

THE MUSEUM'S ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN THE PUBLIC INTERPRETATION OF ENTERPRISES IN ETHNOECOLOGY

March 2000

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PREAMBLE

Notes Towards a Definition¹

Ethnoecology is a new, emerging discipline which brings together, and to a degree integrates, the social and natural sciences in the study of cultures and production in traditional, rural, peasant and aboriginal communities. A comparative analysis of culture and production in modern(ized) rural communities has also been proposed.

Ethnoecology covers the three inseparable domains of landscape, (geosphere), nature, (biosphere), culture and production, (ethnosphere). The discipline is holistic in that its method is the study and evaluation of both intellectual and practical activities that a particular group executes during its appropriation of natural resources for production. Unique to ethnoecology is the assumption of a considered equity between modern scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge and wisdom.

The aim of ethnoecology, and its practical significance, is the identification of those production models that can create sustainable management of the rural ecosystems whose natural resources are being utilized. This long-term goal of sustainable management is in direct contrast to the pervasive, contemporary goal of maximizing production for short-term gain.

In application, the findings of ethnoecology may have world-wide implications for the production of food, pharmaceuticals, forest goods, and other products from biogenetic resources. Also implicated in the ethnoecological enterprise are the proprietary rights and the future prospects for traditional, rural, indigenous communities in the twenty-first century.

Cameron per *Toledo et al*

Notes on the Meanings of Words

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said
in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what
I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you
can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which
is to be Master — that’s all.”

Through the Looking Glass,
Lewis Carroll

In the paper there are several words whose intended meanings should be made clear. The specific meaning of each of these words is significant because some of the discussion centres on their differences. Not surprisingly, common usage and standard dictionary definitions vary from the meanings accepted in postmodern discourse in theory and criticism. Further, current usage in France of words critical to the discussions are significant. The words for which clarification is needed are:

mediation and *médiation*
médiatiser and *médiatisation*
education, interpretation and *animation*.

In this paper to mediate means to intervene, between two or more parties, in a dispute, to produce agreement or reconciliation. Mediation, arbitration and negotiation may appear to be synonymous but mediation, as used here, has a less harsh and more positive connotation as a means to a harmonious outcome.

Mediate can also mean to form a connecting link or relationship between two things, possibly where no relationship existed previously. In postmodern discourse such mediation could cause a reciprocating flow of information and the creation of something new, or alternately can be given the negative connotation of a filter or a damaging or distorting interference, or an intervention as a pollutant or foreign substance, contaminating a relationship.

In French, médiation has the same meaning as mediation in English, but médiatisation (noun) and médiatiser (verb) mean to popularize through the mass media. In some recent French publications, *médiation* has been used to mean *médiatisation*.

Since the 1960's, museum education has usually been called interpretation. The change reflected the broadening of the museums' educational techniques beyond the old tradition of the museum teacher, (professional or volunteer "docent"), lecturing to pupils in the museum galleries as though they were school classrooms. There have been many new and creative approaches to learning in the museum, but in North America the descriptive French term, animation culturelle, or cultural animation, has never been adopted.

In this paper, interpretation is used to mean the activity of trying to express the meaning of something in the lingua franca of other persons or an audience. Interpretation here does not mean sheer description, but assumes cultural translation, i.e. the use of metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech as allusions to the cultural symbolism of the listener.

The Premise

These notes were prepared for a colloquium where the premise was that museums and like institutions should function as cultural mediators, which is to say negotiators, to create a public understanding of ethnoecology as seen from many and varying points of view.

I: Mise en scène

Ethnoecology is emotionally loaded. Perhaps this is because it is a new marriage of the older disciplines in the social and natural sciences, or possibly because it challenges our stereotypes of aboriginal and peasant peoples. Most likely it is because it touches on a host of contentious, contemporary, social, political and economic issues. But for whatever reason, the consideration of research in ethnoecology and its applications invites controversy and heated debate. It is with that turbulent backdrop that we are now asked to script a role on the public stage for museums and like institutions as mediators between the new ethnoecological perspectives and general understanding.

Ethnoecology is described as holistic, and while the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, any of those parts alone may touch on particular, sensitive public sentiments. The

complexity is such that there is a danger of reductionism and we could easily digress while writing our script and miss the larger and most critical issues. For that reason I am going to employ the device of projective imagination, using the metaphor of the museum as theatre to create a *mise en scène* for the drama of ethnoecology. I will elaborate on the metaphor, even in projective fantasy if need be, in order to arrange the component parts and give form to this *mise en scène* which may assist in providing a learning environment for future cultural mediation in the museum.

II: The Metaphor as Practicum

The choice of the metaphor of theatre for the museum, in its proposed new role as a cultural mediator, was not without reason. The museum, one might say, is a theatre of sorts. It is expert at designing sets, scripting narratives and casting art and artifacts as characters on the exhibition stage as though in a play. The museum is a producer, director, and the compere, playing to the stalls. Museums are not, however, experienced in the arts of mediation, resolution and reconciliation in inter-cultural conflicts. Nor have museums conventionally shared their authority, power and resources with other agencies or groups who would autonomously perform traditional museum functions under their roof.

