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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/921>

DOI: 10.4000/iss.921

ISSN: 2306-4161

Publisher

ICOM - International Council of Museums

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 October 2018

Number of pages: 81-97

ISBN: 978-92-9012-445-0

ISSN: 2309-1290

Electronic reference

Patricia Davison, « The Politics and Poetics of the Bushman Diorama at the South African Museum », *ICOFOM Study Series* [Online], 46 | 2018, Online since 15 October 2018, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/921> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.921>

The Politics and Poetics of the Bushman Diorama at the South African Museum

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*... the diorama aims to establish itself as a substitute for reality,
as something even more real
Umberto Eco*

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the interplay of politics and poetics in relation to the history of the iconic 'Bushman' diorama at the South African Museum, now part of Iziko Museums of South Africa. From 1960 to 2001 the diorama, representing a hunter-gatherer encampment in the Karoo, was on public view and during this time responses to the display changed, as did the wider political context of South Africa and the conceptual context of museology. After prolonged controversy, in

2001 the diorama was closed to the public, pending possible rethinking and reopening. The diorama, however, remained closed. The conceptual and political shifts that underpinned the ascendance and decline of the diorama are traced, focusing attention on power-relations and ethics, while also discussing aesthetic resonance. Ironically, the closed diorama remains open to intellectual and creative engagement. As an archive, it has current relevance for museum studies.

Key words: Diorama, Bushman, South African Museum, museology

RÉSUMÉ

Politique et Poétique du Diorama Bochimán du South African Museum

Cet article définit l'interaction existant entre politique et poétique dans le cadre de l'histoire du diorama iconique Bochimán du South African Museum, lequel fait désormais partie maintenant des Musées Iziko d'Afrique du Sud. De 1960 à 2001, le diorama, qui représente un campement de chasseurs-cueilleurs dans le Karoo, était visible par le grand public; pendant cette période, les réactions à cette présentation ont beaucoup évolué de même que le plus vaste contexte politique d'Afrique du Sud ainsi que le contexte conceptuel de la muséologie. En 2001, après de longues controverses, le diorama a été fermé au public dans l'attente d'une nouvelle approche qui permettrait une éventuelle réouverture. Le diorama est cependant resté fermé. Les virages conceptuel et politique qui sous-tendent l'ascendance et le déclin du diorama sont évidents et attirent l'attention sur le rapport entre pouvoir et éthique, sans oublier bien sûr les discussions sur la résonance esthétique. Ironiquement, bien que fermé le diorama n'en reste pas moins ouvert à une approche intellectuelle et créative. Il présente, en tant qu'archive, un intérêt certain pour les études muséographiques contemporaines.

Mots clé: diorama, Bochimán, South African Museum, muséologie

Since the late 1980s it has become axiomatic to invoke the concepts of 'poetics' and 'politics' in the theoretical analysis of museum exhibitions (Karp & Lavine, 1991; Greenblatt, 1991; Lidchi, 1997). The poetics of museum representations encompasses their expressive, aesthetic aspects, while the politics of museum practice focuses on the power relations which shape and influence particular projects and their reception. It must be acknowledged, however, that in prac-

tice these are not independent conceptual fields but often intersect, overlap and inform each other. This paper focuses on the interplay of these concepts in relation to the Bushman¹ diorama at the South African Museum (SAM) over an extended time period during which there were notable changes in the theoretical discourse of museology, as well as in the politics of museum practice in South Africa. This case study affirms that power-relations are implicit in museum practice but suggests that performance and engagement with diverse audiences have the potential to subvert the dominant narrative and open museum spaces to alternative interpretive voices. This accords with the concept of the 'post-museum' as an institution in which knowledge is no longer unified but fragmented and multi-vocal (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.152). The article concludes with insights that can be drawn from the case study.

