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Jonathan Parker, PhD Student
Department of History, The University of Texas at Austin

Ethnographies of Us and Them in Two Prague Museums: Urban Constructions of Rural Spaces
in the Ethnographic and Náprstek Museums of the National Museum

Eating my lunch on a park bench in Prague, I pondered what I had seen in the museums I had just visited. I was struck not only by the exhibitions, but also the setting, Prague itself. Prague is easily the largest city in Czech Republic, and having travelled around the country (mainly in Moravia), I had heard people joke that besides Prague, Czech Republic was a country of small villages, and that even Brno, the second largest city, maintained a kind of “village mentality.” With this in mind, I thought about how the Ethnographic Museum in Prague brought together “folkloric” objects from around the country and how not only ethnic minorities (Roma, Germans, Jews, etc.) but also urban spaces were largely absent from these presentations. Across the river Vltava on Prague’s right bank stood another intriguing museum, the Náprstek Museum (of Asian, African, and American Cultures), which looks solely beyond Czech Republic’s horizons rather than strictly within them. While these museums at first seemed to concern themselves with radically different topics, I was struck by how they were both “ethnographic” (in Czech *etnografie* or *národopis* from *národ*, nation or people, and *dopsat*, to write [until completion]) in nature, and thus (considering the etymologies of these words) how they sought to “write” about “peoples” or “ethnos.” It was then I began to piece together a picture of how they were related to each other, and how they served basically the same project. This picture is the subject of this paper.

Thus in this paper I examine the ways in which these two museums, the Ethnographic Museum and the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African, and American Cultures participate in the reproduction of Czech national identity. In turn I tease out the colonial themes and power

relations which emerge from this participation in nationalist ways of seeing and framing. Both construct a sense of Czech national identity, either by representing “authentic folk culture” which symbolically synthesizes the regions of the Czech Republic, or by presenting “foreign” cultures with consistent reference back to individuals claimed as part of the nation. In both cases, these urban institutions use rural spaces to define and elaborate upon their claimed national identity. Thus this paper will show how museums participate in nation-building projects, and how such projects centralize, homogenize, and consolidate the nation. In so doing museums can act as tools for appropriating regional histories, practices, and material cultures into a broader “national culture” or “identity.” In addition, the fact that such museums are often located in cities, especially capital cities, highlights the privileged status that urban places have in defining the nation in what might be termed “internal colonization.”

At its earliest conception, this project was inspired by a section from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Therefore it seems worthwhile to revisit this classic work at the outset of this paper, albeit as briefly as possible. Anderson’s basic argument is that nations are “cultural artefacts” which were created by a combination of forces around the end of the 18th century.¹ Anderson also points towards some of the “technologies” which make nationalism possible and which reproduce “the nation,” and in particular he emphasizes the role of print media in generating mass, reading publics in vernacular languages.² More importantly here however, Anderson also describes the role of the census, map, and museum in producing national identities. Anderson argues that these “three institutions of power” helped to shape the state’s image of its subject lands and peoples.³ The map and the census made possible the

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), Chapter 1, Introduction.

² Ibid, “Prosperity” in Chapter 2, Cultural Roots.

³ Ibid, Chapter 10, Census, Map, Museum.

“grammar” with which to imagine things like “Indonesia” and “Indonesians.”⁴ They made it possible to quantify ethnic groups.⁵ Of special relevance to this study, Anderson argues that museums are “profoundly political” as instruments of the imagination. In particular, the “museumization” of ancient monuments and artefacts turned them into “regalia for a *secular* colonial state” (emphasis in original). Ancient monuments become “logos” for the colonial state and eventually for the nation.⁶ Like the census and the map, the museum is thus a tool for imagining the nation. It classifies objects as part of a “national” culture and creates logos for and of “the nation.”

Ethnographic Museum

The Ethnographic Museum in Kinsky Garden is one of the main branches of the National Museum. Located in the southwestern part of Prague, the museum was founded in 1901 and its permanent exhibition was most recently reconstructed in 2005. The Ethnographic Museum contributes significantly to the (re)production of a “Czech” national identity by bringing together local “folk” cultures from around Czech Republic and presenting them as a unified whole. In the words of the museum’s own website, the museum “is documenting traditional folk culture of the Czech lands – Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia.” The permanent exhibition “presents everyday life of the Czech countryside and folklore and festivities of the traditional rural communities in the 18th, 19th and the first half of the 20th century.”⁷ The first quote here ethnicises the territory of the Czech Republic by identifying it specifically as “Czech.” This discursive act is repeated with

⁴ Ibid, “The Museum” in Chapter 10, Census, Map, Museum.

