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## **Displaying Nationality as Traditional Culture in the Belgrade Ethnographic Museum:<sup>\*</sup>**

### **Exploration of a Museum Modernity Practice<sup>1</sup>**

This paper is an exploration of the modernist project of museums' construction of "reality" through the processes of the collecting and displaying of objects, as practiced in the Ethnographic Museum Belgrade. Through the analysis of the museum's collecting and exhibiting practices, I will try to argue that in Belgrade ethnographic museum practice the idea of the nation is closely connected with the idea of ethnicity as a bounded whole of the distinctive characteristics embodied in the traditional culture that the museum collects and displays.

**Key words:** anthropology of the museum, nation state, modernity, museum of ethnography, ethnicity, nation, traditional culture

As Heartney writes, "it had become commonplace to assert that museums embody ideologies", but I would add that they embody not just "ideologies", but ideologies of the nation-state.<sup>2</sup> Museums, as paradigmatic modernist institutions, are closely connected with the emergence of the nation-state in the nineteenth century.

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\* Translated by the author.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the MA thesis completed at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester 2004 under the supervision of dr Sarah Green. The study was sponsored by the Serbian Royal Family Foundation. I would also like to use this opportunity to thank all the curators in the Ethnographic Museum Belgrade who helped me to conduct this research.

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Heartney, *Fracturing the Imperial Mind*, in: B. M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, Blackwell, Oxford 2004.

tury<sup>3</sup> and have a prominent role in codifying its values in many parts of the world<sup>4</sup> as one of a wide range of social institutions that serve as a tool for the production of social knowledge, which codified the state's power.<sup>5</sup>

Many academic accounts about state and modernity usually deal only with the ideology and state legal system without questioning how, as Taussig puts it, “the idea of state takes its shape in the lives and beliefs of ordinary people”.<sup>6</sup> Instead, an anthropological inquiry should try to locate abstract ideas of the state that are usually found in sociological and political accounts of the question in the life of “ordinary people” and their everyday practice through which the idea of state “get reified”. An understanding of the state’s production of knowledge through the museum should be grounded in the research of the cultural production of a specific type of museum that is “one class” of a larger family of national museums. Similarly, an anthropological approach to the “public sphere” of the museum can use the advantages of contemporary ethnographic practice in order to go “behind the scenes” as MacDonald puts it in her famous ethnographic account of the London Science Museum.<sup>7</sup> This thus avoids a simple reading of the exhibitions as text, but includes the social forces that create them. My concern with the Belgrade Ethnographic Museum leads me in a similar direction toward the research of the curators’ understanding of ethnicity, the nation and traditional culture, of which creation their institution is involved.<sup>8</sup>

## A Note on the Nation State and the Museum of Ethnography in Serbia

Anthropology is yet another modernist institution that emerged almost simultaneously with the nation states, but its role has been very different in different

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<sup>3</sup> See Penelope Harvey, *Hybrids of Modernity: Anthropology, the Nation State and the Universal Exhibition*, Rutledge, London 1996.

<sup>4</sup> See Flora S. Kaplan (ed.) *Museums and the Making of “Ourselves”: the Role of Objects in National Identity*, Leister University Press, Lister 1996. Notions of both modernity and the state are complex and not clearly defined, but the detailed discussion of their possible meanings is beyond the scope of this paper, for more anthropological accounts, see for example John Gledhill, Power and its Disguises: *Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*, Pluto Press, London 2000; Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1989. Here, I just want to stress that it would be wrong to automatically connect museums and the emergence of nation-states. Museums are older than nation-states and early ethnographic displays of foreign and “traditional” cultures could be found in Renaissance curiosity cabinets, for discussions of the origins of museums see, for example, Paula Findlen, *The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy*, in *Museum Studies...*; Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London 1992.

<sup>5</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1. Penguin Books, London 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, Routledge, London 1992, 122.

<sup>7</sup> Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*, Oxford, Berg 2002.

