

DIGITAL DILEMMAS:

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM AS DISTRIBUTIVE INSTITUTION

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*Introduction*

In a series of lectures given at Oxford University this year, we introduced our students to the history of ethnographic museums, with the Pitt Rivers Museum on our doorstep as a highly significant exemplar of the relationship between academic anthropology, colonial-period collecting and the role of objects in constructions of culture.<sup>1</sup> In looking back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we were examining a period that could be described very simply as one of ‘goods inwards’, when vast quantities of objects from all over the world were purchased or solicited for accession into museums. They were then classified, conserved and displayed according to the intellectual and pedagogic regimes of the day. Our lectures therefore did not just consider the things accumulated within museums. They also addressed architectonics, exhibitionary techniques and the importance of museums as sites for the production of knowledge, where objects and ideas were presented for the edification and enjoyment of the public. Underlying this formulation is, of course, the assumption that visitors would be physically present within the museum and would encounter artefacts in person. As Tony Bennett and others have theorised since the 1990s, museums were thus configured as socially active entities in which people became citizens by participating in their ‘civilising rituals’ and the ‘imagined community’ of the nation was made manifest.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Actor Network Theory has inspired new modes of analysis for deconstructing the history of an institution like the Pitt Rivers Museum and privileging the agency of those who

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared in response to the question posed for the conference, ‘Beyond Modernity: Do Ethnographic Museums Need Ethnography?’, held at the Pigorini Museum in Rome 2012. The conference formed part of the Ethnography Museums and World Cultures research project funded by the European Union between 2008 and 2013, in which the Pitt Rivers Museum was a leading participant. This paper and others presented at the conference will be published in an edited volume later in 2013 entitled *Beyond Modernity: Do Ethnographic Museums Need Ethnography?* (eds. Vito Lattanzi, Sandra Ferracuti and Elisabetta Frasca), Rome: Soprintendenza al Museo Preistorico Etnografico ‘Luigi Pigorini’ and Espera Libreria Archeologica.

<sup>2</sup> See Bennett (1995), Duncan (1995) and Anderson’s chapter ‘The Census, the Map and the Museum’ in his *Imagined Communities* (1991).

created it. For example, the Relational Museum project recognised that the process of bringing ‘goods inwards’ to the museum in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was facilitated by many individuals who, though dispersed across the globe, were interconnected through personal and professional alliances that straddled the British Empire.<sup>3</sup> In this model, the museum is seen as the product of a complex series of human interactions, its collections as the materialised referents of the people who accumulated them. Unearthing the archaeology of the social relations that underpin a museum like the Pitt Rivers has been hugely valuable, but ultimately it is based on the evidence of antique objects and past lives. It presumes that the museum is the core of the operation, while the relationships that produced it from the periphery are now defunct. The museum is thus envisaged as a grand container into which the physical evidence of those relationships has been poured for the purposes of preservation and posterity.

The theories I have briefly described above remain powerful tools for the study of historic museums and collections. However, in the era of the World Wide Web they may require some rethinking. The Internet and its associated technologies have huge implications for ethnographic museums that can be summarised in relation to two main themes. The first is that virtual visitors will soon outnumber actual on-site visitors. Secondly, our collections will increasingly be shared internationally as digitisation projects – sometimes referred to as ‘visual’, ‘digital’ or even ‘virtual’ forms of repatriation – thus enabling museums to extend their reach and accelerate easy access to their collections.<sup>4</sup> In short, whereas the preceding two centuries were about things entering museums – the goods coming inwards – this century is likely to be all about the goods going outwards, as museums rush to digitise their collections in order to make them available to Netizens across the planet. Not only does this development require us to change the way we think about the tangible objects in our museums (as well as their digital referents), it also asks us to reframe the idea of the museum as a physical site, a somatic space of social interaction, the product of sets of relationships or as Foucauldian institutions that create citizens. All of these approaches potentially need to be inverted. In particular, rather than being seen as a vessel in which people and things are gathered together in one place, the museum is set to evolve into an establishment that distributes its contents outwards in all directions via digital formats. I therefore want to argue here that, if museums are becoming *distributive* institutions more than conserving *locations*, a new kind of research will also be required. Rather than focusing on the physically dispersed

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<sup>3</sup> For a full account of the Relational Museum project, see Gosden and Larson (1997).

