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Museums Narrating the Nation: Case Studies from Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina

Abstract

A museum that represents a community's history and culture has the ability to influence the way that visitors understand that community in the present. In this paper, museums in Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina are examined as case studies in order to better understand how museums attempt to narrate national identity to visitors, both domestic and international. Critical analysis of exhibits in these museums reveal that museum narratives often attempt to project the image of singular national identities. Meanwhile, they may deny the history of place of other contemporary or historic communities that are held in disfavor by those who influence the development of exhibits. In Greece, museums project a 'Greek' identity based on Classical, Byzantine, and post-Ottoman history. Museums in Bosnia-Herzegovina emphasize a unifying, shared history of the state's three main ethnic communities without recognizing the profound differences felt between these communities today. Thus, these institutions may be seen as attempts at encouraging visitors to imagine the nation in one way only, without recognizing pluralism. While these case studies do not necessarily represent a universal trend, they demonstrate the need to reflect upon the place of such museums in contemporary society.

Keywords

museums, nationalism, identity, place

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Evan P Taylor

Introduction

In the study of nationalism and national identities, one seeks to understand the means by which a group of people come to imagine themselves as a community based on common interests and a shared understanding of heritage. As a repository and display centre for material of cultural significance, the museum would seem an inviting arena for investigating expressions of identity shared by a nation's people. Certainly, museums exist in a range of forms, from interpretive centres, to living history sites, to art galleries. Such diversity is also expressed in the types of visitors to museums with respect to their national background and reason for visiting. But within the museum, variables such as the types of material on display, chronological schemes, interpretive texts, and maps have significant potential for influencing ways in which the nation is represented to visitors. This representation may be direct and purposeful, or subtle and perhaps even non-existent. The possibility remains, though, that the museum may have an impact on how people understand the nation, be it their own or somebody else's.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how museums in two particular regions narrate the nation. Using these case studies, I aim to underline some of the principal ways in which museum representations contribute to people's understanding of national identity. In the early summer of 2010, I carried out field research in several museums on the Balkan Peninsula. Museums in Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina presented particularly intriguing opportunities to explore the

representation of national identity. In Greece, most official representations of contemporary national identity are based on a tripartite historical scheme featuring the nation's Classical, Byzantine, and post-War of Independence histories. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, in light of the recent decades of inter-ethnic tension that peaked with the armed conflicts of the 1990s, certain state-level and international governmental bodies have encouraged the representation of a unified Bosnian identity that forgoes the divisive nationalistic narratives that were promoted by some leaders from the state's three major ethnic groups in the years leading up to and including the Yugoslav Wars.

Based on my own insights and those from other authors, I investigate how these museums represent national identity and why it may be projected as such. The foci of the study are the museums that most directly represent national narratives. These include archaeological, historical, and ethnographic museums. These are often located in national capitals and tend to address the widest range of issues of national interest that collectively come to be called *heritage*. In discussing each case, I reflect on how museum narratives might impact the visitor's understanding of national identity, and how museum narratives correlate with national realities. In order to explore this topic more fully, I begin by reviewing some contemporary ideas about nations and museums.

Museums and group identity

The combined study of museums and group identity is not new to the humanities and social sciences. Scholars in such fields as museum studies, anthropology, political science, and sociology have written at length about the role museums play in establishing official histories of place and belonging using material culture from other times,

peoples, and places. In his article *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault (1986:26) frames the museum as a heterotopia – a space of difference that is linked to the accumulation of time. Lord (2006:3) has suggested a modified definition of Foucault’s museum, as “a space of difference *and* a space of representation” (emphasis added). In museums, objects are taken out of their original contexts, rendering them associable to new ones. A gap is established between *object* and *concept*, and museum visitors experience this gap by replacing it with meaningful interpretations. Consequently, museums and visitors alike must make choices about how such interpretations will be shaped (Lord 2006:5-7). In an art gallery, there are seldom long text panels describing the intended meaning of a painting. The artist and the museum are inviting the visitor to be critical of the painting, and to *make* meaning of it to bridge the gap between object and concept. Historical museums may be more likely to offer interpretations to the visitor, through such media as text panels, audio-visual material, or dioramas, which I will refer to here as interpretive material. These museums fill the gap for the visitor, in full or in part. The provided interpretive material may not give complete meaning to the object, but it might help to direct or shape the visitor’s own interpretation of it. It must also be recognized that the extent to which interpretive material influences a visitor will be dependent on how critical the individual is, and for what purpose they have come to the museum (e.g. entertainment, education, etc.). Significant to this paper is the potential for objects to be interpreted as meaningful to the concept of national identity.