<sup>8</sup> This research is based on the two months of daily visits to the museum in the summer 2004.

nation-states. As Stocking writes, within European anthropology two main types of anthropology could be distinguished: “empire-building” and “nation-building”.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to British anthropology, which was formed through the research of exotic, dark-skinned, remote, others, Stocking writes that in many parts of Europe, “the relation of national identity and internal otherness tended, in the context of nineteenth century movements of cultural nationalism, to be a more focal issue; and strong traditions of *Volkskunde* developed quite distinctly from *Volkerkund*. The former was the study of the internal peasant others who composed the nation, or potential nations within an imperial state; the latter was the study of more distant others, either overseas or farther back in European history”.<sup>10</sup> This could be said regarding the development of ethnology in Serbia in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> During that time, the absence of a large educated class made the intellectuals’ role in the building of the nation especially important. Some of those seriously engaged in nation-building were ethnologists/folklorists whose preoccupations were questions of “ethno-genesis” and the research of traditional culture with an idealized picture of patriarchal peasants as their “core,” already codified in the national movements of Rationalism and Romanticism in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

Part of the national building process of that time was the establishment of the National Museum with an Ethnological Department in 1844, which became an independent Ethnographic Museum in 1901. At the very least this coincided with the process of establishing the institutions of “national importance”. The museum is organized as a place for the collection and exhibition of the traditional culture<sup>13</sup> of different nations, “Serbs and others with whom Serbs live or lived together”, but although it sometimes has guest exhibitions of traditional cultures of other ethno-

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<sup>9</sup> George W. Stocking, Jr., Afterword: *A View from the Centre*, *Ethnos*, Vol. 47 III, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Same, 172.

<sup>11</sup> See: Иван Ковачевић, *Историја српске етнологије: правци и одлмоци*, II, Српски генеолошки центар, Београд 2001. The tradition of *Volkskunde*, as it is called by Stocking is not uniform in all Central-Eastern European countries and it is not even completely based on the *Volkskunde* idea, see Slobodan Naumović, *Romanticists or Double Insiders? An Essay on the Origins of Ideologised Discourses In Balkan Ethnology*, *Ethnologia Balkanica*, Vol. 2, No 2, Sofia 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Same, see also: Љубинка Трговчевић, *Научници Србије и стварање југословенске државе 1914-1920*, Народна књига и Српска књижевна задруга, Београд 1986; Jasna Dragović-Soso, *Rethinking Yugoslavia: Serbian Intellectuals and the 'National Question': Historical Perspective*, *Contemporary European History* 13(2), 2004. It would be wrong to assume that an anthropological bias of ideology is in case specific for the Balkans (see S. Naumović, *Romanticists or Double Insiders?*...). The same kind of problems (not: the same problems) can occur in any kind of anthropological advocacy, but that does not erase huge differences that exist between different anthropologies and their use.

<sup>13</sup> I will generally write terms such as traditional culture, nation and ethnicity without inverted commas, but it should be understood that they are provisional terms whose meanings are highly contested.

nations, it is predominantly a museum that exhibits “Serbian traditional culture”.<sup>14</sup> As was said by Vlahović, its aim is “to save traditional culture” as “proof” of “main characteristics of our nationality”.<sup>15</sup>

As the Belgrade Museum is an “official institution” for the collection and preservation of national (folk) culture, which performs “important professional and scientific work” of “special social, scientific and national importance”,<sup>16</sup> for the understanding of questions of ethnicity in Serbian society it could be especially interesting to comprehend the museum’s practice in order to understand how “ethnicity discourse” has been shaped in the public sphere.<sup>17</sup>

## Making Ethnicity: Collecting, Classifying and Preserving Traditional Culture

Although it seems that collection came before classification, it is actually the other way around since “reality” should be first classified in order to be selectively collected. Furthermore, if “the science of classification” is, as Elsner and Cardinal argue, one of the best guides through “the history of human perceptions”,<sup>18</sup> then the Belgrade Museum’s collection is an excellent guide for understanding the curators’ classification of “social reality”. The museum’s classification according to the curators “mirrors the differences that exist in traditional material culture”, which in the Belgrade Museum’s case reflects the differences between different ethnicities. Curators believe that traditional culture can be scientifically traced through material culture, since objects are understood as transmitters of the messages that can be simply decoded. This epistemology is borrowed from the early twentieth century