<sup>4</sup> According to an IT company based in London, virtual visitors to museum websites had already outnumbered physical (on site) visitors in the United Kingdom by 2004. See Future Lab (2004).

groups of agents who created the museums of the past through remittances of things (as in the Relational Museum project), we will need to analyse the relationships that are being created (or are imagined to be created) in the present as new audiences of virtual visitors receive our collections in many places far away from where the actual objects are kept.

The idea of the museum as a distributed institution clearly also contradicts something else that was paradigmatic in the museological theories of earlier periods: the context of the nation. The use of digital formats (websites, databases, apps etc.) allows contemporary museums to address citizens of all countries, to transcend borders and override national constructions of culture. In fact we might suggest that digital museums have a particular saliency for communities who have moved across geopolitical boundaries due to forced migration (refugees) or who dwell in multiple locations (members of a diaspora). For the many tens of thousands who currently reside in refugee camps far away from the land of their birth and the millions of others whose migration histories mean that they are disconnected from the material heritage of their forebears, access to objects – however virtual – may help to sustain memory retrieval, act as therapeutic devices and support collective identity formations. As Paul Basu has observed, the digitisation of museum collections creates ‘object diasporas’ that are ‘potentially invaluable as a resource’ for such people (Basu 2011: 37). Basu rightly notes that, just as the movements of diasporic persons need to be charted anthropologically, so too do the diasporic things that migrate within the spaces of the World Wide Web. We might go further and propose that the two diasporic worlds – of objects and people – are so closely interrelated that they ought to be theorised as such. Alfred Gell’s work is invaluable in this regard, for he tells us that ‘Any one social individual is the sum of their relations (distributed over time and space) with other persons’ and their mind and agency are extended through a ‘dispersed category of material objects, traces and leavings’ (Gell 1998: 222). If we replace the word ‘material’ with ‘virtual’ or ‘digital’ in this quote, then we already have a potent position from which to start our analysis of the effects of the distributive museum. Within the pioneering literature on the Internet, some attempts have been made to study it using anthropological methods.<sup>5</sup> For example, Tom Boellstorff created an anthropological avatar in order to inhabit the virtual world that is ‘Second Life’, and Marilyn Strathern’s conception of the ‘dividual’ has been fruitfully applied in two different readings of ‘Facebook’.<sup>6</sup> However, as yet we have very little analysis of the circulation of virtual

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<sup>5</sup> The first book of this sort was Miller and Slater’s *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* of 2011.

<sup>6</sup> See Boellstorff (2010). On Facebook in the Philippines, see McKay (2010), in North America, see Dalsgaard (2008). Intriguingly, ‘Digital Personhood’ is the title of a new research strand initiated by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council of the UK in 2012.

museum objects and their capacity to create 'Digital Personhood'. This is, of course, largely due to the fact that digital museum projects are still relatively new, and their inventors have naturally concentrated on the creation of a resource, rather than its dissemination and reception. In other cases, when creating websites based on their collections, ethnographic museums have often had a particular community of users in mind. They have therefore consulted with members of that community during the development of the project and/or have been physically closely connected to them, as in 'settler' contexts such as North America. But when making collections available on the Internet, innumerable other kinds of virtual visitors can enter our museums, and many unexpected forms of interaction can occur as a result. As 'cultural informatics' expert Elisa Giaccardi has put it, digitisation not only allows us to 'reproduce existing objects but to actualize new ones. Information and communication technologies are not merely tools for processing data and making it available but can be a force and stimulus for cultural development'(Giaccardi 2006: 30). They can also forge new types of relationships. Such technologies have given museums a vital new set of cultural forms that can be used to emulate the old formats (if so desired), but they can also allow us to deviate from them dramatically by breaking down the barriers to access, relinquishing some of the strictures of curatorial authority and collaborating with 'virtual' partners in novel ways. However, if we are to communicate effectively with these interlocutors, we also need to ask a series of questions about how the digitally distributed museum might be received. Are its contents *The Ones That are Wanted?*<sup>7</sup> What kinds of personal and communal interactions do they inspire? How does the globalising technology of the Internet bisect with local cultural patterns, and does it forge creativity, friction or perhaps both? Although I have yet to conduct a protracted period of research with these questions in mind, I can offer some ethnographic sketches that illustrate responses to a digital project in which I was involved both at the point of production (in my role as curator at the Pitt Rivers) and reception (in my role as a fieldworker).