The diorama was opened to the public in 1960 and closed in 2001. For decades this installation of a simulated hunter-gatherer encampment in the Karoo captured the public imagination and attracted acclaim for the SAM, the oldest museum in southern Africa. From the late 1980s, however, there was increased criticism of the colonial bias of museums and demands for change in terms of both structure and programming. After 1994, when South Africa became a democracy, museums and heritage institutions became the focus of more intense debate. In 1998 legislation was passed to establish an amalgamated cluster of national museums in Cape Town intended to spearhead transformation in the museum sector.² The SAM became part of this group of museums, now known collectively as Iziko Museums of South Africa (Iziko). The changing political context had bearing on the structure and staffing of Iziko, the composition of the governing board and the constituencies that it aimed to serve. In this context, the Bushman diorama came under closer scrutiny and, in 2001, the recently appointed CEO of Iziko, Jack Lohman, made the decision to close the installation pending consultation with stakeholder communities and possible reopening at a later date. Media responses highlighted the popular appeal of the diorama and questioned the reason for its closure, suggesting that political correctness had been the primary motive. I discuss this later in the paper.

The installation was not dismantled but 'archived' as part of the history of the institution (Davison, 2001). In the years that followed, out of sight did not mean out of mind. Internal meetings and public debates were held to discuss the future of the diorama and the life-casts which had been displayed in that setting and in the adjacent ethnography gallery. Years passed without any positive intervention and, eventually, institutional inertia gave way to the assertion that the casts should be regarded as human remains. Once this had been ratified, the casts were precluded from exhibition on ethical grounds. By 2011 it had been decided in principle that the diorama installation should be

1. The term 'Bushman' is used here instead of the alternative 'San' to describe southern African hunter-gatherers as this was how the installation in the SAM was described and known.

2. Cultural Institutions Act, No. 119 of 1998.

dismantled (Rassool, 2015, p.663). The pragmatic conclusion is that the politics of the diorama had finally eclipsed the poetics of its presentation. None the less, the poetics of the display lingered in the memory of the many visitors who were moved by its evocative visual appeal and also in the minds of indigenous communities who viewed the diorama with nostalgia for a former way of life and considered the closure to be an exclusion of their heritage from public recognition. Of museological interest is the fact that, despite being closed to the public for over a decade, the archived diorama continues to have a presence in curatorial, academic and popular discourse.³ Artist and academic, Pippa Skotnes, who has sustained a long-term visual and intellectual engagement with the diorama, comments:

Like many people, I have been compelled by the theatricality of it; by its ability to draw in the viewer and encourage a suspension of disbelief; by a deep desire to be absorbed into the landscape . . . Such feelings are reinforced by the beauty of its construction – the perfection of the casting technique, the attention to the detail of colour and expression and the verisimilitude of the painted backdrop (Skotnes, 2014, pp. 47- 48).

”

But there is ambivalence in this response (Skotnes 2014, p. 47), as the serene visual appeal of the diorama obscured a much longer and more poignant narrative of colonial dispossession of the indigenous people who were collectively stereotyped as ‘Bushmen’. The poetics of the diorama depended on historical amnesia, a forgetting of the violent past that had decimated the Bushman population. In post-apartheid South Africa, minorities who descend from these indigenous people have still not been adequately acknowledged in terms of their history, identity or claims to land. Thus debates and controversy about the diorama could not be separated from the conspicuous absence of historical context or contemporary political concerns. In addition, there were unresolved issues relating to the role of museums in society and engagement with stakeholder communities, as well as uncertainty regarding the way the SAM should deal with its own history of representing other cultures. As a museological case study, the diorama highlights these dilemmas.

The early decades of the diorama

The diorama was conceptualized in the late 1950s, over a decade before Cameron (1971) drew attention to the museum as a forum of ideas, and long before the ‘new’ museology of the late 1980s highlighted a critical self-awareness of

3. A recent press headline deplored the closure of the diorama (Smith, Cape Times, 16 August 2017, p. 9); see also Witz, Minkley & Rassool (2017) for recently-published references to the diorama.

curatorial subjectivity (Vergo, 1989). The paradigm of scientific objectivity and authenticity prevailed at the SAM and the trend in museum display at the time was the habitat group. The SAM was already well-known for its collection of life-casts of Bushman which had been produced in the early twentieth century when research into racial typology had been actively pursued by the museum director, Louis Péringuey (Davison, 1993). Although the casts proved to have no scientific value, they became a key visitor attraction and remained on public display without any contextual information except that relating to their skin-colour, height and other physical features. Thus the focus on racial difference was perpetuated in the SAM long after racial typology had been discredited on scientific grounds. Although the making of the diorama was intended to provide an environmental context for the casts and thereby deflect attention away from the singular focus on race, the public remained captivated by the life-like casts which had long been a major attraction to the SAM.