⁵ Ibid, “The Census” in Chapter 10, Census, Map, Museum.

⁶ Ibid, “The Museum” in Chapter 10, Census, Map, Museum.

⁷ “Visit Us: Ethnographic Museum of the National Museum,” *National Museum*, accessed 20 April 2018, <http://www.nm.cz/Hlavni-strana/Visit-Us/Ethnographic-Museum-of-the-National-Museum.html?xSET=lang&xLANG=2>.

the phrase “Czech countryside.” Furthermore, by claiming to present such “Czech” culture from a specific time period (ca. 1700 – 1950) it projects a sense of Czech national and cultural identity into the past. This projection promotes the idea of an enduring cultural identity which stretches far back into the past. Many modern historians, at least those writing in English, would disagree with this assertion. For example, Jeremy King has argued that if these lands were “Czech, rather than Bohemian, then that was only after 1945.”⁸

The construction of a “Czech” countryside is done not only with words, but also by bringing together objects from different regions into a single display. For example, on the ground floor, the Ethnographic Museum presents a display entitled “Life in the Czech Countryside” or, in Czech, simply “Venkov” (“Countryside”). The display consists of a reconstructed farm building with numerous objects and informational panels. Interestingly, many of the objects have tags attached which name the object and state its provenance with varying levels of specificity. Some examples: “Lace pillow, 20th century, Bohemia,” “Hay and grass rake, 1940s, Nová Včelnice, Jindřichův Hradec district, Southeastern Bohemia,” “Sowing canvas, beginning of the 20th century, Chodsko region,” “Hay and grass rake, 1st third of 20th century, Souš, Most district, Northwestern Bohemia,” “Yoke, 1st half of 20th century, Zdice, Beroun region, Central Bohemia,” “Banneton flaskets, 19th-20th century, Svratka, Žďár nad Sázavou district, Moravia,” and “Wheelwrights’ drawknife, 20th century, Svatý Jan, Příbram district, Central Bohemia.”⁹ In addition, the exhibition includes a map of “folklore regions of the Czech lands” (“Folklorní Regiony Českých Zemí 2017) which highlights specific areas within the modern borders of the

⁸ Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12.

⁹ Object captions, “Life in the Czech Countryside,” *Czech Folk Culture*, Ethnographic Museum of the National Museum, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

Czech Republic.¹⁰ This gathering of objects, together with this map as a framing device, works to create an kind of idealized, “Czech” farm house, which in turn produces a coherent (albeit fictionalized) vision of a specifically “Czech” rural culture. This gathering of objects from different regions in one place welds them together into a coherent, nationalized whole. It helps its (presumably urban) audience to imagine a homogenous “Czech” national culture.

This interpretation is supported by Rhiannon Mason’s helpful discussion of the functions of national museums in general. National museums serve to provide an “origin story,” to retroactively impose a national interpretation on the past. In doing so they give the appearance of “objective proof” to claims of national longevity, in turn legitimating the nation as an inevitable and eternal community.¹¹ In contexts where objects are less easily presented as part of a “national culture,” due to similarity with other objects classified as outside that culture (this point applies especially to mass produced objects), the provenance of those objects becomes more important. As Mason puts it, “ownership and usage become the most convincing way of linking material culture to a specific locale.” Other strategies to place objects in a specific, national context include “oral histories and reminiscence.”¹² Thus the sharing of personal experiences becomes a conduit for linking objects with specific places and cultures.

However, as Mason argues, such museums “of” the nation readily become problematic. Museums “of” the nation claim to present and represent the nation through a selection of material culture. In doing so they delineate and delimit the cultural boundaries of the nation. But even as they claim to represent the whole nation (assuming that it is a holistic national museum),

¹⁰ Wall panel, “Folklorní Regiony Českých Zemí 2017,” *Czech Folk Culture*, Ethnographic Museum of the National Museum, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

¹¹ Rhiannon Mason, *Museums, Nations, Identities: Wales and its National Museums* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 73-75.

¹² *Ibid*, 80-81.

inevitably some things are left out. A selection must be made. Thus the question of power comes into play, as curators decide to include some things and exclude others. Alternative narratives, including regional or minority narratives, can be excluded.¹³ Exclusion from the national narrative can serve to delegitimize sub-national claims or render certain groups alien from an imagined national body. In an era when civic rights are dependent on nationality, cultural exclusion can actually justify political exclusion and is therefore consequential. This point will reappear later when this paper compares the Ethnographic and Náprstek Museums.