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<sup>14</sup> Петар Влаховић, *Век Етнографског музеја у Београду у служби народу (1901-2001)*, Гласник Етнографског музеја 65-66, Београд 2002, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Same, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Митар Михић, *Уводна реч на отварању VIII изложбе стапне поставке Етнографског музеја у Београду*, Гласник Етнографског музеја 65-66, Београд 2002, 17.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to stress that my analysis of the Belgrade museum is not applicable to the politics of anthropology/ethnology in Serbia more broadly. Strategies of Serbian ethnologists/anthropologists based in other Serbian academic institutions can vary greatly from those employed in the Ethnographic museum, for the more detailed account of the political positions of Serbian ethnologists/anthropologists in the 1990’s, see for example Slobodan Naumović, 1999 *Identity Creator in Identity Crisis: Reflections on the Politics of Serbian Ethnology*, Anthropological Journal on European Cultures, Vol. 8, No 2, 1999 (2000); Same, *Nacionalizacija nacionalne nauke? Politika etnologije/antropologije u Srbiji i Hrvatskoj tokom prve polovine devedestih godina dvadesetog veka*, Проблеми културног идентитета становништва савремене Србије, Етноантрополошки проблеми, Зборник радова, Београд 2005. The split between the museum and academic anthropology is clearly visible in Western Europe, as well, where the “museum ethnography consistently lagged behind anthropology, failing to catch up with its academic paradigms until each in turn had become redundant” (Anthony Shelton, *Unsettling the Meaning: Critical Museology, Art and Anthropological Discourse*, in: M. Bouquet (ed.) Academic anthropology and the museum. Back to the Future, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford 2001, 150).

<sup>18</sup> John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *Introduction*, in: The Culture of Collecting..., 2.

natural sciences, and it was typical of early museum practice, however it remains relatively unchanged in many museums even now. As Pearce explains, “systematics is a term drawn from biology, botany and geology where it means the practice of taxonomy, the ability to compare and contrast collected specimens”<sup>19</sup> in order to divide one species from another and make a classification.

These approaches are reflected in the rather complicated classification system on which the museum foundation is based, which combines criteria of function with some social (urban-rural) and regional principles (in the case of Folk Costumes Collection), as well as some widely accepted “conservation principles that prescribe separate storage of different materials.” Thus, the museum’s foundation consists of twenty two “basic collections” (some of them are further divided into sub-groups) that are grouped in wider categories. At the official site for the museum it states, “the museum fond is divided into large number of separate collections that can not be considered separately, but only as the parts of the whole found which automatically mean as a part of the system of traditional culture” (original translation).<sup>20</sup> This quotation nicely explains the curators’ ideas of making an encompassed collection as the ultimate goal of the museum. Hence, one of the curators explained to me that the “collection has to be built as a system.” In the words of a curator, that means that other curators cannot collect what ever they found during “fieldwork” or accept whatever is given to the museum by donors, since “that can make a complete mess in the collection”. When the museum needs a particular type of object for filling the gaps in the collection, curators conduct the fieldwork that serves as the “systematic collecting of material culture of a particular region” and it is usually conducted by several curators with different tasks which seems a rather usual practice for the European anthropological museums.<sup>21</sup> The curators understand “ethnic characteristics” as embodied in “traditional material culture” and understand fieldwork as a way to “keep its trace.” “Ethnic characteristics” are here as given realities which just have to be written and collected according to the “positivistic science” the curators believe they practice.

However, most of the curators see that the ethnic borders are already more or less clear thanks to the older generation of ethnographers, thus today the main goal of the museum is to collect those still remaining objects of traditional culture as authentic signs of ethnic identities that will be erased by “mass-culture” (modernity). Likewise, the preservation of the objects of “traditional culture” is seen as the main goal of the museum by most of its curators. This is not confined to only the Belgrade Museum’s curators, but is also a common opinion among curators and conservators in western European museums who “believe in the immediate value of

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*. Leicester University Press, Leicester 1992, 84.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.etnomuzej.co.yu/>

<sup>21</sup> See Martine Segalen, *Anthropology at home and in the museum: the case of the Musee National des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris*, in: Academic Anthropology...

preserving objects as an end in itself”.<sup>22</sup> Curators understand the preservation of objects of traditional culture as the preservation of national heritage without which a nation cannot claim their very “nationality.” In other words, for a nation to be a nation it has to have heritage, which can serve as “material proof” of their “ethnic continuity” in its specific territory. The museum is considered to be the proper place for such an endeavor by its very definition as a “heritage guardian.” Also, as ethnology is considered to be a science that deals with different “questions of ethnicity and traditional culture,” the ethnography museum is the proper place for “national heritage” (that differs from history which is also necessary for the nation, but it is not a “constant category” as ethnicity is understood to be).