Thirteen cast figures were placed against a finely painted landscape of the Karoo. Rocks, accurately modelled on those of the area, as well as local plants, stones and soil evoked a convincing sense of place, and the careful placing of utensils - ostrich egg-shell flasks, sieves, skin bags, tortoise-shell vessels and quivers - gave convincing visual detail and texture to the scene. The central figures were two hunters holding bows and arrows, and a woman reclining in the shade of a mat-shelter under an acacia tree. In the background three young women and a young man appeared to be walking into the veld; on the left two older women regarded the scene passively, while another pounded edible bulbs; on the right a man reached for a club and another was engaged in cleaning a stretched skin; and in the foreground an old man was kindling a flame with a pair of fire-sticks. All of the figures were minimally dressed in aprons or loincloths made of animal skins. This resulted in the almost-naked bodies of the casts remaining a primary focus of attention despite being placed in a camp scene. Years later, in keeping with ethnographic knowledge, cloaks were added to the casts of women to cover their prominent buttocks which had so fascinated viewers.⁴

Initially, the diorama was viewed through three windows that framed the scene and divided it into three tableaux. In the early 1980s, these were replaced by large glass panes that allowed the full panorama of the display to be viewed - this further enhanced the visual impact of the diorama. The objects used in the display created an illusion of homogeneous contemporaneity - there were no individual labels and no dissonant items to disrupt the sense of timelessness. In fact, the items of material culture in the diorama were not contemporaneous

4. In the early 1980s, the clothing of the casts was changed to be more ethnographically accurate. Although Bushman women always covered their buttocks, the early displays of the casts had drawn attention to *steatopygia* - an accumulation of fat on women's buttocks and thighs - as a physical feature of particular interest to viewers; the central reclining woman was covered with a cloak. The complaints from tour-guides confirmed that voyeurism was a significant part of the visitor experience.

with the casts or with each other, nor did they come from the same geographical region - they were selected to create an imagined reality. Paradoxically, as noted by Umberto Eco (1986, p.8), the convincing naturalism of a diorama display is achieved by being constructed entirely artificially.

The success of the Bushman diorama derived from a combination of aesthetic realism and human scale - the poetics of the scene appealed to the viewer's imagination while reinforcing the tropes of 'nature' and the 'primitive'. The body-casts remained a source of fascination - simultaneously familiar and 'other'. Dioramas in museums frequently depict natural history habitat scenes, in which mounted animals are placed in recreated 'natural' environments. By presenting the casts of Bushmen in this way, in a museum largely associated with natural history, viewers were prompted to place them, consciously or unconsciously, in the realm of nature rather than culture. In the early 1960s a policy decision was taken to relocate the colonial history collections of the SAM to a separate building which led to the formation, a few years later, of the South African Cultural History Museum. Significantly, the anthropology collections, including the Bushman casts and their material culture, remained in the SAM with the natural history collections. The result was that ethnography was physically and conceptually separated from cultural history and portrayed as part of unchanging tradition (Cluver & Davison, 1999). From the mid-1970s onwards, the association of the casts with natural history became a key issue for critics of the diorama. The political context of apartheid South Africa added cogency to the criticism that the location of the diorama within the context of natural history rather than cultural history was racially motivated. The claim that the diorama was racist in conception has been sustained and continues to evoke critical and provocative responses ("Curating the colonial crime scene", 2018).