The “farmhouse” display discussed above is not the only example. Another appears in a room apparently used for giving presentations to groups of visitors. This room includes a number of displays explaining the multitude of objects found in rural areas which urbanites are likely unfamiliar with. Among these is another map of the Czech Republic which shows “ethnographic districts of Bohemia and Moravia and their costumes” (“Národopisné oblasti Čech a Moravy a jejich kroje”).¹⁴ Much like the display above, this map brings together a number of regional variations and places them within the framework of the modern Czech Republic. Although the title refers to Bohemia and Moravia, only the external borders of the current state are shown, which encompass all of the regions highlighted. Thus national borders are prioritized over historic, regional ones. As Benedict Anderson and Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul have argued, maps such as this one are powerful devices for imagining the nation as a clearly defined territorial unit.¹⁵ Therefore this map, by representing regional folkloric “traditions” within a modern, national context, reproduces the idea of a Czech nation with a defined territory and “cultural heritage.” The fact that this map is displayed in a presentation room merely underlines

¹³ Ibid, 82-83.

¹⁴ Visual aide, “Národopisné oblasti Čech a Moravy a jejich kroje,” *Czech Folk Culture*, Ethnographic Museum of the National Museum, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, “The Map” in Chapter 10.

the fact that images like this one are used for educational purposes, to “impart knowledge” to an audience, thereby reproducing the basic idea of “the nation.”

Without belaboring the point, the pattern discussed above continues in the rest of the exhibition. The objects displayed consistently come from various regions in what is now the Czech Republic, whether from Central Bohemia or Moravian Wallachia. More interesting is the difference in the display discussed above between the Czech and English titles. The English title explicitly marks this display as of the “Czech Countryside,” while the Czech version simply calls it “Countryside” (“Venkov”). This small linguistic difference has larger implications. It is reminiscent of Michael Billig’s argument concerning linguistic deixis in *Banal Nationalism*, where he argues that small words can be used to implicitly refer back to the nation without naming or specifying it. He uses words like “the” and “this” as examples.¹⁶ However, Czech does not have definite articles, and does not use demonstrative pronouns as frequently as English. Thus the word “Venkov” can be translated as “Countryside” or “The Countryside” depending on context. The exhibition is not speaking about “the countryside” in general, universalistic terms, but rather about a specific territory, that of the Czech Republic. This difference between the Czech and English titles suggests that the creators of this exhibition assumed that a Czech-speaking audience would also assume that “the countryside” refers specifically to “the Czech countryside.” By making this assumption, the creators encourage their Czech-speaking audience to treat the territory of Czech Republic as more relevant, “local,” or obvious to them, since for them the territory of the Czech Republic is simply “the countryside.” In turn, the exhibition encourages its audience to identify as “locals” of a territory defined in

¹⁶ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE Books, 1995), chapter 5.

terms of “nation.” Thus, the Ethnographic Museum reproduces a specifically “Czech” national identity.

Náprstek Museum

Away from the pleasant parks of Prague’s left bank and across the Vltava from the Ethnographic Museum stands the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African, and American Culture on Betlémské Náměstí in the densely built-up center of Prague. The museum’s webpage explains that the museum was initially founded by a certain Vojta Náprstek (1826-1894) as the “Czech Industrial Museum,” and included technical as well as ethnographical exhibits of artefacts Náprstek had collected while in exile in the United States. Apparently he intended the museum for “the benefit of Czech society.” However after 1946 it became a purely ethnographic museum orientated towards “non-European culture.”¹⁷ From this description it is already clear that the Náprstek Museum is a museum “for” the nation rather than “of” the nation, to borrow from Mason’s classificatory schema. Furthermore, the exhibitions here represent not only an example of the “colonial gaze,” but also a “gaze” marked as specifically “Czech.”

Specific examples of this “Czech gaze” in several temporary exhibitions, for instance “The Story of Tibet” (14 March 2017 to 8 October 2017). This exhibition’s webpage attempts to establish some kind of link between its subject and the “Czech lands.” For instance it notes firstly that “the first European to reside in Tibet was a monk of Czech origin, Odorik, in the 14th century.”¹⁸ Not only does this statement place “Czech” within a “European” cultural frame, but it also suggests a specifically “Czech” frame of reference for discussing Tibet. In other words, this

¹⁷ “Visit Us: Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures,” *National Museum*, accessed 2 May 2018, <http://www.nm.cz/Hlavni-strana/Visit-Us/Naprstek-Museum-of-Asian-African-and-American-Cultures.html>.