Before proceeding further, it would be helpful to clarify the meaning of the term *nation* as it is used in this paper. Anderson (2006:6-7) defines the nation as an imagined

political community. It is characterized by a profound sense of common heritage amongst its members, even though the vast majority will never encounter one another. It is also sovereign, existing separately from other nations. Therefore, it is important to search for ways that museums and museum visitors might interpret objects as symbols of common heritage, sovereignty, and difference. Anderson (2006:182-183) recognizes processes of political “museumizing” and “logoization” that antiquities undergo to become national symbols. They are excavated, removed from their original context, and become the subjects of infinitely replicable written reports and photographs. These are published en masse through popular books, textbooks, postcards, banknotes, and postage stamps, thus becoming instantly recognizable. Even if a person is not aware of the object’s original purpose and meaning, it can be recognized as a national symbol. As will be explored in the next two sections, one does not need to know the complete history behind a particular Classical Greek statue to recognize it as Greek. Likewise, the medieval Bosnian tombstones known as *stécci* have become instantly recognizable as Bosnian even though no two are exactly alike. When objects like these are displayed in public museums, they offer visitors a chance to experience the nation’s history. It reaffirms the sense of common heritage required by the community by allowing local visitors to engage in their shared culture (MacDonald 2003:2). This also invites visitors, both local and foreign, to recognize their nation as different from others (MacDonald 2003:5). Locals are presented with their own nation’s past, which is assumed to be distinct from all others. This can be reaffirmed if the museum has galleries with material from other world cultures. For the foreign visitor, the museum exposes them to an unfamiliar

collection of material culture, thus affirming this nation as different from their own.

It is also important to recognize the possible existence of multiple national identities within a single state. Stemming from its enlightenment origins, the museum has traditionally been associated with the expression of a single national identity (MacDonald 2003:3). As nation-states move towards recognizing their multi-cultural communities, museums face challenges to their traditional modes of representation. Kaplan (2006:168) explains that museums in the twenty-first century must decide whether they will define a single national identity or represent multiple, possibly competing groups. Indeed, certain minority groups may wish to project their alternative narratives to others in order to gain recognition and affirm national status. While traditionally dominant national groups may be hesitant to allow this, the imposition of a single national identity on other groups within the state may generate feelings of alienation and resistance (Kaplan 2006:153). Additionally, it is important to recognize that communities, including those we call nations, are seldom the homogeneous and static entities that many wish they could be. As Waterton and Smith (2010:5-6) have rightly argued, the communities so often spoken of in both the mainstream media and academic literature rarely, if ever, represent groups of people with identical histories and aspirations. This fact makes museum representation an even more contentious matter, as even with the presence of competing national communities, there will inevitably also be competition within said communities for the representation of alternative histories.

Greece

Before examining the specific issues that arise from Greek museums, it would be useful to outline certain aspects of the

dominant understanding of the Greek past, and how it relates to certain episodes of Greek history. The popular model of Greek cultural heritage can be viewed as a tripartite scheme (Koumaridis 2006:240). This model encompasses the three main eras of so-called Hellenistic culture: the Classical period (most of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE [Biers 1996:194, 247]), the Byzantine period (from 306 CE- 1453 CE [Hamilakis 2007:46]), and modern Greece (from the outbreak of the revolution in 1821 to the present day [Hamilakis 2007:78]). The critical idea behind this model is that it represents a continuum of Greek culture. The chronological gaps, such as the Ottoman period between the Byzantine and modern eras, are generally considered to be interruptions in the national journey (Hamilakis 2007:64). Despite the significant length of these interruptive periods, and the important impact they had on contemporary Greek society, they are mostly ignored or glossed over in popular representations of Greek history. The Ottoman period, for example, came to be viewed in an orientalist fashion when the war of independence erupted as a conflict between civilization and barbarism. Following the war, the national landscape was extensively reconfigured to showcase the nation's Classical heritage, and antiquities were collected and placed in museums (Koumaridis 2006:219; Hamilakis 2007:80). Mosques and other Ottoman structures were either destroyed or allowed to fall into disrepair in a process of "de-Ottomanization" (Hartmuth 2008:701). This left behind ancient and Byzantine period structures, and made room for the construction of neo-classical buildings (Koumaridis 2006:240).