The perception of Bushmen as 'children of nature' was also perpetuated in popular literature, such as the novels of Laurens van der Post, as well as in film and television. Tour-guides affirmed the stereotype of hunter-gatherers as living in isolated, archaic harmony with their environment. Evidence to the contrary was overlooked and growing public awareness of environmental problems in the face of technological development promoted a nostalgic view of hunting and gathering as a way of life, once shared by all humankind. The diorama reinforced the illusion of an unchanging past and made no attempt to counter the many popular misperceptions and stereotypes about the Bushmen. The most significant absence was the lack of any reference to the colonial history of maltreatment, dispossession and resistance of indigenous hunter-gatherers throughout southern Africa. From the late 1970s, drawing on field research among the Kalahari Bushmen (Lee & De Vore, 1968; Sahlins, 1974), successful adaptation to environment became a popular theme for interpreting the diorama. None the less, the life-like casts remained the primary visitor attraction.

So iconic were the casts that in 1975 the SAM produced a major travelling exhibition presenting glass-fibre replicas of the original plaster-casts in a series

of tableaux on 'The Bushmen' and their way of life.⁵ The exhibition travelled to Europe where it was shown in museums in seven countries. The stereotype of preserving a disappearing way of life was perpetuated, which was an expedient deflection from the harsh realities of life for indigenous people in apartheid South Africa and neighbouring South West Africa (now Namibia). The travelling exhibition repeated the selective visual narrative of the diorama and also echoed earlier politically-motivated exhibitions of living Bushmen at the Empire Exhibition in 1936 and the Van Riebeeck Festival in 1952 where they were presented as primitive people, close to extinction, and in need of state protection, while the colonial history of their decimation was omitted (Witz, 2003).

In the context of apartheid South Africa, museums were perceived as being primarily for white audiences. Even though access to the SAM was not segregated on the basis of race, the wider context of segregation and inequality in South Africa was so pervasive that museums were widely regarded by 'non-whites' as being elitist and colonial. When Nelson Mandela addressed the nation on Heritage Day in 1997, he commented that most museums in South Africa 'represent the kind of heritage that glorified mainly white and colonial history' and deplored the depiction of African people as lesser beings in some natural history museums (Cluver & Davison, 1999, p. 275). This was regarded as a direct reference to the Bushman diorama in the SAM.

Rethinking the diorama - 1980 to 2001

During the 1980s, my colleague, Gerald Klinghardt, and I developed a small exhibition of 'story-boards' that drew attention to the history of the diorama and the concepts that had shaped it. More generally the intention of the display, 'About the diorama', was to raise public awareness about museum authority and power-relations (Coombes, 2003, pp. 225-227). In accord with museological theory of the time (Clifford, 1988; Durrans, 1988), we felt that there was the potential for creative engagement by making explicit the implicit assumptions and value judgements that underpinned museum practice. In addition, we added text panels that outlined the history of the people who were cast. However, many critical issues regarding the ethnographic appropriation and representation of cultural 'others' remained unresolved, including the unequal power relations that had informed the casting project and, indeed, our own project. From a viewer's perspective, the display about the diorama was far less compelling than the diorama itself and few visitors spent time reading the texts. This highlighted the fact that the responses of museum audiences cannot

5. In 1975/76 the SAM, supported by the National Department of Education, sent a travelling exhibition on 'The Bushmen' to Europe where it was shown in museums in Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Holland, Spain and Scotland. In the political climate of apartheid a number of countries rejected the exhibition. Some of the unfinished glass-fibre casts were used later in 1996 in the 'Miscast' exhibition.

be assumed to follow the curatorial narrative. Some years later, in 1996, the dissonance between curatorial intention and viewer responses was shown very clearly in relation to the exhibition, 'Miscast', that was shown at the South African National Gallery. The exhibition represented a counterpoint to the diorama and drew heavily on the physical anthropology research collections housed in the SAM.