¹⁸ “Exhibitions: The Story of Tibet,” *National Museum*, accessed 2 May 2018, <http://www.nm.cz/Naprstek-Museum/Exhibitions-NpM/The-Story-of-Tibet.html>.

exhibition encourages its visitors to view this “foreign” land from a “Czech” vantage point. The same page then mentions that the exhibition presents photographs of Tibet taken in 1954 and 1955 by Josef Vaniš.¹⁹ These photographs do indeed appear in the exhibition, as well as others by Dana Heroldová, Viktor Mussik, and Anton Žižka from other years. These photographs are generally presented with captions such as “A group of Tibetans” and “A herd of yaks.”²⁰ Such generic captions remove all individuality from their subjects, thereby promoting a monolithic view of Tibet. The fact that all of the photographers appear to have Czech names in turn seems to suggest a specifically “Czech” view of Tibet, rather than trying to “present” Tibet with photographs from a variety of photographers.

In addition, in a section entitled “Discovery of Tibet,” an informational panel discusses the arrival of Europeans in Tibet, beginning with the monk Odorik mentioned previously, and continuing with “naturalist Ferdinand Stolička” and Ludwig V. Holzmeister who “spent some time near the Tibetan border” and founded “the museum in Moravská Třebová.” The same panel also mentions that “the view of Tibet as a land of mystery ... also influenced some Czech artists, writers, and filmmakers.”²¹ Thus the exhibition produces a specifically Czech view of Tibet by “presenting” Tibet through the lens of “Czech” figures and the impact of Tibet on “Czech” artists. This emphasis becomes obvious in the case of Holzmeister, who appears to have an extremely tenuous connection to Tibet. In addition, he is noted as the founder of a museum in a town with a Czech name, possibly to compensate for his German-sounding name. Thus this

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Wall displays, *The Story of Tibet*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

²¹ Wall panel, “Discovery of Tibet,” *The Story of Tibet*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

exhibition tends to see Tibet literally through the lenses of only “Czech” photographers and in terms of Czechs’ encounters with Tibet.

Similar themes appear in the “Indians” exhibition (8 December 2017 to 1 August 2018). Leaving aside the problematics of the term “Indian,” the exhibition’s webpage claims that visitors will “be guided through the world of Native Americans by original collection pieces acquired by Czech explorers and researchers.”²² Thus, the visitors’ view of “Native Americans” is explicitly mediated by “Czech” collectors. The identity of these explorers is reiterated and elaborated later in the exhibition. One set of panels in the section on South American indigenous peoples names some of these “explorers” as Alberto Vojtěch Frič (1882-1944), Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860-1932), Milan Stuchlík (1932-1980), and Václav Šolc (1919-1995). These four individuals are presented each on their own panel among panels discussing South American cultures, and not merely as asides.²³ Thus they are given prominence by the exhibition organizers. In addition, two of them are explicitly labelled as “Czech,” while all of them appear to have at least partially Czech names. Possibly the least-Czech-sounding, Enrique Stanko Vráz, is identified in his biographical panel as “Czech traveller E. St. Vráz,” which not only labels him as Czech but also abbreviates the least-Czech-sounding parts of his name. Furthermore, all of these individuals have in some way contributed to the museum’s collections by gathering artefacts. Thus not only is the visitor’s view of these “foreign” (perhaps even “exotic”) cultures filtered through “Czech” point of view, but also the exhibition presents itself as some kind of specifically “Czech” achievement. Therefore this museum is “for” the nation in two senses: both

²² “Exhibitions: Indians,” *National Museum*, accessed 3 May 2018, <http://www.nm.cz/Naprstek-Museum/Exhibitions-NpM/Indians.html>.

²³ Multiple wall panels, “Alberto Vojtěch Frič,” “Enrique Stanko Vráz,” “Milan Stuchlík,” & “Václav Šolc,” *Indians*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 11 April 2018.

to educate its audience and to demonstrate the scientific (specifically anthropological) prestige of the “Czech nation.”

One further observation underlines this analysis. Many other items in the same exhibition, particularly in the section on North America, are identified along with the individual who “collected” them (although most items are simply listed as “Acquired” or “Collected” in a certain year). These individuals include Petr Poledník, František Pospíšil, Ludmila Osolsobě, Tadeáš Haenke (rendered in the English caption as Thaddäus Haenke), Nelly Rasmussenová (possibly a “Czechified” version of “Rasmussen”?), Vojtěch Suk, Jiří Jaeger, Charles Ratton, Filip Oberlander (a.k.a. Philip Oberländer), Vojta Náprstek (the namesake of the museum), and Karl Bodmer.²⁴ While most of these individuals have apparently Czech names, several of them do not. At the same time, this section of the exhibition lacks any kind of biographical panel on its “collectors.” Perhaps this omission was deliberate and intended not only to avoid highlighting non-Czech contributors but also to avoid explicitly excluding them from a biographical panel. Nevertheless, most of the contributors’ names appear to be of Czech origin. The significance of these names is that by displaying them, and highlighting certain ones in particular, the exhibition promotes a sense of a specifically “Czech” collection of “foreign” artefacts. This impression in turn promotes the anthropological and hence the scientific competence of “the Czech nation.” Indeed, the education of “the nation” or “the Fatherland” was one of the National Museum’s founding objectives in the early 19th century.²⁵

