

Comment

著者(英)	Shoichiro Takezawa
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Comment

by **Shoichiro TAKEZAWA**
National Museum of Ethnology

Sad place, Sad story: Why does the museum make me triste?

I began my scholarly career at a graduate school in Paris, and have done field research in Mande cultural area, West Africa for more than 20 years. So, I'd like to comment on Dr. Arnoldi's presentation referring to the current trend of exhibitions in France.

First, I have to say, I've never been to the Smithsonian Museum, nor even to the USA. About the Smithsonian's new exhibition, *African Voices*, all I can do is imagine it from Dr. Arnoldi's excellent presentation. As far as following what she says, this new African exhibition is a sincere response to one of the central issues of current anthropology-ethnology: Is it possible to represent others? Who can represent others with what kind of right and authority?

The Smithsonian's answer to this issue is, in my words, to listen, as much as possible, to the voices of Africans and American-Africans. It is also to represent, as far as possible, the Africans' daily life and their voices by utilizing various up-to-date technologies.

I know that the very opposite attempt is going on in Paris. That is the project of the "Museum of Primary Arts" ("Musée des arts primaires"), newly built to house various objects brought from Africa, Asia, Oceania, North and South America during the colonial era. The basic concept is: "Let the objects be free from anthropologists and ethnologists". Because, as they think, human aesthetic activity is so universal that people can completely appreciate the beauty of artworks from anywhere without knowing their cultural and historical contexts.

Obviously, this project has some faults or problems: It takes African art only as "primitive art," African modern art being excluded from it. The sculptures and masks that will be exhibited in it were originally made not as fine art but for religious or cultural purposes. With what kind of right can they put such culturally bound objects into an aesthetic category peculiar to the modern West?

I don't want to argue these points here. What I want to focus on is the very task of exhibiting, the very existence of the museum as a place for exhibition, and the very story told in the museum.

Recently, two models of museum are talked about, one a temple, the other a forum. Temple means sacred solemn place to keep precious objects, and forum, a place to enter into a controversy stimulated by the exhibition. It is expected that the

present temple-type museum will transform into the forum-type.

I don't think, however, that this metaphor is accurate, because a temple is my favorite place to visit, but a museum, with a few exceptions, is not. Suppose you went to a Buddhist temple. You would find a beautiful garden representing the cosmos. You would see an image of Buddha with a merciful smile, sending off incense. Walking through a clump of trees under the blue or cloudy sky, you would find yourself in a completed universe.

In a museum, on the other hand, the objects exhibited are detached from your living, from the flow of your life. Surrounded by such lifeless objects, you would feel lifeless and fragmented.

When do I feel cheerful? I feel cheerful, in the middle of life, surrounded by people. In Africa, I am cheerful surrounded by cheerful people. But generally, the exhibition of Africa makes me triste. Why is this so?

An example may give us a hint. About 8 years ago, the French museum union held a holistic exhibition on the Niger River. This exhibition aimed at showing the greatness of the past civilizations which flowered along the Niger, indicating the continuity of many cultures beside the river. This exhibition was held in Paris at first, and then went over to West African countries, such as Guinea, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.

Unfortunately, I haven't seen this exhibition. But most of my acquaintances who are researchers, administrators and students and saw the exhibition, say it was a success. Because, they say, it succeeded in having people come to a museum, who had not known the very existence of a museum before. Effectively, more than a hundred thousand people visited the museum at this opportunity in each country.

If I had visited this exposition, would I have felt sad? Certainly not. Surrounded by loud spectators (they are never educated to be silent in a museum), I would feel some kind of happiness. Why is this so? Maybe, because my main theme is the history of West Africa. But more than that, because reconstructing history is an action that gives pleasure to the spectators or the readers. And the longer the time span of the history, the bigger the pleasure will be.

Let me put it like this. If someone asked you to let him represent your life in the form of a novel or an exhibition when you were on your deathbed, you might feel joy with a hint of shyness. But if he or she asked it right now, you would reject it. You might get angry and cry: Why now? How can you say that you can represent my life when it is still full of possibilities?

Summing up one's life when that life is ending is not so sad, because at that time, it can be represented as a whole. The ups and downs, joy and sadness, troubles and efforts of that life will be represented as a whole, even if many things are omitted. But summing up one's life in the middle of it is an inadmissible attempt, because it imposes on that life a meaning that is alien to the liver of it.

If I were to organize an exhibition on Africa, I would try to represent the history of Africa: the birth of mankind, the beautiful wall paintings of the Sahara, the greatness of ancient empires, the finesse of its artifacts, the misery of the slave trade, the hardship under colonial domination, and the jubilation of independence. But I am not yet sure how to represent the present: People's daily life, the prosperity of cities, the prevalence of Christianity and Islam, many kinds of cultural and/or social movements, famine, civil war... These are the on-going present that cannot be summed up.

If it is impossible to summarize the present, all we can do is to indicate it in the form of a collage without imposing any story on it. The photos, videos, masks, crafts, voices, music, slogans, books, paintings, poems... Displayed side by side, they may speak of the variety of life, people's suffering, struggle, and joy in Africa. Could it be a successful exhibition, in that case?