The early Greek state built museums to cater to the three periods of the tripartite model. Three main types were established: archaeological, Byzantine, and historic/

ethnographic (Avgouli 1994:247). Most contemporary Greek museums could fit into this scheme as well. Archaeological museums, which today represent about half of all Greek museums, were established to house the “ancestral remains” of the Classical past (Avgouli 1994:251). Byzantine and historic/ethnographic museums demonstrated the continuity of Hellenic culture by exhibiting ecclesiastical monuments and artifacts that demonstrated a certain Greek character (Hamilakis 2007:46).

It is important to recognize that while this tripartite model remains a cornerstone of Greek national identity (Hamilakis 2007:7), it also extends to Greece's desire for full inclusion in the European cultural community. As a means of projecting Greece's European character, curators try to select elements of the Classical and Byzantine past, such as democracy and Christianity, that are also likely to embody a European spirit (Mouliou 1994:77). Such exhibits at once strengthen the national character of Greece and project a European identity rooted in Classical and Byzantine heritage. The following discussion revolves around three museums: the National Archaeological Museum (NAM), the Benaki Museum (BM), and the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA). These museums, all located in Athens, present interesting cases for examining the ideas about Greek national identity outlined above.

National Archaeological Museum

The National Archaeological Museum was built in the late nineteenth century in true-to-the-time neo-classical style, itself embodying the Classical spirit demonstrated by its contents. The museum houses large collections of pre-Classical Bronze Age material, vases, bronzes, and an array of Egyptian and Cypriot material.

However, the largest collection, and the one that draws the greatest number of visitors, is the sculpture collection. Organized in chronological order, the interpretive material in the collection's 30 rooms attempts to explain artistic and general cultural developments in ancient Greece from the Archaic period to the end of antiquity, when the capital of the Roman Empire was moved to Byzantium. The Greek character of the sculpture collection is established in the first text panel of the first room, titled “The Greek World in the 8th Century B.C.”. The text explains that following the decline of the Bronze Age Mycenaean kingdoms the first *Greek* city-states were established. While acknowledging the autonomous nature of these city-states, it also explains that this was the period during which “the Greek nation developed new, stronger bonds”, and that ideas emerged that would lead “to the birth of Democracy” (NAM n.d.:room 7). It is interesting to note the change in terminology that occurs between the prehistoric and Archaic period displays. In the prehistoric collections, material is labelled as “Mycenaean” or “Cycladic” – never as Greek. In all later periods, with the exception of some Roman material, everything is labelled using the term “Greek”.

It is also striking how much these exhibition halls resemble those of an art gallery. The works on display are indeed among the most visually striking in the country. This is in keeping with the tradition of Classical archaeology; emphasizing art and culture-history over the anthropological concerns of processual and post-processual archaeology. Most pieces are displayed on pedestals in no order that would convey information about life in antiquity. Rather, they are on display to be admired, and with few artifacts pertaining to daily life – no household items and few architectural fragments – the collection

projects a glorified and highly prosperous image of the past. Information for each individual artifact is quite limited, only giving the work's name, its date, and sometimes its provenience. There are generally two text panels per room, and occasionally a map showing the extent of "the Greek world". Usually, one panel describes a particular artistic style from the era represented (e.g. "Kouroi", "The Severe Style", etc.), and the other provides some socio-political context of Greece in that time. Specific events are situated in "the history of Greek civilization", which is suggestive of the idea of Greek continuity from antiquity to modern times. While this is the only exhibit that attempts to outline the history of Greece from the Archaic period to late antiquity, the only non-textual representations of this Greek world are the sculptures. There are no artifacts representative of the "establishment of democracy in Athens" or the development of drama and philosophy that are described in the text (NAM n.d.:room 15). It is interesting to note that in the only gallery representing another world culture – the Egyptian collection – representation of daily life dominates the displays. Here, the curators have included displays showcasing such aspects of life as social structure, food preparation, writing, and cosmetics alongside the grander artifacts, such as sarcophagi, jewellery, and religious statuary, with little concern given to cultural progression and periodization.

It can be said that the NAM is the prototypical Greek archaeological museum, offering primarily an art-historical study of antiquity through its panels and displays. The museum narrative also adopts a culture-historical approach in that it attempts to recount the ideals of liberty, democracy, art, and science as they apply to the development of Classical Greek culture, though most of these are not represented

through artifactual evidence in the galleries. Philip Duke (2007:26), in his analysis of Cretan museums, explains that this kind of representation blocks the museum visitor from engaging with a "dynamic and ever-changing past". In a similar fashion, the NAM's displays present but a superficial image of Greek antiquity without exploring in any depth aspects of Greek life that a visitor today may deem unpleasant (e.g. disease, class disparity, etc.). It should be acknowledged that this may be due in part to the lack of material available to represent these issues in the sculpture galleries. Much of the material exhibited here was recovered in a time when sites were expediently excavated, or plundered, by amateur archaeologists, travelers, and collectors, resulting in collections that by and large only reflected their own personal interests.