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<sup>7</sup> This is the title of Corrine Kratz's 2002 book about exhibiting the photographs she made during her fieldwork in Kenya.

*The Tibet Album*

The Tibet album website was developed at the Pitt Rivers between 2006 and 2008 and officially launched at the museum by the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.<sup>8</sup> Featuring six thousand historic photographs of Tibet taken by British colonial officers between 1920 and 1950, it created a digital diaspora of objects destined for consumption by a group of people that includes Tibetans living in India and the other nations that host Tibetan refugees, as well as those who remain in the homeland they vacated in the People's Republic of China. The basic intention behind the project was to make thousands of original prints, negatives and related documents held at the Pitt Rivers Museum and the British Museum fully accessible to those who were unable to visit the museums. Meticulous archival research was pursued for each photographic object that was to appear within the site, and a distinguished Tibetan historian – Tsering Shakya – was among the team who generated the data. His primary role was to fill a major gap in the documentation of the photograph collections by identifying as many of the Tibetans who appeared in the photographs as possible and linking their portraits to biographical information about them. (As a result some three hundred named individuals are now listed on the website.) There are many other innovative features within it, such as an interactive map that enables the user to locate photographs in space and time according to the routes the photographers had followed in Tibet. The photographs are also searchable through a variety of pathways, not according to the usual taxonomies of an ethnographic museum but more in line with criteria of particular relevance to Tibetans. Influenced by project co-director Elizabeth Edwards' publications, we privileged the materiality of photographs – both as archival objects and as images that exist in different formats (e.g. glass plate, lantern slide etc.) – and examined the social relations that were generated through the production and exchange of photographs in inter-cultural encounters in Tibet.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps the most novel component of the site is the 'My Tibet Album' function, which (in emulation of the actual albums in the museums) enables users to make a selection of images, lay them out according to their own visual narratives and then send them by email to others. This was initiated due to our awareness that, even in the Tibetan refugee camps in India, cyber cafes had proliferated, and Tibetans were already using the Internet to breach the separation between the Tibet of exile and the Tibet of the Tibetan-speaking regions of the People's Republic. For them it was a technology that facilitated solidarity across political borders and enabled families and friends to be virtually reunited. The Tibet Album was also an attempt to fill another kind of

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<sup>8</sup> The Tibet Album can be accessed at: <http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk>

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Edwards (2001).

void. Most Tibetans lack access to the huge numbers of photographs that document their heritage in the West because they are based in Asia and cannot physically enter our museums. The holdings of Western museums are particularly important because photographs owned by Tibetans were often destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in Tibet or lost in the upheaval of departure from it after 1959, when tens of thousands of Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama into exile in India. For the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and his followers, photographs such as those in *The Tibet Album* have great potency, as they document Tibet in the period when Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan forms of governance held sway and before the Chinese assumed control of the country in 1959.

Since positive references to the pre-1959 regime of the Dalai Lamas are usually barred by the Chinese government and photographs of the current Dalai Lama are banned, it has been gratifying to know that *The Tibet Album* has generally been accessible to Tibetans within the People's Republic. It is certainly very much in use in the Tibetan refugee camps in India, where the Tibetan community have concentrated their efforts on the perpetuation of Tibetan Buddhist culture and the reconstruction of their homeland in the foothills of the Himalayas. In what follows I will focus on two forms of response to *The Tibet Album* based on my discussions with Tibetans in McLeod Ganj, the site of the Tibetan 'capital in exile'. Apart from anything else, I found that, by introducing the website and speaking about it in a place I have been visiting more than twenty years, the digitally distributed museum changed the nature of the interactions I had there (see Fig. 1 at end). It also revealed that virtual objects have just as much multivalency and slipperiness as their tangible counterparts. They can be deployed in constructive and creative ways but can also trigger friction and negative emotions. Above all, these micro-histories of engagement with digital objects reiterate the fundamental point that objects – even museumised objects – have no fixed meaning and no essential nature: they can be remade and reinterpreted depending on the context of specific people, places and times. I shall speak of individuals, but their uses of British photographs of Tibet pertain to two modes of engagement that have wider currency within their communities. For the sake of brevity I shall call them the recuperative and the rejectionist.