Again, this analysis is supported by Mason’s general discussion of national museums. Since they are often located in capital cities, museums can be used to signal the cultural and

²⁴ Multiple object captions, *Indians*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 11 April 2018.

²⁵ Rita Krueger, *Czech, German, Noble: Status and National Identity in Habsburg Bohemia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 161-162.

political prestige of those cities and, in turn, of the countries they administer. These museums do not need to present national culture directly. They can be either “of” or “for” the nation.²⁶

Museums “for” the nation attempt to benefit or “enrich” the nation by collecting and displaying objects identified as significant, such as antiquities, which often (perhaps necessarily) come from several parts of the world.²⁷ In connection with this function, museums can also be seen as “treasure houses” of the nation, in so far as they receive national funding and attain status. They often accrue such benefits because those in power identify items of “outstanding national importance” among their collections. Such items also do not need to be representative “of” the nation, simply of great value “for” the nation. Since these items can be from anywhere, museums can work to show the nation to the world, and the world to the nation.²⁸ Thus museums can work in various ways to generate a prestigious public image.

As Simon Knell has argued in a similar vein, by collecting and showcasing “foreign” art, national museums demonstrate the worthiness of their nation. The purpose in displaying international (or at least from-elsewhere) art is to accrue status which derives from its internationally recognized significance. Knell observes a kind of rivalry here. He says that international art “represents the nation’s elevation as a civilization empowered to author and control the universal history of art and culture.” Galleries are built “through competition, emulation and rivalry and as such are among the most political of all national museums.”²⁹ It is easy to see how the quest to justify a nation’s claim to civilization and artistic sophistication can lead to the kind of colonial collecting described by Mason above.

²⁶ Mason, *Museums*, 87.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 84-87.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 88-89.

²⁹ Simon Knell, *National Galleries: The Art of Making Nations* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 18-19.

Examples from a third temporary exhibition tell the same story with different protagonists (and some familiar names). In tandem with “The Story of Tibet” exhibition, the Náprstek Museum housed an exhibition on the indigenous peoples of New Guinea, provocatively titled “Headhunters” (in Czech *Lovci lebek*; 11 April 2016 to 18 June 2018). To the museum’s credit, the exhibition’s introductory panel addresses this stereotype of New Guineans by pointing out that while “there are many documented cases of cannibalism and headhunting in the historical and ethnographic record ... this custom died out during the 20th century.”³⁰ Thus it does not seek to suggest that New Guineans are cannibals, although it does sensationalize them in order to draw visitors.

Moving on, other parts of this exhibition connect the subject back to the museum’s national context, i.e. back to “the Czechs.” For instance the exhibition highlights a research project about the Nungon people conducted since 2009 by Martin Soukup, Julie Hubeňáková, and Jan Daniel Bláha.³¹ While the nationality of these researchers is not explicitly stated, their names strongly suggest their Czech origins. In addition, there is the question of why this particular research project is mentioned rather than any other, if not to highlight the presence of Czech anthropologists (i.e. scientific experts) in New Guinea? As if to answer this question, the following wall panel is entitled “Czechs in New Guinea.” The panel names several individuals already named in the Tibetan and “Indians” exhibitions discussed above, such as Tadeáš Haenke and Enrique Stanko Vráz. While the title alone clearly claims the people named in this panel for “the Czechs,” the panel’s text reinforces this national perspectives. It opens with the phrase “The Czechs already showed interest in New Guinea at the end of the 18th century as is documented”

³⁰ Wall panel, “Headhunters,” *Headhunters*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

³¹ Wall panel, “Anthropological research of the Nungon people,” *Headhunters*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

by the activities individuals of the following individuals. It concludes, “Today the Czechs, entomologist Vojtěch Novotný (1964 -), anthropologist Martin Soukup (1977 -), photographer Jane Rendek (1973 -), and artists Barbora Šlapetová (1973 -) and Lukáš Rittstein (1973 -) work on the island.”³² Thus the exhibition clearly highlights the presence specifically of Czechs in New Guinea. In doing so it presents a particularly “Czech view” of the island, in turn nationalizing the production of scientific knowledge and art in a “foreign” land for the benefit of “the nation at home.” It is also worth noting that, as this panel explains, the Náprstek Museum acquired some of its artefacts and photographs from New Guinea thanks to Enrique Stanko Vráz and Jiří Viktor Daneš, the latter of whom “worked in the diplomatic services in Australia (1920-1922).”³³