Benaki Museum

The Benaki Museum, itself the product of a personal collection that has been built upon over the years, embodies aspects of all three types of Greek museums. All of its displays are chronologically ordered, tracing the history of Greece from the Neolithic period (6500-3200 BCE) to the end of the Asia Minor Campaign in 1922 (BM n.d.:Info brochure). The core of the museum's collection is sourced from the private collection of the late Antonis Benakis (1873-1954), who donated it to the Greek state and oversaw its expansion following the establishment of the museum (Benvenuti 2007:5). As such, the contents of the displays may be attributed to one individual's interests. Nonetheless, the museum continues to attract significant numbers of domestic and international visitors, indicating an overlap in interests of Benakis and those who come to view his collection.

While the archaeological collection is significantly smaller than that of the

NAM, the BM also begins labelling material as “Greek” in the Archaic period. Most of the material from antiquity consists of ceramic vessels and small sculptures, and again, there is little apparent relation – other than contemporaneous dates – between the textual information and the artifacts on display. For example, in a case with several small marble heads and five ceramic vessels, the text focuses on Alexander the Great’s conquest of Egypt, which marked “the beginning of the most splendid Hellenistic kingdom” (BM n.d.:room 7). Following the galleries of antiquity, the visitor makes their way through galleries representing the Byzantine, “Postbyzantine/Occupation”, and modern periods. It is especially interesting to note what kind of material is presented in the “Postbyzantine” and “Occupation” galleries (BM n.d.:info brochure). Most artifacts on display are of ecclesiastical nature. There are several rooms dedicated to “secular art during the period of foreign occupation” (BM n.d.:info brochure), but the vast majority of this material comes from Crete and other islands that came under Ottoman rule later than the mainland. Some objects also originated from Greeks living in Italy and Cyprus. While the museum seems to be trying to represent the continuity of Greek culture during the Ottoman period, there is no mention of how the Greeks of the mainland were living. Two small galleries entitled “Greece through the eyes of foreign travellers, 18th-19th c.” (BM n.d.:info brochure), contain paintings of mainland towns by British artists, which upon close inspection reveal minarets and Ottoman-style bridges. However, the textual information makes no reference to the Ottoman presence in these paintings, most of which are mounted high on the wall, out of plain view. Artifacts from the mainland reappear in high quantity in the galleries of “the Struggle for Independence” and “the formation of the Modern Greek State” (BM

n.d.:info brochure). Perhaps most striking upon entry to the first of these rooms is an enormous revolutionary flag depicting a cross supplanting a down-turned crescent moon, Athena standing on top of a sword-wielding Turk, and a dove freeing the top of an Orthodox church from chains – all happening under the watchful eye of the Christian Trinity. The remaining gallery space recognizes Greek accomplishments, including the display of a Lenin Prize for poetry and a Nobel gold medal.

The galleries of the BM can only be understood as attempting to demonstrate the continuity of Greek culture from antiquity to the modern era. A visitor who pays close attention to dates and place names on text panels will recognize a discrepancy in the provenience of items from the “Postbyzantine” or “Occupation” periods, almost all of which originated outside of mainland Greece. Such a visitor may be left wondering about the state of Greek culture in a mainland city such as Athens during this period, but the casual visitor browsing through these galleries is unlikely to note any discontinuity.

Museum of Islamic Art

The collection of the Museum of Islamic Art was transferred from the Benaki Museum to its present location in 2004. This relatively new museum is located in a residential area of Athens, amongst winding streets and deteriorating buildings. The museum has four small floors of exhibition space, each representing a chronological period of the history of the Islamic world. I came to this museum expecting to see some Ottoman-era material from Greece, but quickly discovered otherwise. In all periods represented – the seventh to nineteenth centuries – only one artifact is labelled as coming from Greece. This is an “Ottoman rifle” from “Northern Greece”, dating to the nineteenth century (MIA n.d.:4th floor).