The next step in museum practice is cataloguing that is seen as one of the most important parts of the preservation process. It starts with the “entry book,” where data about the way the objects were collected (purchased or gift), from whom and when, are recorded. After that every object gets an ID with a black and white picture in standard format and a detailed description including the material from which it is made, its function, place of origin, ethnicity and *religion* of “the group the user of the object belongs to.” Cataloguing is seen as a scientific process of “reading” the data out of the objects. Ethnicity is understood as some kind of “real existing thing” that can be positively observed through material culture.<sup>23</sup> This approach is based on a widely shared idea that culture and ethnicity are something that people possess or belong to and which can be clearly separated from any other culture and/or ethnicity on the bases of specific “ethnic characteristics”.<sup>24</sup> This idea of ethnicity shares many similarities with the “ethnos theory” of Soviet anthropologist Julian Bromley whose understanding of ethnicity share many features with the idea of tradition, conceptualising ethnicities as enduring entities based on common “cultural characteristics” that “persist through generations and through a variety of social form(s)”.<sup>25</sup> “Common characteristics” that Belgrade curators believed to display are distinctive from those of other “ethnicities” and could be “scientifically” traced. Here the Belgrade curators are close to Frederik Barth’s idea of “ethnic identity” as a set of characteristics that are formed in the borders between ethnicities.

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<sup>22</sup> Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations*, UBC Press, Vancouver and Toronto 2002, 28.

<sup>23</sup> It is obvious for the curators that “ethnic distinctions” cannot be so clearly traced, but there are still some abstract ideas of what ethnicity and/or nation is and which objects belong to which ethnicity. Thus, a curator gave me an example of a cradle in the permanent exhibition with the David’s star on it, which belongs to Albanian Muslims, but was particularly beautiful, while another curator chose a Bulgarian tree-leg chair for his exhibition because “it fits in the exhibition” and “anyway it is the same as the Serbian, but the Bulgarian one was in better condition”.

<sup>24</sup> For the deconstruction of these ideas, among the wide range of literature, see for example Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*, SAGE Publications, London 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Construction*, Routledge, London 1999, 18.

ties.<sup>26</sup> However, in contrast to Barth's argument that ethnic groups are socially constructed, for the curators the "cultural content" of Serbian ethnicity is not formed on "the border" with any other ethnicity, but it has stable characteristics that are best embodied in "traditional culture". However, distinctions between different ethnic groups that Belgrade museum preserve and exhibit, are not always so clear, since the "ethnic identity signs", such as language, are sometimes the same or slightly different between different ethnic groups in Serbia and former Yugoslavia. Thus, the curators' choice of the religion instead of the language indicates that they do not create ID cards according to some objective rules of what constitutes ethnicity, but rather it is based on their assumption regarding what constitutes the differences between different ethnicities they are dealing with. Ethnicity is understood as a self-understandable category, an embodied identity that someone posses by birth and that can be identified through costume, types of houses and so on (something like an understanding of gender, that everybody has to have it and it as something more or less obvious and 'natural'). This approach will be more clearly seen within museum exhibition practice since there the link is usually made more explicit.

## **Exhibiting Ethnicity**

The exhibition space of the museum is divided into two main parts, one for permanent exhibitions and one for temporary ones. The current permanent exhibition under the title *Traditional Culture of Serbs in 19 and 20 century* was opened in November 2001. Its aim is to show an "assembly of Serbian people" as it is said in the exhibition main board and was explained to me by the curators. The main idea was to represent all the territories in the former Yugoslavia where Serbian people lived before the Yugoslav wars in the 1990's.<sup>27</sup> The exhibition is divided amongst three floors. The ground floor embodies the main idea of "assembly," having folk costumes as its central part; the mid-floor is dedicated to textile production and household textile items and the first floor to "traditional economy."

On the main panel in the entrance to the ground floor, it is said that although the aim of the exhibition is to show the unity of the Serbian people it also "indicates" "the diversity in certain cultural and geographic zones": differences are celebrated, but they are regional, not ethnic. This is not unusual practice in the many ethnographic museums all around the world that use the same tactic of diversity to stress national unity.<sup>28</sup> Specificity of the same process in the Belgrade museum is reflected in the particular selection of unity characteristics and the curators'

<sup>26</sup> Frederik Barth, *Introduction*, in: F. Barth (ed.) *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*, Universitets Forlaget/George Allen and Unwin, Bergen and London 1969.