The role of mediator is thus an innovation for the museum. The process of effective mediation and resolution is likely to require an unprecedented sharing of power and resources. Because we can act out in the metaphor, as projected imagination, what would not yet be possible in reality, the metaphor is a valuable though virtual learning environment. It offers a practicum in preparation for a new museum culture.

This is a highly subjective exercise and you will find that the component parts of the *mise en scène* selected and described reflect my priorities and not those of some external formula. The aim in elaborating the metaphor, and creating a *mise en scène*, is not to limit the scope of your explorations this week but rather to suggest focal points that may attract your attention.

To begin, I have chosen three words as stage properties. No attempt has been made to visualize these abstractions, but each is to be realized obtrusively on the set as a voice in the dynamics of the play, a sort of inanimate Greek chorus. The words are ANTINOMY, ETHICS, and VOICE.

III: Antinomy

ANTINOMY is an uncommon word but it has utility. It means a contradiction between two beliefs or conclusions that are each, in themselves, reasonable. Not a paradox, which is an internal contradiction, not true and false, not black and white or right and wrong, but two contradictory theses which are independently defensible. Jerome Bruner writes that, "As in most revolutionary times, our times too are caught up in contradictions. Indeed, on closer scrutiny, contradictions in such times often turn out to be antinomies — pairs of large truths, which, though both may be true, nonetheless contradict each other. Antinomies," he says, "provide fruitful grounds not only for strife, but also for reflection.

For they remind us that truths do not exist independently of the perspectives of those who hold them to be so."²

Ethnoecology is antinomic. It is replete with such contradictions — as an idea, as an emerging discipline, as research in the field and in application, and certainly as knowledge to be interpreted to the general public through the mediation of museal institutions. The answers to the questions about ethnoecology, For whom? At what costs or losses? And for what gains? are all antinomies, debatable, critical and unresolved.

Bruner says, “. . . that antinomies do not permit of logical but only of pragmatic resolution,” and that, “There is no way to get the full measure of both sides. . .” He writes, “The standard piety, of course, is that we honor both sides of each antinomy, or do something midway between.” He thinks that “splitting the difference” is risky and gives the option of another route, “just as risky,” which is to ignore resolution of the contradictory antinomies altogether, in favour of entirely new, unconsidered solutions to the matters at issue.

I do not agree with Bruner that antinomies cannot be resolved by logic, except when the parties in disagreement refuse to reason. The middle ground, I agree, seldom satisfies both sides. The idea of treating antinomies as de facto deadlocks is appealing as it opens the way to more creative solutions. Museums that may be cast in the role of cultural mediator should take note of these ideas, both in the metaphorical drama where there is still room to experiment without risk, and later in the realities of conflict resolution.

In continuing to create a *mise en scene* I recall Bruner’s reference to our “revolutionary times.” He is referring to our contemporary times of change — unprecedented rates of change. It matters little whether one of us thinks first of new information technology, biogenetics and other innovations in science, globalization, corporatism and the consumer society, demographics and cultural pluralism, single parents and new family structures or the inequitable distribution of wealth. What is important is the realization that changes in the substance, or praxis of society are accompanied by changes in social values, in the dominant belief system, or, if you wish, in the mythology. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? I will not entertain here any propositions for causal relationships but will say only that if we speak of change and revolutionary times we must then look for changing values. And we will find indicators of changing values in language, in the new shades of meaning being given to words.

IV: Ethics

This leads me to the second prop for the *mise en scène*, ETHICS. It is a familiar and important word, but one whose meaning today varies greatly depending upon the proponent. Ethics has been generally understood to mean moral principles resolved into codes or rules of conduct in human affairs. Ethics, therefore, cannot be immoral or a device of amoral convenience. Can ethics be no more than prudence?

Edward Bond, a professor of moral philosophy, says that, “You cannot call something a Code of Ethics unless it appeals to some underlying moral considerations.”³ How does one square that with the position taken by Marie C. Malaro, a professor of museum studies? Malaro’s annotation to her 1994 book, *Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy*, reads, “In these chapters the subject of ethics is limited to mean the principles of conduct deemed appropriate for a particular profession or activity, as opposed to a set of moral values”?⁴

Professor Malaro is also an attorney. In *Museum Governance* it is the attorney’s voice we hear and I find it implicit throughout the text that ethical practice and codes of ethics are seen first and foremost as prudent risk management policies, about the law, staying out of court and out of jail, and only secondarily, (if then, and when convenient), a consideration of moral principles. We must be alert to changes in the meaning of words, and here in particular, “ethics”, as in a “professional code of ethics” — to a change from a once powerful, idealizing and implicitly imperative word, to designation as a pragmatic, self-serving mechanism.