*Digital reincarnation: the recuperative mode*

My first ethnographic vignette tells a rather positive story in which historical photographs have been deployed in a creative manner. It demonstrates how pictures can move from their archival context (via the services of the Web) to help reanimate cultural practices that have been either lost or broken through the experience of exile. Bhutok left his village in southern

Tibet in India in 1960 to become a refugee in India, where he has supported himself by working as a photographer and establishing the 'I Love Tibet' shop in the main bazaar in McLeod Ganj. In this shop he sells prints of all sorts, some of which are purchased by tourists, but the majority by other Tibetans. The latter go to Bhutok's shop because of its extensive range of photo-icons.<sup>10</sup> These images of key figures in Tibetan Buddhism (both living and deceased) are then inserted into Tibetan domestic and public shrines as offerings or for viewing within acts of veneration and commemoration. For some years Bhutok simply made these icons by reproducing photographs that had been taken quite recently. He also copied old illustrations from books. But in the last few years he has turned to digital technology both to source his images and to manipulate them. His double portrait of the Karmapa (the head of one of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism) illustrates the innovative results that have ensued (see Fig. 2 at end). Using Photoshop, Bhutok has been able to place the deceased sixteenth Karmapa into the same visual field as his next incarnation, thus restoring the link in a lineage that has otherwise been threatened with fracture since the Chinese government has attempted to control the recognition of Tibetan religious leaders. The positioning of the two Karmapas alongside one another has been made possible by digital stitching. Importantly for the purposes of this discussion, the black and white photograph of the sixteenth incarnation was taken in the 1940s by the British representative to Tibet, Hugh Richardson, and is now in the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum (as well as on The Tibet Album website). Bhutok's creative appropriation of it reveals the significance of this image for contemporary Tibetans in a way that the object in its archival state cannot and demonstrates how the life of museum objects can be extended and reworked in culturally specific ways through the technology of distribution. For in fact there are two Tibetan monks in India who claim to be the seventeenth incarnation of the Karmapa and, according to Tibetan custom, one way to prove whose claim is most legitimate (amongst others) is through assessment of their physical resemblance to their predecessor. In his twin Karmapa image Bhutok allows the viewer to make this comparison on physiognomic grounds, and by placing the older photograph alongside the colour portrait of Ogyen Thinley Dorje (who presides over a monastery just below McLeod Ganj) he is asserting that Ogyen is the rightful heir to the Karmapa title. In this instance digital technology allows the fundamental Tibetan cultural concept of reincarnation to be perpetuated and activated in a format that can be readily recognised by the customers of the 'I Love Tibet' shop. A tradition is thus reinvented using a global technology but according to the agendas of Tibetans themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> On the development and use of photo-icons in Tibetan exile communities in India, see Harris (2001).