<sup>27</sup> Although the title of the exhibition refers to a precise historical period – nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the absence of any "social and historical context" makes it very hard to historically locate the exhibition.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Flora Kaplan (ed.) *Museums and the Making of "Ourselves": The Role of Objects in National Identity*, Leister University Press, Leister 1996.

understanding of their scientific validity. Thus, in the main panel it is explained that, “Serbian people, gathered around sacred objects in places which, for centuries, have emitted the spiritual power of their ethnic and cultural being. The Peć Patriarchate was the centre of spirituality to which the Serbian people from the whole South Slav area turned to”. (original translation) The unifying role of the Serbian church is further presented with a replica of the drinking-fountain from Dečani Monastery in Kosovo. A central glass showcase contains costumes from South Serbia, Kosovo and North Macedonia and above it is a frieze with photographs of Serbian monasteries from the whole former Yugoslav territory – from Croatia to Macedonia. Replicas and originals of religious buildings and objects are presented on the first floor as well. Thus, among the replicas of the house types there is a “log-cabin church” which I was told is a model of Church of Repentance (Pokajnica), which holds symbolic value within the national history. It was built by one of the nineteenth century Serbian leaders, Vujica Vučićević, who killed his godfather Karadjordje, the leader of un-successful first Serbian upspring against the Turks following the order of Miloš Obrenović, the leader of a more successful second Serbian upspring in the early nineteenth century. However, in the public discourses Karadjordje is usually valued morally higher than Miloš, as he was perceived as a heroic figure that fought for the freedom of his country.<sup>29</sup> This story fits well with Serbian myth of the Kosovo battle that says the Serbs lost their “empire” in the battle against the Turks at Kosovo field in 1389, which led to “five hundred years of slavery under the Turks”. The Kosovo legend, finally codified in the eighteen century<sup>30</sup>, has an important role in national iconography and its political use was very prominent in Serbian history up to the current years. In this way, the curators have connected religion and Kosovo as the most important Serbian identity markers, placing the Kosovo monastery and folk costumes for the same region in the centre of the ground floor while at the same time symbolically marking Serbian ethnic territory with the “friezes of monasteries.”<sup>31</sup> The curators appear to understand religi-

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<sup>29</sup> See: Драгана Антонијевић, *Симболичка употреба ликова Карађорђа и кнеза Милоша у политичким збивањима у Србији у последњој деценији XX века*, Традиционално и савремено у култури Срба, Посебна издања Етнографског Института САНУ, књ. 49, Београд 2003; Same, *Симболичка употреба ликова Крађорђа и кнеза Милоша у политичким збивањима у Србији у последњој деценији XX века, II*, Проблеми културног идентитета становништва савремене Србије, Етноантрополошки проблеми, Зборник радова, Београд 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Miodrag Popović, *Vidovdan i časni krst. XX vek*, Beograd 1998.

<sup>31</sup> In the first floor Christmas, Easter and Family Saint Day (*Slava*) are exhibited with characteristic items in the houses’ interiors. The importance of religion is clearly seen through the temporary exhibitions as well, with fourteen exhibitions between 1989 and 2001 having explicit religious themes. In an exhibition presenting new museum items in 1998, under the title *Time of the past – time of the future, gifts and bought items from 1992 to 1998*, icons were placed in the center of the exhibition hall and turned towards all four corners to act as “unifying symbols.” National costumes mainly from the Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia and a region in Serbia where curators did their recent fieldwork were placed around the icons and turned toward them, thus stressing the “unity of all Serbs” regardless of the state they lived in.

ion and ethnicity as inseparable: Orthodox Christianity and the Serbian nation simply belong to each other.<sup>32</sup>

The first floor is dedicated to national costumes that worn by dolls and arranged according to the “zones” are placed in glass showcases. Photographs of people at the assembly along with different objects such as cradles, music instruments, bags and children toys, accompany the costumes. Every case has an explanation panel about the main characteristics of the costume in the “zone” and every doll is accompanied with labels in Serbian and English. However, since some of the labels do not have a wider geographical reference, other than the wide category of the “zone”, it is hard to know from which part of the former Yugoslavia the costume in question comes and this is the case with all the exhibited costumes from Croatia. According to the curators the reason for this practice is that the museum displays Serbian traditional culture regardless of the current state it belongs to, and the labels do not refer to the states at all. Technically this is true since Bosnia and Herzegovina are not two states, but one, same as *Serbia* or *Montenegro* are not states, but belong to the state that is called *State Union of Serbia and Montenegro*. However, this does not explain why in some cases it was important to stress that a particular costume is from Serbia, while in others it was not important to say that a costume is from Croatia. In the national ideology, ethnicity and territory are supposed to belong to each other. Furthermore, in order for ethnicity to develop into a nation it has to have its own territory.<sup>33</sup> Because ethnicity and territory go together, failing to include the information that Kordun, Dalmatia, Lika, Banija, Slavonija and Baranja are in the Croatian state implies that their costumes are only Serbian, not Croatian, or that their location is contested. It is interesting to note that the only region that belongs to Serbia that is not marked as such is Vojvodina. At first glance it seems that the status of Vojvodina was problematic for the curators, but this does not seem very likely. Vojvodina’s costumes are placed amongst the costumes from Croatia under the same category, “Pannonian zone.” Had the labels marked Vojvodina as Serbia the distinction between Serbia and non-Serbia would be made more visible and also could pose the question where other non-marked costumes from the vitrine belong.<sup>34</sup> Here ethnicity is associated with a particular territory based on the idea of native ethnicity to a specific region.

