Case study presentation  
**Key theme: Museums and civil rights**  
Doors being open. Rights of Afrodescendants in the National Museum of Colombia  
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The second half of the twentieth century challenged the conditions under which nations and national museums had been operating since their inception. Post-Second World War responses to atrocities included the legislative recognition of the rights of cultural minorities (Bonilla 2006), and the concept of the nation-state as the supremacy of a dominant group, which organizes and legitimizes one common life and culture for all was contested (Walzer 1997).

The tension between the nation-state and the reality of its culturally diverse population found an apparent solution in multicultural legislation, which acknowledged the rights of different communities within the state. In Latin America, it was indigenous communities and movements that had the most impact on policies and the multicultural constitutions that came about at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s.

Amidst this regional transformation, Colombia has developed, since the beginning of the 1990s, a highly sophisticated constitutional and judicial framework and set an example for other countries in the region (Bonilla 2006). In terms of rights and multiculturalism, the new Constitution -signed in 1991- reveals two sets of principles: the first is constituted by the rights granted to minority groups so that they might guide their lives according to their traditions (not necessarily in accordance with liberalism) and the recognition of the multicultural character of the nation; the second is constituted by the values of unity and sovereignty as well as a view of universal human dignity, which should make up the minimum denominator that unites the Colombian people (Bonilla 2006).

This tension between the principles of respect for difference and need for unity can also be found in national museums which seek to tell the narratives in which the nation is apprehended. Should national museums encourage narratives of unity and a strong national identity? Or, should they separate and privilege differences that are characteristic of diverse groups? How does the museum contribute (or not) to the recognition of the rights of minorities?

Though legislation is keen to protect cultural diversity, in reality, ethnic groups such as Black or Afrocolombian communities have “unequal access to education, employment, housing, health care and other services (literacy rates for Afro-Colombians are much lower than for the general population). These shared experiences indicate structural discrimination within the Colombian system” (The Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice 2007: 20).

In this context, what is the role of museums in supporting Afrocolombian demands for respect of their rights? This presentation will look at the issue of differentiated rights for
Afrodescendents in the National Museum through the analysis of the temporary exhibition *Wakes and Live Saints amongst Black, Afro-Colombian, Maroon and Islander Communities* (2008). This particular exhibition was chosen because Afrocolombian activists and scholars have strongly demanded that the National Museum respond to claims of historical reparation and alter its current narratives and collections by means of consultation and participation.

**Past grievances and present exclusion**

In order to grasp the importance of work done between Afrocolombians and the National Museum, we have to take into account the very complicated present-day conditions faced by these communities. In spite of the discourse of equality and citizenship and special legislation installed twenty years ago, in reality, minority groups still have not had their rights guaranteed. In the case of the Afrodescendent population (10.6% according to the census but estimated around 20%), Rodriguez (2010) highlights the fact that the probability of an Afrocolombian being displaced by internal conflict is 84% higher than the rest of the population. He also points to the “Auto 005 of 2009” of the Constitutional Court which demands that the State act immediately to protect the rights of the Afrodescendent population that has been forcefully displaced. There are pressing issues concerning the impact of violence and the holding of land, amongst other dire conditions that have not been met by governmental agencies.

Conditions of exclusion, displacement, and a denial of basic rights are not only a product of disenfranchisement but also of discrimination. Law 70 of 1993 for Black communities, a byproduct of the Constitution, states that the government will condemn all forms of racism, though experts point to the systematic denial of the existence of racism. Diagnostic reports published on the application of Law 70 find that its impact is still highly irregular in all its respects: “land rights, ethno-education, government inaction such that the very relevance of Law 70’s rights and guarantees are put in question, along with the state’s commitment to more fundamental human rights” (The Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice 2007: 22).

These conditions were unknown to the museum staff when, in 2005, scholars in the field of Afrocolombian studies expressed their concern for the misrepresentation of Black communities in the National Museum. Two meetings were held between representatives of the Ministry of Culture, the National Museum, and Claudia Mosquera and Jaime Arocha, professors at the National University of Colombia who at that time led the Group of Afrocolombian Studies. The core of the debate was centered on the construction of a separate pavilion or gallery for people of African descent. For Mosquera, the issue of reparation was key in understanding the need for specificity, not sufficiently met by inclusion in an all-encompassing narrative. In a later interview, Arocha stressed the importance of the construction of a special and separate space for the representation of the Afrocolombian communities as the main reason for his participation in the project (interview December 10, 2008).