Many of the artifacts in the museum originated in major manufacturing centres in Anatolia, including many ceramic objects from Iznik, but whether these had been exported to Greece, or other regions of the Ottoman empire, is not specified. The museum's artifacts represent a wide geographic distribution, coming from Egypt, Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Turkey, India, and the northwestern Balkans, so it seems odd that after nearly 400 years of Ottoman rule, there is only one object from Greece.

It would seem that the establishment of a new museum wholly devoted to Islamic art marks a certain detente in the way that Greek cultural institutions represent the Islamic world. However, the museum does not emphasize Greece as part of the Islamic world's history. It is also worth noting that in the two hours I spent at this museum on a Friday afternoon during the tourist high season, I encountered no other visitors. While the museum does not directly represent any part of tripartite Hellenism, it indirectly supports this scheme by keeping Greek culture separate from the Islamic influence that most certainly was present in Greece for several centuries.

The first two museums discussed above project Greek identity as being rooted in Classical antiquity, and continuing through later periods until the present day. They project Classical antiquity in a sanitized manner, and select elements of later periods that are consistent with the model of tripartite Hellenism. The Museum of Islamic Art does not address Greek history, and in doing so supports the ideal of a continuous Greek identity that is distinct from Islamic cultures. The glorification of Classical antiquity may be owed in part to the loss of material relating to daily life during the hasty search for artifacts considered more valuable to early collectors. However, no mention is made of the means

by which material was recovered in the sculpture gallery of the NAM, nor the antiquity galleries of the BM, leaving the visitor entirely uninformed of the flawed image that these early collections offer of the past.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

While in recent years there have been national debates in Greece about the place of immigrants and ethnic minorities – particularly Muslims – the concept of a Greek national identity being based on cultural continuity since antiquity is seldom contested. In other regions, multiple national groups co-exist in the same state, raising challenges for museums when representing national history. Bosnia-Herzegovina (also contracted here as Bosnia and BiH) is divided into two political entities and has three recognized constituent peoples – Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. Bosniaks and Croats share control of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, while Serbs control Republika Srpska (the Serb Republic). In 2000, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia-Herzegovina's Constituent Peoples Decision granted individuals from all three groups the right to reside anywhere in the two entities, while leaving the entities' governing bodies controlled by their respective ethnic majorities (Mansfield 2003:2053). The complex political system imposed on Bosnians, combined with the region's turbulent history, makes any projection of national identity potentially contentious.

Of the three constituent peoples, members of the Bosniak community have shown the greatest desire to dissolve the entities, and many have taken to identifying themselves and all other groups simply as *Bosnian* (Oluić 2007:149). Bosniak spatial identity includes the entire territory of the Bosnian state, whereas most Croats and Serbs maintain meaningful connections only

with particular areas of the Bosnian landscape (Oluić 2007:157). The international community, represented in Bosnia-Herzegovina by the United Nations and NATO, has aligned itself with the Bosniak/Bosnian desire for national unity (Oluić 2007:9).

What follows is a very brief outline of the period of Bosnian history with which the two museums to be discussed are primarily concerned. Even prior to the arrival of the Ottoman Turks, the Balkan Peninsula was a multi-ethnic region situated between the Roman Catholic West and the Eastern Orthodox East. In the late thirteenth century Bosnian Catholics severed all ties from Rome, establishing a Bosnian Church that maintained mainstream Catholic views. During the Bosnian Church's heyday in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, other Christian religions were tolerated in the independent Bosnian kingdom (Oluić 2007:40). When the Ottomans invaded the Balkan Peninsula in the second half of the fifteenth century, many Orthodox Serbs fled into Bosnia hoping to escape. When Bosnia fell under Ottoman rule in the late 1460s, the central administration established Orthodox and Muslim *millets* - officially recognized religious communities - with the latter receiving favoured status in the imperial system. Many former adherents of the Bosnian Church converted to Islam, viewing it as a dynamic new religion, proven to have God's favour with the Ottoman military success (Oluić 2007:42). It is important to recognize the multiple religious groups of different origins existing in Bosnia throughout the medieval period. This history differs from what is represented in the National Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina (NMBH) and the Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina (HMBH), both located in Sarajevo. Of particular importance in the following discussion are the absence of non-adherents to the Bosnian

Church, and a glorification of the medieval Bosnian kingdom.

National Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina

The National Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina has three departments, each with their own building: archaeology, ethnology, and natural history. The archaeology building displays collections of ancient Roman and medieval Bosnian material. The relatively small gallery on the first floor displays third century CE Roman frescoes, statuary, weaponry, and architectural fragments. As with all displays in the archaeology department, important objects are situated on a map delineating the modern territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina. There is very little text describing the artifacts, and what is available is seldom written in English, suggesting that the target audience is not an international one. Up a set of stairs from this gallery, the visitor reaches the medieval Bosnian collections. The three large rooms on this floor exhibit fourteenth- and fifteenth-century items including stone columns, jewellery, armour, weaponry, epigraphic inscriptions on stone, bronze crosses, gold ornaments, a throne, and a stone relief portrait of a king. Again, little information about this material is provided in English, but inevitably the impression one gets is of a powerful, wealthy, and prosperous medieval kingdom. There does not appear to be any material representative of daily life during this period, nor is there any indication of religious plurality. As with the Greek museums, this may be due to the early methods used to recover the displayed material, but nowhere is any explanation made to visitors as to why this material is missing.

Also on this floor is a small, highly secured room containing the Sarajevo Haggadah. This manuscript originated in a Jewish community in Spain in 1350, and

following the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, the Haggadah travelled with various families in exile, eventually arriving in Sarajevo at an unknown date (NMBH n.d.:Haggadah room). Having survived exile and several wars, the Haggadah came to symbolize the endurance of religious co-existence in the face of war (Hajdarasic 2008:111). The museum exhibit was sponsored by the United Nations mission in Bosnia (Hajdarasic 2008:114), and at the time of the exhibit's opening was praised by the United Nations special representative as “the multicultural anti-thesis to nationalism” and “a beacon of tolerance in Europe” (Hajdarasic 2008:118,120). As such speeches were given, and as the exhibit was mounted, no mention was ever made of the manuscript's connection to the Jewish community in Bosnia that was devastated during the Holocaust (Hajdarasic 2008:120). Rather, the exhibit took on an international character. More than any other, it is targeted to both domestic and international visitors. It is accompanied by an interactive computer terminal providing information in several languages, and conveys a message, formulated for political purposes, of tolerance and cultural survival after conflict.

It is interesting to note that, aside from the Haggadah exhibit, ancient Rome and medieval Bosnia are the only two periods represented in the building. Both of these periods are represented with monumental sculpture and architecture. Though the museum is still piecing together its collections, having suffered damage and prolonged closure, these two galleries portray - much like the Greek museums - a glorified past. In this case, however, there is no apparent link between contemporary Bosnians and the ancient Roman period. Rather, these collections illustrate two powerful societies that existed independent from one another on the same landscape.

This idea of a landscape that hosts or produces powerful and glorious societies is strengthened by the extensive use of maps to situate ancient sites within the boundaries of the modern state.

The ethnological department houses exhibits dealing with contemporary aspects of *Bosnian* culture, as well as life in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the Ottoman to Austro-Hungarian transition period. Two temporary exhibits were showing at the time of my visit – one on traditional Bosnian women's shirts, and the other on games. These demonstrated the wide variety of shirt styles and games in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina, but no mention was made about whether any of these were unique to certain groups, namely Bosniaks, Croats, or Serbs. The second floor permanent exhibits include several dioramas of households in nineteenth-century Bosnia. Each diorama addresses a specific aspect of Bosnian life (e.g. courting, embroidering, etc.) with costumed mannequins. The introductory panel states that “Oriental and Islamic elements have been most prominent among the urban population”, but also that there have been “contributions from Christians (Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic) and Jews” (NMBH n.d.:ethnology dept.). Nowhere in the NMBH's exhibits, nor in the Historical Museum's exhibits, are the terms “Serb”, “Croat”, or “Bosniak” employed. From the medieval period onward, the people of Bosnia, if not an Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian administrator, are referred to as Bosnian.

It is impossible to visit the NMBH without noticing the dozens of medieval tombstones, known as *stécci* (singular: *stécak*), spread out over the grounds. When these were placed here, it was widely thought that the followers of the Bosnian Church, and the people of the medieval kingdom, were Bogomils. The Bogomil culture originated in Bulgaria, and was

independent of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. The curators and archaeologists of the NMBH once thought that the *stécci*, which seem to be unique to Bosnia-Herzegovina, were erected by the Bogomils. However, the very existence of these people in Bosnia has long since been disproved (Wenzel 1993:130-131). In addition to the *stécci* not being of Bogomil origin, only eight have been shown to have any link at all to the Bosnian Church. It appears that people of all Christian faiths erected *stécci* during Bosnia's medieval period (see Wenzel 1993:131). Still, these tombstones have become national logos, and in the Historical Museum are associated uniquely with the Bosnian Church, a group with which, for the most part, only Bosniaks tend to associate (Oluić 2007:42).

Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina

The Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina is located directly across the street from the NMBH, and has two permanent galleries. Only one of these galleries represents national history, while the other focuses on the 1992-1996 siege of Sarajevo. The exhibit that I will address here, "Bosnia and Herzegovina through the centuries", begins with a poem about the reawakening of Bosnia, a theme that ties into the stated purpose of the exhibit discussed later in the gallery. The displays in this gallery, consisting of text panels, images, and a few artifacts, describe the continuity of Bosnian culture from the twelfth century to the present day. The first part of the exhibit includes maps of medieval Bosnia, lists of Bosnian kings, an outline of the Bosnian alphabet (a regional variant of the Cyrillic alphabet), and illustrations of designs found on *stécci*. All of these aspects of *Bosnian* culture are said to have emerged under the medieval Bosnian Church and kingdom. No mention is made of the decline of said Church and

kingdom as the exhibit transitions directly into the Ottoman period. Panels explain that during this era, Bosnia "had an important role in the military and political life of the Ottoman Empire" (HMBH n.d.: "BiH through the centuries" exhibit), though no detail is given about what exactly this role entailed. In the few display cases containing artifacts, Bosnians are distinguished from Ottomans. The term "Ottoman" is reserved for high-ranking administrators that had come from Istanbul, whereas the term "Bosnian" is used for any other person that lived in Bosnia, including those who emigrated from Turkey that were not tied to the Istanbul-based administration. The last few panels explain the history of Bosnia after the Ottoman period. One of these explains how Bosnia-Herzegovina was transferred to Austro-Hungarian control in 1878, whilst maintaining its integrity and uniqueness. The World Wars and recent Yugoslav Wars are said to have been difficult on the Bosnian people, but their peace agreements have restored Bosnia's statehood for the first time in 480 years (HMBH n.d.: "BiH through the centuries" exhibit). The last panel summarizes the objective of the gallery:

This exhibition is a testimony of the existence of BiH from the first mentioning until nowadays, and proves that it was not AVNOJ's creation. Its borders formed in number of wars, which results were confirmed by peace agreements [sic] (HMBH n.d.: "BiH through the centuries" exhibit).

The statement implies that there is widespread belief that the Bosnian nation only emerged under Tito's anti-fascist resistance movement (AVNOJ), whose stronghold was northern Bosnia. Whereas the NMBH exhibits attempt to expose the

origins of a Bosnian national identity and some of its contemporary characteristics, the HMBH is committed to proving Bosnia-Herzegovina's right to exist as a nation with deep historical roots. The narrative of belonging presented by each museum is essentially the same, though the purpose for doing so is slightly different.

These two museums project a single national identity with the aim of including all Bosnian peoples. Rather than using the names of contemporary ethnic groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina, archaeological, historical, and ethnographic displays use the umbrella term "Bosnian". The use of this term aligns the desire for a united nation-state, expressed mainly by Bosniaks and the international community. However, it is important to recognize that not all people in Bosnia embrace this vision of the nation. Engelstoft and colleagues (2001:960) argue that this desire for national unity in Bosnia-Herzegovina is actually a form of Bosniak nationalism, mainly because it is often strongly rejected by the other ethnic groups. It has traditionally been held that Croat and Serb national identities are based on the concept of shared blood, while Bosniak identity is based on shared environment and cultural practices (Engelstoft, Prodic, and Robinson 2001:962). Croats and Serbs, therefore, are less likely to be willing to embrace the Bosnian identity, which is based not on shared blood, but rather on a shared cultural heritage. It is also interesting to note that the reconstruction of the NMBH in the early 2000s was a European Union-funded project (Engelstoft, Prodic, and Robinson. 2001:973), implying that the international community was aware of how *Bosnian* culture and history would be represented. Hayden (2007:107) argues that the international community should avoid imposing a unifying Bosnian identity on all people of Bosnia-Herzegovina, arguing, "they need help rebuilding real, not

symbolic, lives." He contends that large segments of the population reject the imagining of a single Bosnian community (Hayden 2007:108). The idea of a single Bosnian community with multicultural co-existence emerged only as Bosniaks began seeking support from the international community towards the end of the war, while in reality at least half of Bosnia's population rejected this view (Hayden 2007:112). Considering this, one must question if it is appropriate for museums to represent a Bosnian narrative of belonging that so many people reject.

