right for tribes to request repatriation of these materials (Simpson 2001: 3).
museum practices with community-based initiatives and greater access to collections and archives (Kreps 2003; see also Karp, Kreamer and Lavine 1992). Whereas in the past, museums were perceived as elitist institutions which served narrowly defined audiences, many museums today seek to develop closer relationships and to create ways for communities to face contemporary social and political issues (Simpson 2001: 247). Museums and anthropologists working in the new museology strive to meet the needs of diverse communities by emphasizing protection and promotion of living culture and revitalization of arts or “ethno-forms” (Kaneko in Salemink 2001; Simpson 2001: 247). In stressing a participatory approach, the new museology tries to encourage community members to share their knowledge, experiences and resources (Kreps 2003: 10).

The birth of the museum in Vietnam can be traced to late 19th century French colonial rule. In building museums in Vietnam, the French introduced specific “visual practices” and systems of knowledge such as ethnology, archaeology, preservation and archiving (Schwenkel 2004: 233). Like many other institutions during colonial rule, the museum was a specific western cultural construction which was intended to “modernize” the colony. Likewise, in training ethnologists and other scholars, many Vietnamese students were sent to France, thus reinforcing the presumed superiority of a western (French) model (Mac 1977).

Since independence,² Vietnamese museums, like other important cultural institutions, have been transformed according to a dominant discursive practice that poses Vietnamese history as a narrative of resistance to foreign aggression (Pelley 2002).

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² 1945 is recognized as the year of independence by the Vietnamese state, since this is the year Ho Chi Minh and other leaders officially declared the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (now Socialist Republic of Vietnam). French imperial rule was not completely ended until 1954, with the defeat at Dien Bien Phu.
Schwenkel observes that museums in Vietnam are characterized by a clear didactic purpose, with exhibits that present linear, chronological narratives that are non-interactive and are generally not open to alternative narratives, meanings or observations (2004). In her study of museums and commemoration, Schwenkel found that most of her informants tended to view Vietnamese museums as boring in their repetition of ideological messages about wars against foreign imperialism and as lacking in creative and aesthetic appeal (2004: 226, 232). Schwenkel observed that Vietnamese museums generally attract more foreign visitors than Vietnamese citizens (232). According to her informants, Vietnamese museums failed to draw citizens because the museum staff and curators are often perceived as “lacking heart” in their objectives (232).

In contrast, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) has become widely regarded for its dynamic and ‘progressive’ attempts to adopt a new paradigm of museology in their efforts to not only portray and document, but also preserve and protect and develop the cultures of Vietnam’s 54 ethnic groups (Proschan 2005). Opened in 1997, the VME has strived to develop community-based, participatory exhibitions in an attempt to assist indigenous communities in their efforts to safeguard their cultural heritage. By focusing on living cultural traditions and by training ethnic-minority researchers, the VME has shifted from the simple preservation of material culture. Through public programs, educational activities and ethnographic filmmaking (aimed at both domestic and international visitors), the museum aims to promote and protect cultural practices and promote representations that communities identify as part of their cultural heritage. By involving “culture bearers” to participate in museum practices, the VME envisions itself as a site for dialogue between visitors and individuals.
As a national museum, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology falls under the administration of the central government. As part of the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, the VME has academic partners such as the Institute for Ethnology in Hanoi. Situated in a multi-ethnic, Communist country that is currently experiencing profound changes, the VME must also support the basic aims of Vietnamese cultural, social and political institutions: unity in diversity, reinforcing collective identity and a strong sense of Vietnamese culture. It must thus balance the needs of the state with the needs of the diverse population.

Yet the VME also looks outwardly in its approach. In contrast to other Vietnamese museums, it sponsors international training for its staff and welcomes collaboration with international scholars and museums. In 2003, the VME curated a joint international exhibition on Vietnamese culture at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. It has developed programs with the UNESCO Culture office in Hanoi and the Ford foundation and other international organizations. It sends representatives to participate in workshops (Asia Pacific 2004). It has received support from many international partner institutions in France, Japan and the Netherlands (Salemink 2001). Thus, the VME operates within complex frameworks: it is a national and an ethnological museum that strives to also operate in an international context. How does it balance its these needs and demands?

Following Kreps’ approach, I will examine the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and its practices as cultural constructs located in specific social, political, economic and historical contexts. I will combine a critical theory approach with ethnographic methods including participant observation and life histories to develop an understanding of the
museum from the inside perspective, and through the viewpoints of those who create the museum and its practices in their everyday work.