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1 According to the 2005 Census, 14.06% recognize themselves as being part of an ethnic group (Afrodescendent, Indigenous or Roma).
Reparation

Reparation is understood primarily as a strategy to mend or at least an attempt to rectify the consequences of a past action that cannot be undone. It has been a term used since the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance was held in Durban (South Africa), in 2001. The Conference declared the transatlantic slave trade a crime against humanity, and called on states to take measures in different realms such as honouring the memory of the victims, as well as remembering the crimes committed and the recognition of the history of these atrocities as a measure towards reconciliation.

Discussions by local intellectuals and leaders in Colombia have taken on this discourse that draws on the injuries of the past to explain the present (Mosquera 2007). Applied to the museum, historical reparation is a right and would mean acknowledging the oppression and wrongs of the past in order to rebuild the communities that have been affected and continue to suffer the legacies of such past. For Almario (2007), there is a need to revisit the past in order to see how the damages to the communities in the present are a result of the repression of former events. He agrees with the idea that a lack of acknowledgment and hiding the memories of slavery cause continuities of inequality, exploitation and discrimination generated by the politics of imperialism (Ibid).

In light of the Durban declaration the responsibilities of State institutions do not only concern representations of multiculturalism but also of staging difference as a reparatory measure: “Why not demand that the State rewrite the history of the Black presence in the country since the transatlantic slave trade?” (Mosquera, Barcelos and Arévalo 2007: 16). Mosquera calls on rejecting essentialism and exoticism of Black culture and questions the multicultural character of the nation that has not initiated actions towards reparation (2007: 221). In her view, the State has promoted a politics of silence and forgetfulness on the institution of slavery (and its present day consequences) (Ibid.: 237) and she is critical of institutions because they continue to hide the memories of enslavement that are already dispersed and fragmented.

The Durban declaration, as well as the emphasis made by scholars such as Mosquera and Arocha on representations of the nation, assumes that transforming these representations in the Museum will contribute to the process of reparation and acknowledgement. Such change is much needed due to the subrepresentation of Black and raizal communities, both in the collections and in the permanent exhibitions. Both academics and community representatives were appalled by the absence and misrepresentation of Afro communities and made claims that directly checkmate the current narrative structure. Several participants in the two meetings held on the topic of representation of Afrocommunities in the Museum in 2007 expressed that the Museum is just as excluding as the nation is. Why expect the museum to be different to the reality of the communities? However, the museum not only

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3 February 22 and 23 and September 13 and 14, 2007. 28 representatives and scholars met to construct a diagnosis of the museum.
mirrors a reality but, when it invokes a reality of the national, it is actually producing it as such (Bolívar 2002: 27).

The exhibition
As a result of the meetings and demands mentioned, a temporary exhibition was produced. This exhibition was to be the first product within a larger project of representing Afrodescendents in the Museum. Hence, one of the aims of the exhibition was to give visibility to what African captives and their descendants have brought to the nation’s formation in the fields of spirituality, social organization, aesthetics and symbolic universes. It was also thought that this inclusion would acknowledge the Museum’s complicity in making Afrocolombian communities invisible and that by recognizing both instances this action could contribute to the process of reparations required by the international community. These objectives responded to Jaime Arocha’s concern with the lack of representation of these communities. On this matter he states: “I’d rather have the academic or the empiric representation, even if they might be static, because they can be corrected and filled with new contents and we can enter a debate” (interview December 10, 2008). Stereotypes, in his view, are contents that can be modeled, corrected, debated. The total absence of representation means that no conversation can be started.

The exhibition communicated a particular notion of ancestry unique to Afrocolombian communities, which is embedded in their African past and years of resistance to enslavement as well as evangelization. It also acknowledged present day dangers these communities face, and hence sought to highlight those elements that threaten the practice and survival of the rituals as well as the fact that these communities are not justly represented in the National Museum’s exhibitions or collections. The exhibit consisted of a series of altars elaborated by the Black people who worked with us in the research process; these represented different phases in the mourning rituals and altars to Catholic saints. There were also objects, videos, audios which were used to explain mourning phases as well as a selection of late 20th century Central African pieces from the Museum’s collections, to discusses matters of ancestry in religious systems in the Congo region, primarily.4