By the mid-1990s the political structure of South Africa had undergone the momentous transition to democratic rule. The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, the unbanning of the ANC and the advent of a democratically-elected government in 1994 affected every part of civil society, including museums and heritage institutions. There was widespread discussion of the role that museums could play in social and cultural transformation, in redressing past discrimination and in creating the space for multicultural engagement. Much has been written about the 'Miscast' exhibition, curated by artist Pippa Skotnes (Coombes, 2003; Kasfir, 1997; Lane, 1996, Skotnes, 2002), and this will not be repeated here, except to comment on the relationship of 'Miscast' to the diorama. Skotnes has written that her curatorial strategy was to create an environment that was almost diametrically opposed to that of the diorama but which provided a sensory experience for viewers. 'Whereas the diorama occluded all traces of history and intellectual traditions, "Miscast" cast these in leading roles . . .' (Skotnes, 2014, p. 55). In one room, visitors had no option but to walk over vinyl floor tiles printed with historical accounts of violence and images of Bushmen; in another fragmented limbs and torsos, re-cast from the original casts in the SAM, were illuminated from within and presented on plinths in the manner of sculpture. If the diorama presented a romanticized view of hunter-gatherer life which evoked a sense of longing for an imagined past, 'Miscast' countered that illusion by drawing on the material archive to reveal the colonial violence and dehumanization inflicted on the Bushmen. Responses from descendant communities were unexpected and unprecedented in outrage - they challenged the right of the curator to represent their history and accused the National Gallery of perpetuating the colonial humiliation of the past. Here the politics and authority of curatorship was foregrounded and the Gallery was quick to acknowledge the need for dialogue and negotiation. Public forums followed and hundreds of visitor comments were documented; controversy continued throughout the five-month duration of the exhibition. Twenty years later, 'Miscast' remains a landmark exhibition in museum discourse and in the history of the South African National Gallery (Tietze, 2017).

It was hoped that there would be greater public engagement with the diorama during the 'Miscast' exhibition but this did not take place. After the close of 'Miscast', however, the SAM invited Pippa Skotnes to curate an exhibition in the room adjacent to the diorama that included a number of panels of Bushman rock paintings. She installed some of the images that had been used in 'Miscast' to draw attention to the work of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd who, in the 1860s, had transcribed the /Xam language and the beliefs that were

essential to the understanding of rock art. At the time, Skotnes also proposed modifying the diorama to make viewers aware of the problematic absence of history but this was not implemented.

In the same year as the 'Miscast' exhibition, the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage (1996) was published by the national Department of Arts and Culture.⁶ It had followed a lengthy process of consultation and was intended to be the blueprint for transformation in the heritage sector. It advocated the rationalization and restructuring of national museums in South Africa. This was ratified in legislation by the Cultural Institutions Act of 1998 which provided for the formation of two 'Flagship' amalgamated institutions, one based in Pretoria and one in Cape Town. Thus the SAM became part of the Southern Flagship Institution, later renamed Iziko Museums of South Africa (Iziko). Within this new cluster of museums, the formerly separate South African Cultural History Museum became linked once more with the SAM and this structural change allowed for the eventual integration of the colonial history collections with the ethnographic collections. This integration gave rise to the Social History Collections Division of Iziko and to new curatorial portfolios that aimed to cut across former disciplinary boundaries.

From 1999 onwards, the political imperative to transform the long-established national museums became more pressing⁷. A new governing Council and management structure were put in place with a mandate to redress discriminatory practices. It was in this context that the diorama became the focus of increased media attention and political inquiry in parliament. The Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, which was responsible for funding national museums, was asked to respond to assertions that the diorama demeaned and dehumanized the victims of racial oppression. In this climate of opinion, the closing of the diorama became inevitable. In April 2001 it was screened from public view and 'archived' with the possibility of it being re-interpreted and re-opened at a later date.

If relations of power in museum practice derive from the curatorial authority to select, classify and represent knowledge (Karp & Lavine, 1991), this is particularly relevant in exhibitions of other cultures. The high profile of the diorama gave it symbolic value as a signifier of museum practice more generally, and closing the diorama was seen as an indicator of transformation of museums into more democratic institutions. Politicians who had not seen the diorama did not hesitate to condemn it as racist. Detractors suggested that the SAM had kept the diorama open for so many years, despite being surrounded by controversy, simply because it was the biggest visitor attraction. For others,

6. <http://www.dac.gov/content/white-paper-arts-culture-and-heritage-o>

7. Museums, like the SAM, which had their roots in the nineteenth century carried a burden of the colonial past which was not the case in museums which were established after 1990. The latter included the Robben Island Museum, the District 6 Museum and Freedom Park, all of which embraced narratives of resistance to apartheid.