Most universities and institutes conducting research in the humanities and social sciences have had thorough, detailed and stringent codes of ethics governing research involving human beings, at least since the 1970’S.⁵ The codes of ethics of many museums and museum associations, however, tend to be either silent or evasive in this regard and the processes of

exhibition and interpretation are not seen as extensions of the underlying research with the concomitant codes of ethics. Museum codes may address issues of intellectual and cultural property rights and issues of cultural representation and appropriation but these codes, if not evasive, are generally “guidelines” rather than directives.⁶

When projecting oneself as mediator into the metaphorical combat zone of our drama, the necessity of being armed with an irreproachable and non-negotiable Code of Ethics becomes immediately apparent. It is beyond any doubt that if museums and the like are to undertake mediation and interpretation vis-à-vis ethnoecology and the public it will require a serious reassessment and substantial revision of the relevant ethical codes and practices.

V: Voice

VOICE is about representation and is the third prop to be put in place. The word may be used in the sense of “having a voice,” as in the making of decisions or the expression of opinions, which implies participation but not authority. It is also used here in the special sense of what is often called “authentic voice.” The radical view is that in matters of cultural representation, say in museum exhibitions or interpretation, only the proprietors of the culture, sub-culture or group being represented have authentic voice and may present the narrative. Curators and interpreters within the museum, or field research workers who collected the data and materials to be interpreted, for example, are culturally extraneous. Their voice is not only inappropriate but also as narrative it will constitute an appropriation of the relevant cultural property which, for indigenous communities, may include traditional knowledge and wisdom, lore, ritual and spirituality.

It has been the museum convention in archaeology, anthropology and ethnology, that curators, other researchers and interpreters, are intermediaries between the culture of origin of materials and information and the museum’s various publics. When there is an extant or hereditary population, there may be some form of consultation. It might be an advisory committee or nominal participation in the production of the narrative as exhibition and interpretation, but that is usually the extent of consultation. Rarely if ever has a museum transferred overriding authority, and the financial and other resources for the production of exhibitions or interpretation, to a group claiming authentic voice and exclusive rights. There are always claims for a voice and the right to intervene in a museum’s narratives and interpretations, but the museum’s power and authority have generally been closely held by the governing bodies who have their own sense of exclusive rights.

The demand by indigenous peoples who claim authentic voice, for the exclusive right to interpret their intellectual and cultural property, can be seen as proprietary along with the more familiar claims for ownership of land and resources, human remains and artifacts. It is a lawyer’s anathema — a communal claim for ownership and the exclusive management of intangible assets, based on the principle of moral ownership as opposed to legal possession, and made by claimants whose culture has no tradition of private property law.

For the museum such claims threaten a denial, and eventually the withdrawal, of curatorial authority. Can the museum be the ethical interpreter of traditional knowledge and wisdom, and also of the new insights of ethnoecology? Is this one narrative because of the source of some of the knowledge, or is two? Is this the kind of conflict that the museum can mediate to resolution? Projective imagination can put me at the metaphorical centre stage, but I do not yet have the stagecraft to be the catalyst of resolution. In real life, I just don’t have the experience. The metaphor as projective imagination, creating a virtual space, may provide opportunities to learn.

The convention of the museum as an intermediary and inter-cultural interpreter is as old as the Euro-American museum tradition but it has a long history of ethnocentrism with

both political and economic dimensions. In this imperial and paternalistic convention the museum was seen, and some still see it, as expert, authoritative and articulate. In contrast, indigenous or aboriginal communities were seen by the museum as lacking scientific knowledge and having no cognitive syntax comprehensible to the general public. On the other hand, many of today's ethnoecologists, and certainly the indigenous peoples, regard traditional knowledge and wisdom as valid science, though outside the Western convention. They view the traditional cognitive syntax as logical, as evidenced by the outcomes. Here we have antinomies and a problem in ethics as well as the new and unstudied challenge of the indigenous authentic voice.

At this point, however, it is important to consider what other kinds of groups, not necessarily indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities or other marginalized sub-cultures, might have a sense of proprietorship or a vested interest in ethnoecology. There are academic research institutes, governments, corporations and special interest groups who may all feel entitlement. Ethnoecological research has a far reaching impact, touching many aspects of identity and survival in societies around the world. There is great interest in this "emerging discipline," and it needs to be seen, measured, and assessed, in the larger context of today's changing world, in what some would call the "Big Picture."

VI: The Backdrop as the "Big Picture"

The backdrop we create in the *raise en scène* is a panorama of the intellectual landscape within which the action of the play takes place. From the outset we knew it had to be turbulent or tempestuous because of all the controversy about biogenetics, modified foods and cloned sheep that got mixed up in people's minds while trying to understand ethnoecology. With that kind of confusion it seemed wise to first position ethnoecology in this landscape and then to relate the other characters and their roles to that focal point.

The backdrop is a collage of images — social, political, economic, scientific, technological and environmental — composed from news photos, film and video clips, works of art, a banner headline or two and some children's drawings. They reflect the deep divides and ironies in this exponentially changing world we are all trying to understand. Contrasting images are juxtaposed above, below or beside each other: cultures and counter-cultures; the marginal and the central; conservation and destruction; peace and war; the innovative new and the poignant old; the reactionary and the progressive, and hope beside futility.