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<sup>32</sup> Religious practices are usually very convenient for marking ethnicity, since religious practices are relatively stable (at least officially) during a longer period of time, making it easier to see them as clear marks of an “unchanged tradition.”

<sup>33</sup> See: Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1986.

<sup>34</sup> A focus on the ethnically mixed regions that were caught in war dominated the temporary exhibitions that tried to mark Serbian “ethnic characteristics” in the regions in question. In the exhibition *Traditional Culture of Serbs in Serbian Krajina and in Croatia* in 2000 a central part of the exhibition was devoted to national costumes. According to one of the authors, the idea was to “include Serbs *regardless of their religion* and to enclose all Serbs that lived in Croatia” and those costume types that were missing were replaced with photographs. Obviously, there are categorical anomalies such as Serbs who are not Orthodox, but “Uniats” (Greek Catholics). As it seems here their new religion does not change their “national identity” and it was important for the curators to exhibit their folded costumes to show they belonged to the same Serbian ethnicity as Orthodox Serbs belong.

The second panel in the permanent exhibition explains the importance of national costumes saying, “having a role in everyday life and designating ethnic identity, the traditional costumes of Serbian people with distinct pictorial and aesthetic values, represented one of the most significant features of national culture up to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. (...) “The character of clothing indicates not only where the person came from and his/her social status, but also, particularly in mixed communities, to which confessional or national community he/she belonged.”

The importance of the folk costumes for defying ethnic/national identity is clearly visible in the *central vitrine* on the ground floor with the costumes from Kosovo. Some of the costumes exhibited are strikingly similar to those commonly thought to be characteristic of Kosovo Albanians. Similarly, on the mezzanine in the glass cases dedicated to rolled and treaded textiles, among other items is exhibited, “male white cap (ćeče), Gornje Selo (Prizren), early 20th century – made of pust (firmly compressed thick woolen fabric resistant to rain and snow, my remark), rolled from woolen yarn” usually understood as one of the main specificities of the Kosovo Albanians’ costume.<sup>35</sup> It was obviously very important to explain that something which is commonly believed to be Albanian national costume is actually not Albanian, but Serbian.

National costumes seem not to simple signify national identities, but to embody it by inscribing the ethnic/national identity onto the very bodies of the people who belong to it, bringing the notion of ethnicity and nation very close to the notion of race as biological data.<sup>36</sup> In those terms, costumed dolls are parallel to the representation of the different “native people” in the colonial museums where wax dolls were displayed to show “physical characteristics” as a scientific proof of different races.<sup>37</sup> In the same way, lack of facial features of the costumed dolls was also a topic of criticism from a curator who told me that the “modern museum, which has dolls on exhibition, has to have dolls with anthropometric characteristics of the people in question”.

It seems that similar is true for other textile devices. The whole mid-floor is dedicated to homemade textile production, giving a “social context” for the exhibited costumes. Emphasis here is on the different techniques of textile-making and the “natural-material” used in the process. A central place is dedicated to the distaffs for which it is said in the main panel in the floor that “during the history it (distaff) was a guardian of national and ethnic identity.”

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<sup>35</sup> For the presentation of ethnic difference it is enough to exhibit one part of the costume. Exhibitions of costume parts are far the most prominent temporary exhibitions in the museum.

<sup>36</sup> For the very similar understanding of ethnicity in Greece, see Roger Just, *Triumph of the Ethnos*, in E. Tonkin, M. McDonald and M. Chapman (eds.), *History and Ethnicity*, Routledge, London, 1989.

<sup>37</sup> See Annie E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, Duke University Press, Durham 2003.