This was a collaborative effort because the team incorporated at an early stage a group of Afrocolombian professionals from different regions who had been living in Bogotá for a while and whom professor Arocha knew through different projects. It also involved people in the seven different regions that were represented. Early on, the production team thought about the ways in which Afrocolombians could participate in the exhibition process, besides their contributions to research. Two main instances were introduced. The first was the inclusion of a group of young Afrocolombian students trained as Museum tour guides. The second instance of self-representation was the program of nine presentations that were held in the auditorium every Saturday throughout the exhibition. These were integral parts of the exhibition, not merely complementary activities. The groups were chosen according to the regions represented; the people working on the exhibition team as well as the

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communities we worked with in the different sites were given priority. These presentations were of significance because the mestizos (visitors, staff or production team members) were at a disadvantage, since we were the “others” who were foreign to a particular language. What was particularly interesting about the presentations was their diversity and how they combined tradition and modernity (and postmodernity): from very traditional music, through combinations of contemporary dance in dialogue with tradition, and hip-hop as well as Baptist hymns.

**Repairing the museum**

Did the exhibition contribute to a process of historic reparation (a notion that highlights that a group of people is different and should be treated accordingly due to historic reasons)?

Regarding the role of museums, Black people in the focus groups held after the exhibit ended and over the course of the diagnostic meetings that we held in 2007 did not necessarily use the word “reparation”, but it was very clear that the voids and misrepresentations had to be corrected because, as a member of the production team stated, “one, as an Afrocolombian, is not found in the galleries”. This was considered important, not only in terms of the Museum’s content, but because of what this invisibility reiterates: “that we are invisible to this country, even though we have given the nation multiple contributions”. For another participant, “if we are not here, how can we expect to find the things that we do?” One of the women participating in the 2007 research for *Velorios* described very profound and negative feelings about her visit to the museum:

> I felt hate, rage, I wanted to cry. Why have the assassins, the guilty, those who murdered us? Why not have the history of the Black people and the contributions that Blacks have made to the country? [Our] history is being kept away because there’s no desire for it to be known.

“I don’t know what is worse, to be made invisible or misrepresented”, someone else in the meeting claimed.

Despite the negative encounter with the contents of the permanent exhibitions and the voids, people who participated in the 2007 diagnostic meetings were very positive about what the role of museums should be. Generally, they highlighted the importance of bridging the past and the present: “things of the past that reinforce the present and are alive. Museum is memory and knowledge and the responsibility of [acknowledging] that when our elders teach us this memory [it] has to be preserved”, said a young Black woman from Tumaco.

This task of safekeeping traditions was made apparent in these descriptions of the museum as the place that “feeds the seeds so that they do not die”. A repeated sense of “treasure” for future generations was highlighted in affirmations such as “So that the young people can recognize historical and ancestral knowledge”. Though societies cannot freeze the memory of the past because social memory keeps what is most significant (Fentress and Wickham 2003: 82), in the case of the descendents of the enslaved African memory is about resistance, and there is a fear of losing the traces of that collective memory: “Maybe museums can make us remember the things of our quotidian lives that we are losing”, said one focus group participant.
The relationship between past violence and the present was also made apparent. A young musician in the focus group said that people have to understand the reasons why displacement exists and the conditions of people who experience it: “there are many millenary traditions and these have to be benefited. There has to be reparation of the discriminated peoples, and when something of us is [reproduced], there has to be reparation”. One young man, who is knowledgeable of other social and cultural processes in Brazil, commented that the museum could contribute in similar ways to the symbolic reparation as it is being carried away in that country, “in symbolic terms because it’s the work of telling a history that has not been told, and in ways in which it has not been told”. People like this young man or others who are involved in political processes see that education is a way to claim and to stage such reparations. One of the participants spoke about the need to continue the debates because the exhibition could not be only about nostalgia but rather articulated to reparation, justice and violence.

Anthropologist Jaime Arocha confirmed that exhibitions and representations of national narratives are crucial to processes of reparation:

Yes; [these exhibitions can be a part of a process of reparation], but only if they are part of a larger effort. What we did is important in this sense, but we need more. To have a group of people [at the inauguration] with a fist up in protest for the situation of the Black communities is a landmark…. an important symbolic act. Even the video with the contexts, the fact that the museum had a video that confronted official policies regarding palm harvest, monoculture, mining, which are an integral part of this government, and to have left that implicit inquiry regarding the environment and the people, that’s very important…..