This vista of nature and human society at work in a changing world has no perspective, offers no point of view. It is neutral and yet it is discomfiting because, as we selectively identify with some images and reject others, we discover that we have created a new collage reflecting our own view of the world. We search there for ourselves — our fears, our aspirations, our worth — in the midst of the tempest of images and ideas. And we are to be found there, but as a small part of something much larger and more complex than we had envisioned. The "Big Picture" gives us no more and no less than an invaluable perspective on our connectedness to the world around us.

So it is with ethnoecology in all its dimensions, its contemporary significance and long-term potentials. In the intellectual landscape of the backdrop we find it moving in the deep currents of changing values which have carried it along, from isolation on an intellectual island to the highlands of social conscience, in the vast continent of a new reality. If I wax poetic here it is because I believe that the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of ethnoecology signify ways to a greater humanity among peoples.

The use of the metaphor of the museum as theatre, and projective imagination, have been useful in exploring the prospects for the museum as cultural mediator, and in considering the new kind of museum culture it implies. When required to evaluate and develop strategies for

activities in unknown territory, this is one way of using metaphor and your imagination to be there tomorrow, today. Now I am going to take a real time, real world look at ethnoecology, commercial “bioprospecting,” translation problems, The Tower of Babel, and finally the prospect of a new museum culture.

VII: The New Ethnoecology

Ethnoecology has a short history. The early articulation and naming of the new discipline in 1954 have been credited to Harold Conklin, an American ethnographer.⁷ He started a brush fire in the academic world with the proposition that the social and natural sciences had to combine their experience, resources and techniques in a holistic methodology to achieve a meaningful assessment of rural indigenous cultures. There followed an unceasing flow of research and publication. As an outsider scanning this production I perceive a dramatic change in the values and priorities of ethnoecology in the academic world over the last forty years. I also see a parallel, related, but contradictory development in the private sector.

Before Conklin and his followers had encouraged the joining of the social and natural sciences into a new holism, most scientists seemed to be working under the bell jars of their particular disciplines. Academic isolation, and a concern more with polishing technique and refining method than with the broader significance of their researches, also persisted into the early years of ethnoecology. The literature of the time offers little evidence of social conscience. Contemporary ethnoecology, on the other hand, exhibits a liberal, humanistic ethic. It can be seen applied not only to the applications of research in the sustainable management of arable and forest environments, or to the dangerous potentials for the commercial exploitation of biogenetic technology, but also it is seen applied to the troubling questions about indigenous communities, their rights and future prospects. This was exemplified by the 1995 conference at the University of Georgia, “Ethnoecology: Different Takes and Emergent Properties.”⁸ This is the new ethnoecology which we found on the highlands of a “vast continent of a new reality” in our metaphoric imagination. In my view of the changing world this was a reference to the counter-culture of social responsibility in the twenty-first century.

VIII: Bioprospecting

The related parallel development observed in the private sector is the burgeoning, multi-billion dollar industry given the polite appellation, “bioprospecting.”⁹ In the search for sources of fresh biogenetic stock, corporations in the business of agriculture, pharmaceuticals and other enterprises based on biogenetic resources have been raiding indigenous communities around the world with unprecedented aggression. The targeted regions of greatest biodiversity are in the tropics. The “prospectors” seek not only biogenetic samples or specimens but also the related traditional indigenous knowledge and wisdom. Many have questioned the ethics of their field practices.

There is a host of issues surrounding this commercial activity and the rights of indigenous communities. The right to say “No,” and when “Yes,” financial remuneration, copyright, intellectual and cultural property rights, and so on. These issues are addressed by international declarations, treaties, labour laws, human rights laws, conventions, commissions and agreements.¹⁰ There is no consensus in the indigenous communities, or among ethnoecologists, that these bureaucratic safeguards are effective.

Some are worried that commercial biogenetic engineering and genetically modified crops and other foods may be marketed putting profit before the health and safety of the public. One also has to be concerned about the potential cross-over of ethical scientific practice in academic ethnoecology and participation in commercial biogenetic enterprises, where expertise in ethnoecology is at a premium.¹¹

A contrary position is that private sector biogenetic technology corporations have poured hundreds upon hundreds of millions of dollars into research and development towards high yield crops and herds of enhanced quality. Malnutrition and starvation in the Third World can be staved off by their scientific advances. Other hundreds of millions have gone to biogenetic research in new medicines, drugs and vaccines. These two views of commercial biotechnology enterprises are antinomies. When the ethnoecology story is told these major investors in research, and their shareholders, will demand a voice.

IX: Loss of Definition

The result of effective cultural mediation related to ethnoecology, for example, would be not only the resolution of differences and reconciliation but also collaboration in public interpretation programs. Unfortunately the conventional communication process, from collecting, documentation and research, to the public at large, is problematic at best.

When making copies of photographs, films, video and audio tapes, or photocopies of paper documents, we speak of the original and then of the copies as first generation, second generation, and so on, as we observe the progressive loss of definition. We are losing the precision or resolution of the image: colours are changing, details are lost. We are not only losing information from the image but misinformation is being introduced. This reminds me of an old parlour game where the guests sat in a circle and one of them whispered a message to the person beside them, who passed the message along, and so on around the circle. The inevitably laughable result was that the final version of the message bore little, if any, relationship to the original.