Further panels around the exhibition highlight particular individuals, namely Miroslav Stingl and Leopold Pospíšil. The former is described as “an eminent Czech traveler, ethnographer and writer” who apparently wrote about his travels in Melanesia in his book *The Islands of Cannibals*, published 1970.³⁴ The latter is a professor of anthropology who emigrated in 1948 and made his career in the United States.³⁵ Nevertheless, he is listed here. By including these individuals apparently because of their national origin, the exhibition constructs for the visitor a nationalized “lens” on to New Guinea. Furthermore, many of the photographs shown around the exhibition were taken by the people named in the “Czechs in New Guinea” panel, thus again suggesting a specifically Czech gaze on New Guinea in a manner reminiscent of the Tibetan photographs discussed above. Thus, much like the Tibetan and “Indians” exhibitions,

³² Wall panel, “Czechs in New Guinea,” *Headhunters*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wall panel, “Miloslav Stingl,” *Headhunters*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

³⁵ Wall panel, “Leopold Pospíšil,” *Headhunters*, Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures, Prague, Czech Republic, visited 23 August 2017.

“Headhunters” highlights the activities of people it claims as “Czechs” and thus for “the nation.” It thereby presents its subject not only on its own terms, but also to demonstrate the nation’s participation in the production of scientific knowledge.

Twinned Colonial Visions?

Besides the nationalist dimension highlighted above, these two museums – the Ethnographic Museum and the Náprstek Museum – both participate in implicitly colonial practices, as this final section seeks to explore. Both museums are “ethnographic” in nature. As the etymology of the word “ethnographic” shows, these museums both claim to represent one or more “peoples” through their exhibitions. In doing so they both implicitly claim the right to speak for and about their subjects, whether this right is grounded in scientific (here mainly anthropological) expertise or in a supposed, shared, nationality. Thus these museums share a kind of intellectual structure, which in turn suggests that fundamental themes present in one can be found in the other, such as a certain colonial point of view. This colonial aspect is most obvious in the Náprstek Museum. For example, on the “Indians” exhibition webpage, visitors are told that they “will be guided through the world of Native Americans,” while the second part of the exhibition takes visitors “on a journey full of adventure, deep into the forests, savannahs, deserts and mountains of South America.” In an attempt to distance itself from traditional colonialism, the exhibition imagines a new “El Dorado” for itself, eschewing material wealth in favour of “the mystical El Dorado ... as symbolic ritual and spiritual enrichment.”³⁶ Thus the museum claims an “expert” role for itself to show visitors a foreign “Other” in Romanticized “exotic” lands which will bring “enrichment” to visitors. The museum encourages visitors to imagine the “Indians” through its particular

³⁶ “Exhibitions: Indians,” *National Museum*, accessed 4 May 2018, <http://www.nm.cz/Naprstek-Museum/Exhibitions-NpM/Indians.html>.

presentation of artefacts. Furthermore, and as noted above, these exhibitions at the Náprstek Museum are often presented with reference to Czech explorers and scientists who visited and studied the regions and peoples featured. Presenting these regions and peoples in this way positions them not only as objects of study for the benefit of the museum goer's gaze, but specifically for the benefit of an imagined Czech nation. The prominence of specifically Czech explorers and scientists (who are often explicitly labelled as Czech, or at least implicitly so by both their inclusion and the exclusion or down playing of non-Czechs) promotes the idea of these "non-Europeans" as proper objects of study for an imagined "Czech nation." The museum's exhibitions transform their subjects into objects of a putative Czech gaze. (A particularly uncharitable observer might remark that such an objectification is only appropriate for a project seeking to build up its "European" credentials.) Thus national and colonial lenses align in this museum.