the closure was long overdue - it symbolized a restoration of dignity and full humanity to the /Xam Bushmen. From the SAM perspective, closing the diorama opened a space for debate about the diorama in the public and academic domains. The diorama dilemma became inscribed in museological discourse:

Every attempt to deal with this problematic display. . . produces friction and foregrounds the museum itself, its operations, its history and mistakes, in a series of reflexive moves that make the museum, its practices and its mediations visible. We can see here a critical shift from an informing museology (the exhibit as a neutral vehicle for the transmission of information) to a performing museology (the museum itself is on display) (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006, p. 41).

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Diorama dialogues

When the diorama was closed, it was not anticipated that uncertainty about its future would continue for over a decade. During the period to from 2002 to 2010 the CEO of Iziko was Prof. H. C. (Jatti) Bredekamp who facilitated consultation with representatives of indigenous stakeholders regarding Iziko's holdings of human skeletal remains, as well as the casts (Bredekamp, 2006). The life-like presence of the casts and their historical connection with scientific racism formed one of the key concerns in relation to the future of the diorama. The issue of consultation was complex as there was not a single descendant community but a number of diverse stakeholder groups with different perspectives. A successful example of consultation with community stakeholders took place in relation to the development of a new exhibition of Bushman rock paintings and engravings that had been in the SAM for almost a century but had not been adequately displayed or interpreted. The new exhibition, ‘/Qe – the power of rock art’, opened in December 2003 and drew on a body of scholarly knowledge relating to San spiritual beliefs. Archaeologist, Dr Janette Deacon, who was responsible for scripting the exhibition texts, worked closely with indigenous groups and allowed the ancestral voices of Bushmen to be reflected in the exhibition. The title of the exhibition was suggested by /Una Rooi, one of the elders who spoke the endangered Nuu language and was a guardian of intangible heritage and local knowledge. The exhibition is significant in that it both acknowledges and honours the San people, past and present. Unlike the diorama which was an idealised construct based entirely on the views of outsiders, this exhibition sought to respect indigenous knowledge and beliefs.

The exhibition script drew on oral narratives transcribed in the nineteenth-century from the /Xam⁸ (southern Bushman) language by Dr Wilhelm Bleek and

8. In transcriptions of the /Xam language, the following diacritical signs are used: / indicates a

his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd. They had worked with a group of convicts in Cape Town who had come from the Kenhardt district of the northern Cape and were among the few remaining speakers of the /Xam language. Eventually, over 12 000 notebook pages of /Xam cultural beliefs and mythology were transcribed from the verbal accounts of //Kabbo, Dia!kwain, /Han#kass'o and others.⁹ Over a century after Bleek died, cognitive anthropologist and rock art researcher, David Lewis-Williams, found in the Bleek and Lloyd archive a source of illumination for the interpretation of rock art. His analysis showed that, far from being primitive, the iconography of the art was complex, multi-layered and deeply spiritual (Lewis-Williams, 1981). This insight was entirely absent in the narrative of the diorama, as well as in the explanatory labels of the rock art panels that had been exhibited at the SAM since 1918 (Davison, 2012).

The poetics of the rock art exhibition constitutes a spatial interpretation of the landscape in which the art was inscribed and which had profound meaning for the artists. There is an inverse relationship between space and object, whereby awareness of emptiness heightens the presence of the rock art on display and projects the body of the viewer into a visual experience of an imagined landscape. Contrary to the diorama which was characterised by the presence of the body-casts, the design of the rock art gallery invites a sensory and poetic engagement with absence and poignant loss of a cultural heritage. By exhibiting the rock art of the Bushmen in a way that inspires respect for the artists, it was hoped that the negative racial stereotypes associated with the diorama would be countered and replaced with empathy for their culture.