I am digressing here not to parlour games but to the problems of translation or transliteration when information and ideas are moved, not from say English to French, but from an ethnoecology research site to the somewhat encoded language of science, then to the museum language of the laity and common usage, and on to the vernacular of the street. Are the end messages likely to reflect the original communication with even a shred of integrity ?

Consider what happens to ethnoecology as we move from the realities of the research site to the vagaries of public perceptions. We begin with the realities of the site — the landscape, nature in all its wondrous manifestations, culture and production. Within the local culture there is traditional knowledge and wisdom, a belief system and ritual — all the intellectual and spiritual resources required for making a plan of productive activity. Such a plan is implemented and there is a de facto technology. This is the “original.” To this we bring the ethnoecologist, and she is armed with the existing literature, ergo the knowledge already acquired in her discipline, personal knowledge, and a mission. She sets out to bring these alien assets together with the inherent assets of the site.

The product of the ethnoecologist’s mission will be field notes, maps and diagrams, video and tape recordings, photographs, and specimens and artifacts taken out of context. This is the first generation of translation. Then follows the production of a report which will have text, analytic data, refined maps and diagrams, photographs, and possibly annexed video and audio recordings. The field report, a scholarly document in the esoteric language of science, is the second generation translation.

If the objective is to create public understanding of ethnoecological research, then the next step is choosing a suitable conduit for communication and broad dissemination. And we are here today because we have been chosen — museums, interpretation centres, zoos, parks, botanical gardens and the like. How do we receive this multi-media package of texts and data, images and things, and begin to translate it into a public program? Will the museum’s public programmers accept a second generation translation or will they want to go back to the source? Time and money will probably dictate that they must work with what is given.

To be fair to the museum professionals who must now create the third generation translation, acting on faith and out of necessity, it must be said that they are incredibly adaptable and creative. Most museum professionals today will have post-graduate qualifications. If they happen to have studied herpetology it will be only in the largest museums that they will work as a herpetologist. More likely they will find themselves employed as the Curator of Natural Science — all of it. There has been considerable specialization in their studies, but their work is now as a generalist. The museum educators and interpreters, like the exhibit planners and designers, are even less likely to have academic training that fits all the subject matter of the museum's programs, so they too must be adaptive generalists.

Most special exhibitions and interpretive programs challenge the staff each time anew with less than familiar content. Thus each new project means a crash course for the staff in a new subject area as they assemble and study the information and collections in preparation for exhibition. Their greatest frustration, however, is that only a small portion of the information, ideas and materials available can be presented.

The criteria for a museum exhibition are at great variance from the criteria for scholarly presentation. This is not because of any lack of scholarly intent but because of the limitations of architecture, space, installation, conservation, lighting, traffic, security, and the most critical factor of all, the attention span of the visitor. Visitors will spend, on average, about two hours at a large, urban museum and about forty minutes of that time in a special exhibition. A museum exhibition cannot succeed, cannot communicate effectively, if designed as a three-dimensional textbook.

No matter how much space is given or what budget is allotted, an exhibition devoted to a scholarly endeavour must be reductionist, and with the best of planning and direction, and an attentive, informed visitor, it can communicate only the most essential ideas. What the visitor takes away from his museum experience is the translation in the fourth generation.

The museum visitor now interprets the exhibition to his friends. The mass media — television, radio, the daily press and a few chat lines on the "web" — take their turns at interpretation. And soon people who have had no exposure to the museum's program are explaining it to each other. I have lost track of the generations, or should I say degeneration. I hope this doesn't sound too discouraging. It is simply that the effective communication and dissemination of new information and ideas is not only difficult but also is most problematic. But is a loss of definition to the point of outright distortion inevitable? At least part of the answer may lie in multiple narratives from the appropriate sources, that is having more than one voice speaking as directly as possible to

the museum visitor. Who is and who is not permitted to speak, of course, remains a matter for mediation.

X: Please Don't All Speak at Once.

There are many who will want a voice in telling the success story of ethnoecology. Fewer will want to talk about the risks and hazards of biogenetic engineering or commercial practices in marketing genetically modified cereal seed or consumer foods. And giving a voice in the shaping of the ethnoecology narratives to each of biogenetic technology corporations, government departments of the environment, agriculture, fisheries and forestry, environmentalist groups, the research ethnoecologists and others, would be a nightmare for the museum interpreter.

How can a museum deal with many voices, contradictory viewpoints, ethical interpretations at variance, and vastly differing social and economic goals? Does corporate sponsorship or government financing of interpretive programs, or the ownership and governing control of the museum, earn a voice, and if so, does it signify a little or a lot? And what of the special case of

indigenous peoples? The question of authentic voice and their claim for exclusive rights must wait on further interpretation of cultural and intellectual property law. We seem to have come full circle, back to antinomy, ethics, voice, and the need for mediation. Further, it becomes clear that if the museum assumes the role of mediator it must be impartial, cannot take sides and therefore can have no voice in interpretation.