Moving on to the Ethnographic Museum, the national dimensions are already obvious. But how does this colonial "lens" manifest itself here? As noted above, the exhibitions of the Ethnographic Museum display rural "Czech culture" exclusively, i.e. they make no mention of non-Czech cultures rural or otherwise. According to its own website, the permanent exhibition "presents the everyday life of the Czech countryside and folklore and festivities of the traditional rural communities."³⁷ No mention is made of attempting to represent urban culture, nor does any appear in the exhibition itself. At the same time, the museum is located in Prague, the largest urban space in the Czech Republic. Furthermore, this museum was founded in 1901 when the region was experiencing rapid industrialization and urbanization. By 1910, only 42.5% of the

³⁷ "Visit Us: Ethnographic Museum of the National Museum," *National Museum*, accessed 20 April 2018, <http://www.nm.cz/Hlavni-strana/Visit-Us/Ethnographic-Museum-of-the-National-Museum.html?xSET=lang&xLANG=2>

population in the Bohemian lands worked in agriculture, down from 55% in 1869. Meanwhile, the population grew from 8.7 million to 10.1 million between 1890 and 1910, with cities absorbing virtually all the growth.³⁸ Perhaps then this exhibition is a manifestation of a quasi-colonial relationship between the city and the countryside, originally born out of urban, nationalist anxieties surrounding social change and (an imagined loss of) cultural authenticity. The countryside is imagined through various exhibits as a repository of “authentic” Czech national culture, and at the same time as separate and distinct from the space in which the museum is located. “Obviously,” Prague is not part of the countryside, even though this urban museum draws on the countryside in order to construct a national identity in which Prague participates. The countryside is imagined as someplace “out there” which nevertheless helps to define “our” identity.

At the same time, individual regions are not allowed to stand on their own. Whether as part of a specific exhibit or merely by its inclusion in this explicitly national museum, objects and artefacts from particular places are deliberately welded into a nationalized whole. Thus the products of individual localities are placed within a specific narrative, which largely prevents these localities from speaking for themselves. Within the context of a “national” (and urban) collection, they are already spoken for. Like the Náprstek Museum, the Ethnographic Museum has claimed the right to speak for its subjects, framing them within a nationalized, urban gaze. While the Náprstek Museum is concerned with “foreign” culture and the Ethnographic Museum is concerned with “domestic” culture, they are both urban museums, part of the national museum and located in the political and economic center of Czech Republic. Each asserts the right to speak of rural cultures and frame them within a narrative which justifies the nation-state and its

³⁸ Hugh Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2004), 155-156.

territorial boundaries. Thus these spaces “out there” are made useful for the preservation of urban hegemony, since urban institutions claim the right to speak for rural spaces. A museum dedicated to rural folklore and located in the city seems unremarkable, even expected, while the idea of a museum dedicated to city life located in a tiny village or small town somehow seems absurd. This hegemony of city over countryside is only solidified by nationalist ideology which presumes and imagines a fundamental yet hard-to-define “sameness” between the nation’s urban and rural spaces. Thus nationalism synergizes quite well with a kind of “internal colonization,” where “internal” is understood as internal to the nation-state. Prague can speak for Moravian Wallachia (for example) because they are both “Czech.”

The broader literature on museums supports the contention that they are often deeply significant arenas for power struggles between the dominating and the subordinated. According to Mason and other scholars, besides “promoting, consolidating and legitimating a sense of nationhood within their territories,” museums also play a role in colonial projects. They do so by housing collections of artifacts taken from colonized lands, thereby attempting to make these lands knowable to their audiences. In doing so they support an asymmetrical “colonizing gaze,” in which the colonizer is free to view and to study the colonized but the reverse is not typically true.³⁹ Finally, national museums can be agents of homogenization. They can implement government agendas to silence or delegitimize political opposition, regional identities, and ethnic minorities. Mason cites several examples, including Francoist Spain, colonized Korea, apartheid South Africa, and Nazi Germany.⁴⁰ These examples are all extreme, right-wing cases, but it seems just as plausible that left-wing and liberal regimes could use the museum for political ends even if these ends are not as explicit or overt as right-wing regimes.

³⁹ Mason, *Museums*, 90-92.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 95-97.

More general work from other authors also points toward the possibilities of internal colonization by a “nationalist imaginary.” Especially since it may seem odd to talk about colonialism operating within a single state, especially in the Central European context, it is worth reviewing this work before concluding. Yet, a precedent for a kind of “imaginary colonialism” or “literary colonial imagination” can be found in Austrian literature from the end of the 19th century, as Ulrich Bach argues in *Tropics of Vienna*. Focusing on a set of texts by such writers as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Theodor Herzl, and Robert Müller, Bach argues that these writers deployed colonial utopian narratives in order to explore solutions to the empire’s social and economic problems. In doing so, these authors constructed imaginary spaces to suit their purposes.⁴¹ In other words, these authors wrote stories set in “far-flung” places in order to address the needs of the imperial metropole. As Bach notes, this usage of places “out there,” “neither takes the realities of the other area into account, nor does it reflect on European economic exploitation of the respective colonies in Africa, East Asia, and South America.” Furthermore, Bach argues that “the relationship between the foreign and the familiar in these texts is dialectical, so that what is distant and what is close collapse into each other.”⁴² Thus Bach highlights an interesting Central European precedent for this paper. Namely, he points out the ways in which literature was used by specific authors to (re)imagine colonial settings beyond the metropole in order to in turn meditate on the metropole’s own ailments. These authors thus instrumentalized literary fantasies or idiosyncratic visions of these distant places in service to the urban metropole (i.e. Vienna). Consequently, the difference between the metropole and its (imaginary) colonies vanished. In parallel and as this paper has attempted to show, the