Although the exhibition includes some photographs and objects up to the late seventies, there is no reference to the industrial production of textile. The emphasis is on the continuity with prehistoric (spindle rings from early Neolithic period are exhibited) and medieval time (in the introductory panel of the floor, Serbian medieval tradition is very much stressed, while Ottoman is scarcely mentioned), but also the universal character of textile production, as it is said under a photograph of a woman spinning using her body: “spinning without a distaff using parts of the body: chin, armpit, hand and head as well as different spindles, points to primordial human resourcefulness”. All of this implied that traditional textiles could be produced only with traditional techniques and colors, as the notices suggest that with the adoption of “western technological devices” it “gradually vanished”. Obviously, using modern industrial technology it is possible to make clothes that would look exactly the same as “traditional”, but the curators’ stress on the *technique*, craft skill, rather than on the textiles themselves creates an absolute distinction between “modernity” and “tradition” by assuming that “traditional clothes” can be made only by “traditional techniques.” The introduction of “western technologies” was the introduction of “modernity” which was the end of “tradition.” Part of what is considered traditional costume is exactly its way of production: “traditional” meaning by hand.

Textile production was predominantly women’s work, as is stated in the panels. But, the display in the floor which begins with the exhibition of *Dyeing – Women’s Home Industry*, ends with the exhibition of *Dyeing Craft in the Town of Pirot* – a men’s craft whose *kilms* (*cílim*, hand-made carpets) are exhibited “because of its unique beauty” in special glass cases on the mezzanine’s walls and all around the museum’s halls. Display of “women’s” and “men’s” works on the two different sides of the entrance makes visible the opposition between the ordinary, every day textile production and more sophisticated textile production of Pirot’s dyers. Similarly, on the first floor the only specifically gender marked economic activities are displays of Shoemaking and Potter’s Workshops. Thus, men are seen as bearers of the “progress” but not of the “bad progress” of industrialization since they did not use industrial devices in their production but simply improved “traditional skills” producing some kind of advanced “traditional economy”. This stress on men’s “craft work” as opposed to women’s “traditional work” marks women as the “bearers of tradition” which is especially visible in the exhibition of costumes: almost one third of the costumes on the ground floor are women’s costumes and almost all temporary exhibitions dealing with clothes exhibit women’s clothes. Thus, it is not surprising that the last “urban costumes” of western influence exhibited in the first floor are exclusively women’s clothes. When women abandoned traditional clothing the “end of tradition” was in sight.

Although it is unclear if the “traditional culture” covered in the museum’s exhibitions existed before the nineteenth and twentieth century, or if it is unchanged from an unknown past, it is clear that it finishes with an industrialization process which, on the contrary, could be placed in a precise historic moment. In the classical anthropological evolutionary paradigm presented in the exhibition it could be indicated that the opposition between “tradition” and “modernity” is the opposi-

tion between “backwardness” and “progress” that came with modernisation. The curators appear quite aware of this danger, trying to stress, as is said in a panel, the “resourcefulness” of Serbian traditional culture as part of the universal human “achievements”.

The opposition between tradition and modernity is not seen in the universal terms of “evolution of human-kind,” but rather in specific “Serbian circumstances” where the opposition between rurality and urbanity play an important role. This opposition is clearly seen on the first floor with models of the houses showing the evolution of the four major types of houses (typical for four zones), interiors of the craftsmen’s houses, interior of the urban households and urban dresses, gravestones and objects “with customs.” The display begins with the *Dinaric log-house* and ends with town houses of two types: the *Eastern Balkan type* typical of the urban regions in the Ottoman Empire and western-like “city salon”, both accompanied with the urban dresses of the same two “types.” The urbanity of the *Eastern Balkan type*, which was exposed to “oriental influence,” as stated in the panel, and is represented with dolls in urban costumes from Bosnia and Serbia displayed in the typical house of the type, precedes European urbanity under “western influences.” Contrary to the popular belief that in the Ottoman Empire Serbs were predominantly peasants, while Muslims lived in the towns,<sup>38</sup> displaying Serbs as oriental and urban at the same time it is to show that ‘Ottoman urbanity’ was not wholly a Muslim privilege, but rather a sign of an ‘upper class’ that is nor necessarily ethnically marked.

The exhibition is finished by the “Belgrade city salon” – obviously “western style urbanity” is seen as opposed to the traditional culture, which is rather unquestionable, since the very modernity is a condition for the existence of the concept of tradition, but I am not sure that that is something on which the curators agree. On the contrary, tradition is understood as an “unchanging core of ideas and customs handed down from the past”<sup>39</sup> that should serve as base for the ethnic authenticity<sup>40</sup> and could be possibly destroyed by industrial unification.