Are museums prepared to exchange interpretive authority for a role in cultural mediation?

XI: A New Museum Culture

The proposal that the museum assume the role of cultural mediator, in place of the traditional role of inter-cultural interpreter, is one of the most radical propositions in museology since the idealism of the first eco-museum and *Ja nouvelle muséologie* of Georges Henri Riviere. It is not a subtle difference in the choice words.

The museum as an inter-cultural interpreter attempts to transpose meanings framed by the world view of one culture into the cultural frame of a different culture — the dominant culture in the museum's own society. It has always been a questionable undertaking but museum traditionalists have argued that interpreting in this way could create a "window on the world." The critics of the *soi disant* pan-cultural view through the "window on the world" argue that, as it is contained within the interpreter's own cultural frame, the view through the window can have but one cultural perspective.

The museum as a cultural mediator does not appropriate the cultural voices of others but rather resolves the problem of difference or distinctiveness by enabling each to speak on their own behalf. Although the idea of the museum as mediator is so new that it has yet to be debated, I anticipate that its critics will argue that without translation, *ergo* interpretation, the cultural expressions of others would be alien and unintelligible. The fundamentals of the museum tradition are challenged. The debate could produce our own museological antinomies, but before that consider the kind of new museum culture which could accommodate mediation.

First of all, cultural mediation, in the sense we have been using it here, requires that the parties in contention for exclusive or privileged voice in the narrative must agree to participate in the search for resolution. There must be a mutuality of interest in the goal, which is public understanding of the narration — of the story or stories to be told. Secondly, the mediator must have no conflict of interest and be accepted as a disinterested party, non-partisan and certainly not an interpreter. And thirdly, mediation cannot be achieved without each contending party being willing to gain a full understanding of the opposing thesis or argument. And towards this end the museum as mediator must provide a new kind of learning environment for those who would create the cultural narrative.

The explorations with the theatre metaphor suggest a model that encourages interaction, as with actors on the stage; that forces confrontation and an analysis of the issues, as with our stage props of antinomy, ethics and voice. Most important of all, in this environment the participants must learn to see themselves and the propositions they would defend in the larger context of "a panorama of the intellectual landscape," of nature and human society, in a time of unprecedented change. I am, of course, recalling the backdrop to the stage which, in the museum, becomes a background of learning.

The environment for mediation being proposed is obviously not the teacher in the classroom. It is a communal and mutually advantageous environment in which the learners become each other's teachers and the mediator's role is the encouragement of shared enterprise in achieving the goals. If successful, such mediation would result in the creation of narratives

and exposition which incorporated different voices and perspectives argued well, and not compromise in the middle ground. The museum now becomes an open forum where the authority and power, once closely held within, is vested in those who have come with stories to tell.

Realizing this new museum culture of mediation, mutuality, shared enterprise, and the multi-dimensional exposition of cultural narratives, could bring significant benefits in public education. It might overcome some of the problems of repeated translation, discussed earlier, by bringing authoritative voices closer to the audience. It would certainly encourage informed public debate by openly presenting arguments on all sides of significant issues. But the museum culture of mediation also makes imposing demands for new and more stringent codes of ethics.

Agreement on a shared, comprehensive code of ethics is probably the most difficult objective to achieve in effecting cultural mediation. The code must address the ethics of the museum, the scientific community, indigenous communities, government and the corporate community, as they each relate to enterprises in biodiversity, biogenetics and ethnoecology. If there are to be shared initiatives in public education, there must be commitments and adherence to a common code of ethics. It is first and foremost a matter of integrity, but it is the demonstration of that integrity in public education that will lend credibility, win acceptance and lead to public understanding.

If there is a foundation to be laid down, upon which this new museum culture can be soundly built, it is stone-by-stone and brickby-brick a commitment to ethical practice founded on sound moral principles. It would not be without reason, however, to argue that any prospect of a consensus to meet this ethical challenge in our contemporary society reflects my credulous utopianism more than a rational assessment of probability.

CONCLUSIONS

Some will see this vision of the museum as a cultural mediator to be utopian, impractical or too much the child of the radical counterculture. It does suggest a museum that has surrendered its authority to relativist debate. Has the museum of research and scholarship, of learned authority and respected voice, become mute? There is certainly no question about the importance of public education in all that ethnoecology implies, taken broadly as one of the ways and means to the sustainable management of our global environment. But when we try to identify the mediating agency to undertake this task, are we focusing appropriately on the museum? Is it a worthy goal to reinvent the museum as an agency of cultural mediation, moving towards a model of the museum as an open forum for the resolution of contemporary social issues, while moving away from its traditional, authoritative voice and its role as society's cultural memory? Is this the fabled folly of exchanging new lamps for old?