Discussion

While they may seem troubling to an antinationalist outsider, it is important not to immediately discredit these national narratives presented in museums. For many, these narratives represent meaningful ways of understanding their place in the world. In Greece, the continuity of Hellenic culture is a cornerstone of national belonging. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, many people envision national unity, exemplified by a historic Bosnian culture, as the path to a prosperous future. The museum is one medium through which these narratives of belonging can be communicated. Museums in both Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina actively engage in the projection of a singular national identity. While for many this affirms their sense of place and belonging, for others it erases it. Perhaps it is possible to represent multiple narratives in the museum environment, but this would require the initiative of governing bodies, curators, and an understanding audience.

In his analysis of the legacy of Ottoman architecture in the Balkans, Maximilian Hartmuth (2008:696) argues that misconceptions about the past prevent understanding and appreciation in the present. Throughout the Balkans, mosques and other Ottoman-era buildings

demonstrate provincial peculiarities as a result of the work of local craftsmen. These are expressed in construction methods, ornamentation, and materials used (Hartmuth 2008:700). What most Greeks would see as insignificant to the national landscape could just as well be seen as a unique expression of Greek provincial architecture (Hartmuth 2008:701). Instead of preserving such structures, most were cleared from the landscape following the revolution, simultaneously erasing marks of their own artistic expression and the history of place of Greece's historic Muslim population. Were the past diversity of Greece's cultural landscape to be recognized and appreciated, perhaps some of this process could be reversed. The story in Bosnia-Herzegovina is different, where the current national homogeneity of Greece is unknown. Though it may be problematic for a museum to impose a single national identity on the entire populace, it would perhaps be divisive to represent three national narratives side-by-side. In a state that is already divided into ethnicity-based entities, perhaps it is unrealistic to have centralized national museums in the state capital. Banja Luka, the entity-capital of Republika Srpska, has its own regional museum, and I suspect that a significantly different national narrative is represented there.

Through the sensual exploration of the past that they offer, museums become important places for people to orient themselves vis-à-vis people and places of other times. With the narrative they are presented, people are not just passively *taught* at museums. Rather they use this information to make decisions about who they might call their ancestors, what people they choose to include in their community, and which place they call home.

Conclusion

The ideas that I have explored concerning museums and national identities are hopefully useful for understanding cases outside of Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Any museum that labels itself as *national* will inevitably face dilemmas concerning the representation of historic and contemporary communities that do not identify with *the nation*. I have only discussed the avenues chosen by a handful of museums. The Greek museums tend to exclude elements of history, mainly involving the Ottoman occupation, that are not in line with the continuity of Greek culture. The Bosnian museums attempt to project a single national history with which any *Bosnian*, of any constituent nation, can identify. Rather than delve into the delicate matter of recounting the history of Islam in Greece, or the distinct ethnic groups of Bosnia-Herzegovina extant to this day, these museums opt for nuanced, simplified narratives. These narratives value cultural homogeneity, continuity, and national pride. They represent constructions of place and of belonging that nonetheless evoke questions of exclusion.

I suggest for further investigation potential means of including thus far excluded *others* in national museums, notably minority and historic communities. We have seen how these peoples can be excluded or unwillingly absorbed into singular national narratives. Were this to be avoided, museums could play a significant role in building bridges among previously disjointed communities. A more exhaustive study would include a review of museums that have experimented with this form of representation, and proceed with a comparative analysis. This study has merely explored the projection of national identity in two regions where museums continue to offer a single national narrative. It is my sincere hope that this analysis will

encourage others, including museum professionals, to reflect critically upon the place of museums in wider society and the role that representation plays in perception and construction of group identity. I expect that the pursuit of such research, and of other checks on current practices of representation, should lead to a greater understanding of how the museum can represent national narrative as is expected of it, whilst raising its value to a greater portion of society.

Author's note: In mid-January 2012, approximately one year following the completion of this paper, many national cultural institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including the Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina, were closed due to severe funding cuts. These cuts resulted from profound disagreements between the entity governments as to the representation of Bosnian nationality to museum audiences. While Bosnia-Herzegovina represents a highly fragile state, still divided on ethnic lines fifteen years after the signing of the Dayton Accords, this case demands reflection upon the raison-d'être of national museums elsewhere and the way that they operate. It will be very interesting to see whether the weakening of these national institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina reflects upon self-identification among those that identify as Bosnian, and whether stronger regional identities, and regional institutions, emerge.

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