Although, as we have seen the end of traditional culture is rather clear, there is no precise idea about the origin of “ethnicity” that does not end with traditional culture. The museum’s emphasis on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is conditioned by the curators’ understanding of “traditional culture” as a culture of “peasants” codified in the time of the emergence of the nation state in the nineteenth century. But, for the curators’ understanding of ethnicity, it could be said that “the actual origins of the ethnos are apparently unimportant – to possess it is simply an aspect of being human”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> From the numerous references on this point, see for example Miša Gleni, *Balkan 1804-1999, I*, Samizdat B 92, Beograd.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, *Tradition, Genuine or Spurious*, Journal of American Folklore Vol. 97, No. 385, 1984.

<sup>40</sup> See: Beth A. Conklin, *Body Paint, Feather, and Vers: Aesthetics and Authenticity in Amazonian Activism*, American Ethnologist Vol. 24, No. 4, 1997.

<sup>41</sup> M. Banks, *Ethnicity...*, 19.

## Conclusion

Much of the museological practice described by the curators seems to adhere to an international standard of museum collection and classification practices of the most *modern* museums. But modernity is not an issue for the curators and although they sometimes talk about the “modernization of their museum practice,” it thus does not mean that current practice is not modern, though it could be improved to reach the high modernity of western societies, for the curators the question is more of money enabling western museums to be more “advanced” than those at home, and not a qualitative difference between different practices. This does not mean that the curators have precisely the same understanding of modernity as their western colleagues, but they believe in ‘scientific knowledge,’ reason and truth.<sup>42</sup> For the curators, ethnicity and nation are natural and self-evident concepts that can be objectively studied through the international museum modernist practice. This consists of a “system of conservation, storage, air-conditioning, and (the absence of) a computerized catalogue for the collection”,<sup>43</sup> leading to a huge classification process that is supposed to define “ethnic differences.” However, the great “Modern Constitution,” as it is called by Latour – pure science, separated from the political world – actually never happened, and the museum project is just one more modernist project that has “failed”.<sup>44</sup> That means that the Belgrade Museum is not alone in its “modernist project,” although the context of its scientific project is very different from that of the western European museums. Even if it is a part of an imagined ideal modernity practice, as Latour describes it, there is no single version of modernity, but rather multiple modernities – alternative versions developed in different parts of the world. And although modernity as constructed in the Belgrade Ethnographic Museum was based entirely on the modernist principle, the kind of modernity it was ‘failing’ to produce was different from those ‘failed’ to be produced in some other parts of the world, or the ideals of modernity as they are imagined to be in the commonly understood (Western) European modernist project.

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<sup>42</sup> There are numerous references on “differences in practicing modernity”, for example see Lisa Rofel, *Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China*, in: A. Gupta and J. Ferguson (eds.) *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, Duke University Press, Durham 1999.

<sup>43</sup> Mary Bouquet, *Thinking and Doing Otherwise: Anthropological Theory in Exhibitionary Practice*, in: *Museum Studies...*, 218.

<sup>44</sup> “Modern Constitution” assumes proper mediation of elements separated *scientifically* into the social (political) and material (natural) (Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead 1993).

**Марина Симић**

## **Националност као традиционална култура у Етнографском Музеју у Београду:**

**истраживање музејске модернистичке праксе**

*Кључне речи:* антропологија музеја, национална држава, модернизам, музеј етнографије, етничитет, нација, традиционална култура

Музеји као парадигматске институције модерности тесно су повезаани са формирањем европских националних држава у деветнаестом веку, имајући важну улогу у кодификацији „националних вредности“ и служећи као средство за производњу друштвеног знања којим се моћ државе кодификује. Антрополошко разумевање начина на који националне државе производе знање кроз музејску праксу мора бити утемељено на истраживању културне продукције специфичних врста музеја у оквиру велике породице националних музеја. Користећи могућности које нуди савремена етнографска пракса, антрополошко проучавање музеја има могућност да избегне једноставно читање музејских изложби као текста укључивањем анализе друштвених сила и односа кроз који се конструише „музејско знање“. Мој рад о музејској пракси Етнографског музеја у Београду водио ме је у сличном правцу, дакле ка анализи концептуализације појмова етничке припадности, народа и традиционалне културе и начина на који су они конструишу. На основу анализе музејске праксе сакупљања, класификација и излагања објеката може се установити да се идеја националости, која доминира у београдској етнографској музејској пракси, заснива на концепцији етничитета као јасно заокружене целине, чије су дистинктивне карактеристике отеловљене у традиционалној култури коју музеј сакупља и излаже.