Fully recognizing all the past and present sins of imperialism, colonialism, Eurocentrism and cultural misrepresentation in the Euro-American museum tradition, there remains a defense. It can be well argued that the institutions we call museums are the creations of their respective societies, reflecting the culture, and therefore the values and the dominant mythology, of their times and places of invention and of their maintenance thereafter. They are thus culturally specific, and with all the wrinkles, warts and wattles they are still our invaluable cultural memory — invaluable in the assessment and understanding of our past and present identity without which we cannot envision tomorrow. It is this resource — part history, part mythology, part science, part art — which qualifies the museum to be authoritative and most useful in addressing the issues of today.

Further, terms such as “culturally specific,” and “our identity,” must make it clear that the traditional museum as described belongs to the cultural entity which created it in the

first place. No nation, no society nor any group within, has ever created a museum lacking a cultural perspective. The “Window on the World” has always been the world outside our window as we saw it. In a culturally pluralistic society perhaps we must have a plurality of museums where we can look out many different windows. But, to rest the defense, a museum is a creature of its society, be that a nation or a community. Its value lies in the diligence of its scholarship not only in refining the historical record while preserving the cultural memory, but also in keeping that memory accessible and vital for today.

The argument contrary to this is that the old, traditional museum has but pale shadows of the past, legendary more than truthful. The new museum must disengage from such a problematic and inhibiting past and thus unfettered, engage in the issues of today’s realities. The rejoinder is that the traditional museums, with their historic collections in ethnology, history, biology and the earth sciences, not to mention art collections as sources of insight as well as information, offer us resources for today’s challenges without which we are naive, ignorant, and in intellectual poverty.

Take as an example Kew, the Royal Botanic Gardens just outside London. Since 1759, and with imperialist zeal throughout the colonial period, Kew built world-wide collections comprising 6 million dried plant specimens; 40,000 taxa of living plants; 80,000 fungi and artefacts of plant origin, and a vast library and archives. Kew is actively involved in contemporary botanical, biodiversity and environmental programs around the world. It is an exemplary international resource in ethnoecological research.

The conundrum put before this colloquium is how to create effective programs for public understanding of ethnoecology, a new scientific discipline with broad and urgent implications. Many of us believe that there is an impending, global, environmental disaster, which can only be staved off through public awareness creating political will and consequent, radical, legislative action and enforcement. My task has been to examine the proposition that museums, zoos, aquaria botanical gardens, and such as park interpretation centres, should become the mediators between the general public and the various factions related to ethnoecology, with this goal of public understanding.

My conclusions are, first, that these museal institutions can make valuable contributions to initiatives for public understanding of ethnoecology. They should participate in the discourse. Secondly, they are not the appropriate medium of communication to initiate such programs for reasons of agency and structure. An appropriate medium must have the capacity to maintain multiple exchanges, or conversations, among individual members of the public and any of those directly involved in ethnoecology and related activities. We are all, as individuals and as members of groups, both participants in creating a sustainable environment, and subjects of the decisions made and their outcomes. We need to talk to each other, now!

The new museum culture has been described here as the museumcum-open forum. Museums by their nature — by virtue of their governance and mandate; their being de facto agencies of their founding and supporting factions within the society — cannot be open forums. I have already said, in other works, that the disinterested museum, the museum without a specific cultural perspective, is a fiction. The same holds true for government departments, public school systems, and of course, corporations, their foundations and the programs they fund at universities and research institutes.

The hypotheses of ethnoecology and environmentalism, as opposed to those of government economic development bureaucracies and biogenetic-based corporations, are antinomies. The indigenous communities and the developed western world are embraced in antinomy. As I said at the beginning, ethnoecology in all its dimensions is antinomic. Antinomies are not resolved when established institutions, all seen as agencies of particular jurisdictions, attempt to mediate resolution among vested economic interests, traditional wisdom, political ideologies and modern scientific theory. It is most unlikely in a world in which the public

does not trust governments or corporations, or even the arms-length educational and cultural agencies, to tell the truth.

Finally, it is my conclusion that the appropriate medium for an open forum, for the exploration and perhaps resolution of issues as complex and multipartite as ethnoecology, its related activities and its implications, is to be found in cyberspace. The Internet and the World Wide Web are our twenty-first century equivalent of the ancient market-place, where many voices and views were heard, where stories were told and lessons learned, and where the transactions encompassed everything from goods to ideas and wisdom, to alliances and reconciliations. The market-place had no hierarchy and no bureaucracy. The law was an unwritten but well understood code of ethics — rules of conduct in ones affairs — enforced when breached by exclusion or expulsion and disgrace.¹²

In other times we fought for freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and a free press, each of which put ethical practice on display and open to challenge. Today, these freedoms at times appear problematic: assembly in public places and pepper-spray are a dangerous mixture; the media have become commodities. The Internet, the Web and their evolving successors may be the only places we have left where we can meet the criteria for the open display, the unrestrained challenges and the debates towards an accord on codes of ethics and practice. There, would we be cultural mediators, we can have a voice among others, listen and be heard, judge and be judged.