The problem that one highlights is that the museum is not the nation, and this museum cannot respond for national policies; it can make great efforts to support reparation but what if the national scope is against it? Even inside the Ministry of Culture, if the Minister goes to the exhibit for just a few minutes it’s because she does not care for such reparations. In the interviews she has given, it’s obvious that she is only interested in a cosmetic multiculturalism….

(interview December 10, 2008)

If reconciliation starts with the acknowledgement of violent history, then museums can be part of a larger effort. Perhaps the effort of Wakes and Live Saints was a single step but it did not go unacknowledged.

Challenges

Though exhibitions such as Wakes and Live Saints might serve as means in a larger effort of reparation, because they contribute to acknowledge the past and the present plight of Afrocubolians, there are further challenges to be aware of. One of the challenges is related to the differences in expectations within a diverse community.

In an interview with Juan de Dios Mosquera (November 24, 2008), a prominent Black leader, done after the exhibition ended, he criticized our effort because he considered that in
trying to show the cultural diversity of the “others”, it undervalued and represented that culture as inferior. He said the anthropological gaze continued to show the other as “wild”. In his view, the exhibition should have incorporated other cultures in equal conditions to show rituality in its differences but also as part of the life of other communities. In separating a culture from the national reality, it highlights the idea of the anthropological subject available to be observed by society; in this sense, he explained that Black people were first denied their humanity, which created the sense of “otherness” that is pervasive today. For him, exhibitions that are based on folkloric aspects do not rescue Black people as social subjects. His critique is of interest precisely because one of the main concerns of the production team was to oppose stereotypical representations, even anthropological ones. His views show that readings and interpretations can never be closed off and singular.

There are also the challenges that come about when thinking of non-Afrodescendent audiences. Visitors in general did not see a need to privilege any specific group or culture in the museum. Under this idea, a specific space for Afrodescendent communities runs counter-wise to how audiences imagine the museum. Similarly, there was disagreement amongst the staff of the National Museum of Colombia about developing a specific space for Afrodescendents; although a segregationist approach did not appeal as a solution for representing these groups, most did acknowledge that, because of historical reasons, these communities deserved special attention from the museum.

And perhaps one of the greatest challenges has to do with what to remember. One of the main themes that Black people mentioned in meetings and focus groups was the relationship between America and Africa. Enslavement is a crucial part of their history, as well as a focal point when debating acknowledgement that leads to reparation. In the case of the memories of the descendents of the enslaved Africans, their history and its portrayal in museums have been controversial. There is a danger in exalting heritage “laden with sorrow and guilt”, in the words of Lowenthal (2000: 18).

Representations of enslavement are a necessary but painful feat that risks reinstating victimhood upon today’s generations. Samuel Thomas in his report on fieldwork also discusses the dangers entailed in recuperation of the past:

Moreover, as has been discussed within the remit of Afro-Brazilian scholarship, an over-focus on Africa, and by implication the slave trade, and by implication the subordinate status of blacks in the nation, risks explanation of the contemporary black predicament with an over-emphasis on the past, leaving more contemporary dynamics and their contribution to the plight of blacks under-addressed and left ‘by the wayside’, as the force of History recuperated dominates the construction of miraculously homogeneous ‘Afro-identity’.

(2008: 2)

Despite the need to tell unsettling stories, we should also be wary of opening wounds, as Peralta argues for the case of Portugal: “…the silencing of the past may be a productive process, enabling people and communities to move on, discarding those memories that just do not fit present practical purposes” (2009: 115). Idealized representations are also reparation and rehabilitation of a community, as well as a form of survival.
The challenges created by legislation and rights that aim at giving citizens tools to uphold their rights but also to acknowledge that citizens have not been treated equally and hence, some of them deserve special legislation, derives in true representational conflicts for national museums.

These twenty years have shown that multiculturalism does not necessarily reconcile the tension between unity and difference because in spite of the advancements in legislation, “universal” human rights do not respond adequately to the vindications of minorities and the issue of differentiated rights comes forth in order to create an equilibrium between minorities and hegemonic cultural groups (Bonilla 1999). Hence, there is further thought to be given to the role of museums in this context. There is also a need to openly discuss the issue of reparation within the Afrodescendant community and the way that it is enacted by the museum. More generally, citizenship has a historic dimension that is intrinsically tied to the way citizens see themselves included or excluded from their nation’s past. In this scenario, how communities perceive their own cultural heritage and the heritage of others determines the ways in which they craft their political identities and how they decide to participate in the national community.

References