Another initiative that involved consultation with indigenous communities was in the development of a policy on the management of human remains in Iziko collections. The publication of 'Skeletons in the Cupboard' (Legassick & Rassool, 2000) had drawn attention to the unethical acquisition by the SAM of human remains for scientific analysis in the years between 1907 and 1917. The project to make the life-casts in the diorama had also taken place at this time and was linked conceptually to the precepts of racial science that were later discredited. In 2003 an audit of Iziko's physical anthropology collections was undertaken and recommendations made regarding human remains that were found to have been collected unethically. In a series of workshops, descendant communities were made aware of the holdings of the SAM and of the possible processes of return and reburial. A draft policy on the management of human remains was circulated for comment to stakeholders and the final policy was ratified by the Iziko Council in 2005 (Bredenkamp, 2006). Thus far, no requests for reburial of human remains have been received by Iziko but

dental click, // - a lateral click, ! - a palatal click and # - an alveolar click. The /Xam language is no longer spoken but the clicks occur in related San languages.

9. The Bleek-Lloyd archive is held by the University of Cape Town. Pippa Skotnes has written extensively about this archive (Skotnes, 2007).

the Advisory Committee set up in terms of the policy guides access to these sensitive collections and how they are curated. All human skeletal material is restricted from being on public exhibition. Consultation regarding Iziko's collections of human remains is an on-going process.

At a forum on the future of the diorama held in June 2007, Prof Bredekamp noted that the Iziko Advisory Committee on Human Remains had recently agreed that there was no inherent problem in displaying the figures which had resulted from the casting project, but that they should be placed in historical context. One of the main reasons for closing the diorama had been the absence of historical interpretation regarding the early history of colonial violence and dispossession, as well as the twentieth-century history of racial science in which the casts had been made for the SAM. Both contexts had been humiliating for the Bushmen. One of the speakers at the forum proposed that the intellectual history of the SAM as a colonial institution, including the diorama, should be presented in an exhibition. Another speaker drew attention to the poetics of the diorama and that it could be re-interpreted to create a multi-faceted display focusing on individuals whose life histories and knowledge had been recorded and preserved in the Bleek/Lloyd archive. In this way, the memory of /Xam people would be honoured. A spokesperson for indigenous communities argued for greater dialogue with the people whose culture and history were being represented, so that their voices could be heard directly, rather than being interpreted by those who controlled the exhibition process. Here the issue of power relations and sharing curatorial authority was raised and accepted in principle but remained to be taken forward in practice.

At the same time, it was suggested that the future of the diorama should be considered in relation to rethinking and planning the other ethnographic displays, as well as to larger issues of transformation at Iziko. Although this made sense at the institutional level, it deflected the specific focus away from the diorama to larger, more diffuse issues that would take time to resolve. The following year, in November 2008, a temporary exhibition curated by Pippa Skotnes on George Stow and the rock art of the San was opened by historian, Nigel Penn, who made reference to the impasse regarding the diorama. Between 2008 and November 2010, when Prof Bredekamp retired as CEO of Iziko, a number of panel discussions about the diorama were held but no decision was taken. The significant point was made that a reconfigured diorama did not have to be a long-term installation but a creative intervention that would draw on the historical archive on the /Xam to reclaim their history and also tell the back-story of the diorama itself, including the casting project. However, the proposal to re-imagine the diorama using creative techniques to convey multiple voices did not prevail as it was deemed necessary to address the bigger issue of colonial bias in all the ethnography displays.

In November 2010, Ms Rooksana Omar was appointed as CEO and a new Council (the governing body of Iziko) also took office. Two years later the diorama was still closed and it was reported that, 'much of the work of re-concep-

tualising our permanent exhibitions must still be undertaken' (Iziko Annual Report, 2012/13, p. 8). Led by historian, Prof. Ciraj Rassool, a member of the new Council, the institutional priority shifted towards addressing the issue of human remains in Iziko collections. This resulted in the plaster-casts being conflated with human remains and thus precluded from exhibition on ethical grounds. In June 2011, the Iziko Council accepted the recommendation from of the sub-committee on Human Remains that all body casts made in the interests of racial science by James Drury should be deemed unethically collected human remains (Rassool, 2015, pp. 662-663). It followed that the diorama would be closed permanently. But this was not the end of the public discourse on the diorama or the Ethnography Gallery of which it had been a significant part.