As well as contributing its knowledge and opinions to such discourse I suggest that the museum's further positive action could be to provide portals into the Internet and the Web for the exploration of ideas such as ethnoecology. We can open doors without holding the keys. There, in what some have called anarchy, I believe we will find what proves to be the most democratic means we have to talk to each other, hear all the voices, identify and reject the deceits and canards, argue the issues, and work towards understanding that invites action.

NOTES

1 There are comments in the literature to the effect that the new ethnoecology is not yet well defined. For the benefit of participants in the March 2000 colloquium, or others who may be unfamiliar with the subject, I have with impunity freely paraphrased Victor M. Toledo and others. See, Victor M. Toledo, "What is Ethnoecology? Origins, Scope and Implications of a Rising Discipline," in *Ethnoecologica*, Vol.1, No. 1, April, 1992, (Centro de Ecologic de la Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico). Toledo divided ethnoecology's domain into landscape, nature and production. Some of my readers had difficulty with that, so I have added geosphere, biosphere, and what may be a neologism, ethnosphere. The notes presented here do not constitute a definition but are a layman's effort in that direction.

2 Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. and London), 1998, pp. 66-70. While respecting Bruner's thesis on the culture of education, I do not accept his position on the relativity of truth.

3 Edward J. Bond is Professor Emeritus of Moral Philosophy, Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario. He is the author of *Reason and Value*, (Cambridge University Press), 1983, and *Ethics and Human Well Being*, (Blackwell, Cambridge Mass. and Oxford), 1996. Personal communication, February, 2000.

4 Marie C. Malero, *Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy*, (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London), 1994. p.165. Professor Malero was director of the Graduate Program in Museum Studies at The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., retiring in 1998.

5 See, for example, Margaret Mead, "Research with Human Beings: A Model Derived from Anthropological Field Practice." In *Ethical Aspects of Experimentation with Human Subjects*, edited by Paul E Freund, (Cambridge: Deadelus), 1969. Also *Ethics: Report of the Consultative Group on Ethics*, (The Canada Council, Ottawa), 1977.

6 See, for example, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) *Code of Professional Ethics*, (ICOM, Paris), 1986, and the Canadian Museums Association (CMA), *Ethics Guidelines*, (CMA, Ottawa), 1999.

7 See Toledo, (Note 1), and also Nazarea and other contributors to *Ethnoecology: situated knowledge / located lives*, edited by Virginia D. Nazarea. (The University of Arizona Press, Tucson), 1999. This is a collection of contributions to the landmark 1995 conference, "Ethnoecology: Different Takes and Emergent Properties," convened at the Ethnoecology/Biodiversity Laboratory, University of Georgia.

8 See Note 7.

9 Christine S. Kabuye, "Am I My Brothers' Keeper?" in *Ethnoecology: situated knowledge / located lives*, p. 267-268.

10 Darrell A. Posey, "Safeguarding Traditional Rights of Indigenous Peoples." David J. Stephenson, Jr., "A Practical Primer on Intellectual Property Rights in a Contemporary Ethnoecological Context." Katy Moran, "Toward Compensation: Returning Benefits from Ethnobotanical Drug Discoveries to Native Peoples." All in *Ethnoecology: situated knowledge located lives*, pp. 217-270.

11 Eyal Press and Jennifer Washburn, "The Kept University," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 285, No-3, March, 2000. pp. 39-54. This magazine article is a revealing report on American universities, corporate research grants, patents and licenses, in the sciences.

12 For an outrageous, over-stated, but insightful and valuable assessment of the Internet and the Web, see, Rick Levine, Doc Searls and David Weinberger, *the cluetrain manifesto: the end of business as usual*, (Perseus Books, Cambridge, Mass. 2000).

Ethnoecology

Situated Knowledge/Located Lives

EDITED BY

Virginia D. Nazarea

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA PRESS TUCSON

The University of Arizona Press
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First Printing
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© This book is printed on acid-free, archival-quality paper.
Manufactured in the United States of America

04 03 02 01 00 99 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ethnoecology : situated knowledge/located lives / edited by
Virginia D. Nazarea.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8165-1882-3 (cloth : acid-free paper)

1. Ethnobiology. 2. Human ecology. 3. Traditional farming.
4. Biotic communities. 5. Indians—Ethnobiology.

I. Nazarea, Virginia D. (Virginia Dimasuay), 1954-

GN476.7.1.77 1999

304.2—ddc21

98-25481

CIP

British Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Ethnoecology is "a way of looking at the natural world that emphasizes human behavior. Without doubt, it is a powerful resource recognition and management tool that orient people in the world. The sustainability of their practices and the role of ethnoecology offers great promise in other fields of investigation and

Somewhere along the line, the concept of "the way of looking," thus intended, ideological filters with artifacts that impart some comfort but at the same time caricature and parody of understanding embedded in non-human, pan-human categories an ethnoecological context has distracted us from the nurturance of diversity, balancing persistence and change.

This multidisciplinary volume that social and natural scientists and humanists have on the human dimension. More than this, it explores the implications that ourselves have on their environment. Those vantage points, the volume offers a thematic, both enabling and collaborative of decision-making processes. It provides a useful framework for analysis, management, agricultural sustaina-