In this twelve-month project, I will focus on the VME's efforts to adopt a new museology, and its efforts to protect and promote the cultural heritage of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups. I will also explore how the VME balances the demands of a diverse population with the demands of the state. Until recently, museology relied almost exclusively on western knowledge systems which dictated how cultural materials were viewed, curated and organized and transformed into objects of culture, art, history and heritage (Kreps 2003). How has museum practice developed in Vietnam and what was its status before independence? What kind of an approach has the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, a relatively new museum, adopted?

To answer these questions, I will conduct participatory research at the VME in Hanoi where I will work as a volunteer with the museum curators and administration. Of the ten main divisions of the museum, I will focus on those which involve education and curatorial practices. I will reside in the neighborhood where many Museum staff members live, in order to develop a holistic perspective of the VME community. I will draw on the participatory methodology that is a hallmark of anthropological research: immersion in the host community, participant observation, ethnographic interviewing (formal and informal), and recording life stories. The study of life histories will provide insight into generational differences and the transformation of concepts of culture and tradition. I will also carry out visitor surveys at the Museum, the results of which will be shared with the VME. I will also interview international scholars who work with the VME, such as those from the American Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian
Institution and the Ford Foundation and UNESCO Hanoi, in order to provide insight into the Museum's international relationships.

In order to ground my study of the VME in anthropological museum practice in Vietnam, I will do some comparative work by taking several research trips to the Museum of Ethnic Cultures in Thai Nguyen province (approx. 60km. north of Hanoi), which is the only other comparable anthropological museum in Vietnam and where I have contacts through Thai Nguyen University. This museum, built in 1962 on the grounds of the French mission, seems to follow a more “conventional” approach to museology and it will be interesting to see how its mission, programs and operating conditions compare with the VME. I will also interview anthropologists at the Institute of Ethnology in Hanoi, and the National Center for Social Sciences and the Humanities in order to better understand the relationships between museum anthropology and research anthropology in the Vietnamese paradigm.

In 2004, I met with the Director of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Nguyen Van Huy, who encouraged me to conduct research at the Museum. During preliminary research for my MA in 2003, I also met with Director Khong Dien of the Institute of Ethnology in Hanoi who welcomed me to meet with other anthropologists. With a strong background in Southeast Asian studies, and knowledge of the literature on museum studies, and with anthropological training, I can be a useful volunteer at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, by providing assistance with museum activities and programs, during the research period. When we met in 2004, and as indicated in the enclosed invitation letter, Director Huy indicated that I would be welcome in this dual capacity and in fact, working as a volunteer will complement my research by allowing me to be more
involved with the museum practices on a daily basis. With my language preparations, training in anthropological methods, knowledge of area and museum studies and previous research experience in Vietnam, I am well-equipped to carry out this important research.

By March, 2006 I will have completed comprehensive exams and will have submitted a more developed version of this proposal to my doctoral committee for approval as my dissertation project. By the start of this project, I will have processed my proposal through the University’s Internal Review Board for the protection of human subjects. My primary concern in the project will be to protect the relative anonymity of the people I interview and work with, and to be sensitive to and foreground their concerns throughout the project and afterward, following the Code of Ethics as formulated by the American Anthropological Association.3 By the start of this project, I will have completed all requirements for the doctorate except for the dissertation.

This ethnographic research will culminate in a written ethnography of the VME, which I will write on return to Honolulu. This will form the basis of my dissertation, a copy of which will be furnished to the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. After completing my doctorate, I will work to translate my ethnography of the Museum into Vietnamese, to help provide for further international collaboration. As a bilingual text, this ethnography will provide more groundwork for the VME to further develop exchanges with international collaborators. More broadly, this project will provide insights into the challenges and key issues which confront museums and communities worldwide where analogous circumstances prevail in the struggle to sustain identity while processes of globalization advance. Ultimately, the project will thus contribute to a stronger foundation for collaboration and linkages between Americans, Vietnamese and others.

Vietnamese academics are increasingly trying to forge intellectual relationships with foreign scholars and to build collaborative research projects. The lack of available scholarship by foreigners in Vietnamese and the paucity of foreign researchers versant in Vietnamese has exacerbated the intellectual divide between Vietnam and other countries. This is complicated also by differences in academic culture and intellectual traditions. The research I propose here is designed to encourage mutually beneficial research, intended to help close this intellectual divide, and to lay groundwork for future cross-cultural, collaborative projects. Because of my academic preparation, and because of my language preparation, and because of the preliminary research that I have already done, I know that this project is feasible, important and necessary.