In 2013, all life-casts, whether made in the interests of racial science, or not,¹⁰ were removed from the ethnography exhibitions and replaced by wire figures. At the same time a series of additional labels and objects were added to the gallery to mark the centenary of the 1913 Land Act which had greatly reduced the land available to the African people of South Africa. Other labels were introduced to explain the changes in the gallery but these were intended as temporary measures. Four years later, they were still in place, highlighting the distance between intention and reality. As George Stocking (1985) wisely noted, large museums tend to be institutionally prone to paradigm lag and thus exhibitions often outlive their conceptual currency. At one level, the diorama also proves this point but, none the less, it has retained iconic status and occupies a unique place in museum history in South Africa. It resonated with viewers and remained vivid in the collective memory despite, or perhaps because of, being contested.

Conclusion

By 2017 the management structure of the SAM had changed and a decision was made to close the Ethnography Gallery, dismantle the exhibitions and take the collections back into storage. On 7 August 2017, as a prelude to the closing of the gallery, a 'cleansing and re-dedication' ceremony was performed by a coalition of community representatives whose traditional material culture had been on display for many years. A commitment was made by the museum curators that new exhibitions would be planned in discussion with source communities and that responsibility to redress omissions and errors of interpretation would be shared. In principle, this would be a form of curatorial power-sharing and would accord with 'post-museum' theory (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.152; Marstine,

10. Apart from the full-body casts that had been made between 1907 and 1924 for the purpose of making a physical record of 'pure' Bushmen (Davison, 1993), the displays included models made in the 1970s of a Xhosa woman dressed in traditional clothing, a Sotho man making a hat of grass and a Lobedu woman cooking. Their faces, hands and feet were cast, with full consent of the individuals concerned, and the bodies were made of straw. These models were used to display clothing and related items of material culture.

2006, p.19) that advocates transparency in curatorial decision-making and working together with museum constituencies. This commitment, however, has yet to be tested in practice and balancing community interests with those of museum professionals may prove challenging. An issue that makes working with communities complex is that community groups seldom speak with a unified voice and contesting views can be difficult to reconcile. This was the case when negotiating with stakeholders about the future of the Bushman diorama. The outcome was inertia on the part of the museum, and a lack of decision-making and action. Although the diorama installation remained closed to the public for 16 years, the discourse surrounding it did not dissipate but remained relevant to current debates, especially those focused on the transformation and de-colonization of museums. Contemporary students of museology and heritage have only seen images of the diorama but they engage actively with the discourse and continue to interact critically with it.

Shortly before the closing of the Ethnography Gallery, an interactive intervention titled 'Curating the Colonial Crime Scene' (2018)¹¹ was staged there and members of the public were invited to participate in transforming and decolonizing the static displays into a lived memory. The event took the form of a performance, in the Xhosa language, in which a restless spirit from the past who had taken the form of an old man bore witness to various crimes perceived to be inherent in the ethnographic displays. Despite being closed for over a decade, the diorama was invoked as a crime of ethnographic violence. The intervention appealed to the emotions more than the intellect and the visual presence of the performers in the gallery was compelling and intriguing; they enlivened the space and triggered the imagination. Ironically, the power of the museum as a cultural domain was not undermined but affirmed by the intervention.

The insight from this event is, I suggest, that inclusion and building relationships with diverse constituencies, even those critical of the institution, is an important aspect of contemporary museum practice and redressing past inequalities. Grewcock (2013, p. 174) argues that embracing process and performance, combined with a recognition of visitors and audiences as participants, serves to open museums to embodied and lived experience. This was affirmed in the intervention described above. Understanding and revealing how relations of power work in museum practice remains important but as Witcomb (2003, p.15) has noted there is a tendency in academic museum studies to assume that the operation of power in museums always has a negative impact on society. In fact, as this case study shows, the reality is more complex.

11. On 12 September 2017 Iziko hosted the one-day event as part of 'Heritage Month' in South Africa. The intervention was organized by the Iziko Education and Public Programmes Department in collaboration with Kara Blackmore, curator, and the Institute for the Creative Arts, Cape Town.

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