*The politics of possession: the rejectionist mode*

However, not all reactions to digital distribution are so positive, though they may equally be seen to arise from Tibetan assertions of agency. In 2007 I introduced *The Tibet Album* at a talk organised by Tenzin Tsundue, a poet, activist and heroic figure amongst the younger generation of Tibetans who have been born in India. A large and enthusiastic audience of all ages attended the event, and Tsundue publicly endorsed *The Tibet Album* project. However, when I returned to McLeod Ganj in 2008 and interviewed him again he was less complimentary about it, stating: 'Ownership is your motivation. Access is your excuse'. It seemed he had decided that digital distribution could not possibly compensate for the museum's on-going retention of the original objects. Tsundue also expressed a concern that colonial period photography might only reinforce Tibetophilia, a passion in which Tibet continues to be imagined in the West as it has been since James Hilton coined the term 'Shangri-La' in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> He described the love of such photographs as a decadent indulgence and as potentially deleterious to the Tibetan cause because they depict a fantasy past rather than the brutal reality of the present. For him, the most important photographs were therefore of those he called the 'Tibetan martyrs', the people who had died protesting against the Chinese either within the Tibetan regions of the People's Republic or in exile. We were speaking at a time of high tension in McLeod Ganj and only a few weeks after 10 March 2008, when rioting had erupted across the Tibetan plateau and had led to the deaths of both Tibetans and Han Chinese. Photography was playing a crucial role in the dissemination of information about what had happened, and debates were raging among the exiles about the veracity of the imagery used by Chinese news operations, especially the state-owned agency Xinhua. A 'photo evidence wall' had been created at the heart of the exile community, where daily discussions took place over whether a photograph culled from the web was genuine or not. One picture in particular became notorious because it appeared to show a racist Tibetan wielding a sword as if about to attack Han Chinese. The 'Tibetan' later turned out to be a fake (it was suggested that he was a Han policeman in disguise). But when the picture was re-released by Chinese news agencies and embassies a little later, the murderous Tibetan had been digitally erased. Tsundue's objection to the rhetoric of accessibility that surrounds projects like *The Tibet Album* arose from this context, and it alerted me to the shifting terrain in which the digital image is received. For him, the pleasures of reminiscence could only be enjoyed by Tibetans during periods of stability or by those non-Tibetans with the constant

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<sup>11</sup> James Hilton coined the term 'Shangri-La' in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*.



privilege of possession. At a time of crisis, when the web was full of violent and propagandistic imagery, colonial-era British photographs were certainly not the ones that were wanted.

*Some concluding remarks*

The Tibet album website was explicitly geared towards the globally dispersed Tibetan community, but as I have briefly indicated, reactions to it among them have varied. To judge from the emails I have received and a map showing the locations around the world where the site has been accessed, it is of interest to Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike and has been consulted for family history projects, academic research or simply to create a virtual gallery of images of old Tibet to be viewed in the privacy of domestic spaces from Berlin to Beijing. On the other hand, material on the site has been appropriated by state actors who seek to control the representation of Tibet within China, as well as by religious groups, publishers and media organisations who have attached their own interpretations to the images while disregarding any of the historical or biographical information provided on The Tibet Album.<sup>12</sup>

Such actions are, of course, inevitable due to the nature of the technology and the endless reproducibility of images. By digitally distributing some of the contents of the Pitt Rivers and British Museum, we must accept that The Tibet Album will be consumed within the context of wider debates (often of a political nature) and that its life beyond the museum is outside our control. Virtual objects are obviously more susceptible to radical re-appropriation than the physical objects still housed in the old museums. However, they also give rise to creativity and positivity. What I have tried to advocate here is the need for attention to be paid to those who are in receipt of the goods coming outwards from our museums and whose personhood (and the relationships in which they are enmeshed) is likely to be increasingly articulated through digitally distributed things. So, in response to the question posed by this conference – Do ethnographic museums need ethnography? – my answer is emphatically yes. Museum anthropologists may not yet need to conduct fieldwork of the sort Tom Boellstroeff pursued for his *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2010), but an old-style ethnographic engagement with individuals and communities as they embrace or denounce our digital projects is essential if we want to appraise their success and avoid errors in the future. In the past, ethnography provided the information needed to contextualise the goods that had come into our museums and to present them effectively to actual visitors. In the twenty-first century we need ethnographic research that captures the goods going outwards and that follows the digitally

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<sup>12</sup> I discuss debates about the photographic representation of Tibet at much greater length in Harris (2012).

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distributed object to the point of its reception among ‘virtual visitors’ who actually live in multiple locations all over the world.

**Figures 1 and 2 below:**



Fig. 1. Tenzin Tsundue and Clare Harris at the presentation of The Tibet Album website in McLeod Ganj, India, 2007.



Fig. 2. Bhutok's double portrait of the Karmapa.

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