⁴¹ Ulrich E. Bach, *Tropics of Vienna: Colonial Utopias of the Habsburg Empire* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 1-2.

⁴² *Ibid*, 128.

Ethnographic and Náprstek Museums “colonize” extra-urban spaces when they (implicitly) participate in nationalist ideology.

Such an instrumentalized imagining of places outside the metropole was also an important element in the construction of national identities in several so-called borderlands as historian Pieter Judson convincingly shows in *Guardians of the Nation*. Primarily considering districts in southern Bohemia, South Styria, and South Tyrol in the western crownlands of Austria-Hungary, Judson shows how nationalist activists (having achieved significant victories in formal political institutions), worked to construct and then nationalize imagined “linguistic frontiers” between their imagined nations in the late 19th century. He argues that such activists sought to overturn traditions of bilingualism and local identity in order to polarize communities along putative, ethnolinguistic lines. While German, Czech, Slovene, and Italian nationalists in these regions certainly fought with each other for their respective nations, they all struggled against indifference to nationalism to convince rural populations to embrace national identities.⁴³ While Judson does not seem to state it directly, in general these nationalist organizations seem to have been based in major cities around the empire, such as Vienna and Prague. His account of these movements in the so-called “language frontiers” would thus point towards an urban nationalization of the countryside, or at least a deliberate transmission of nationalist sentiment and ideology from cities in rural areas.

Looking momentarily beyond central Europe, highland Georgia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union provides another instructive point of comparison. In his fascinating work *Being a State and States of Being in Highland Georgia*, Florian Mühlfried considers the processes of state building in the Tusheti region of Georgia, on the border with the Russian Federation and its

⁴³ Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 3-5.

republics of Chechnya and Dagestan. In the fourth chapter Mühlfried frames the extension of the central government's power into Tusheti in three stages. In the first, local Tushetians themselves deliberately invoked the state in order to better protect themselves against cross-border raids in what Mühlfried terms a kind of "folk diplomacy." During this stage, the border remained relatively open between Tusheti and Chechnya and Dagestan. Following the start of the Second Chechen War in 1999, the Georgian government came under international pressure (especially from Russia) to assert itself more strongly in this peripheral region. During this phase the international border was hardened and locals were forced "to spatially center their lives within the official boundaries of the state." In the third phase, the Georgian Orthodox Church was deployed as an agent of nation-building in Tusheti. Parading through the region with religious icons and church representatives, the Church saw itself as bringing Tusheti back into religious (and hence cultural and political) alignment with the rest of Georgia. Mühlfried characterizes these stages or models of statehood respectively as "federalist folk model," "neoliberally coloured pragmatic model" and finally "essentialist and nationalist Orthodox model." As this process took place, locals lost a great deal of power vis-à-vis the center of state power, first in "hard," pragmatic ways in then in "softer," cultural ways.⁴⁴

But what does all this have to do with museums in Prague? This example demonstrates the way in which the state can use cultural institutions (a national church or museum) in order to solidify its control over its claimed territory, especially when those territories are deemed peripheral and somehow "threatened." Obviously the Czech Republic has faced far fewer threats to its territorial integrity since independence than its Georgian counterpart, but nevertheless they appear to share in certain patterns not only of state- and nation-building (of course in the context

⁴⁴ Florian Mühlfried, *Being a State and States of Being in Highland Georgia* (Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books, 2014), 130-132.

of nation-states the two kinds of building are closely intertwined), but also in processes of maintaining that which they have built. As Mühlfried demonstrates, as the state extends its legitimacy into its geographic periphery, it not only takes more power for itself in the means of violence, but also in the means of cultural reproduction. Thus it also reserves for itself the right, in the Georgian case through a national church, to define the identity of its claimed citizens and co-nationals. This process necessarily involves the transformation of local subjectivities into national ones. While locals may have presumed a more reciprocal relationship between themselves and the state to begin with, the central government later assumed a hegemonic role justified on both pragmatic and nationalist grounds. This relationship between the center and periphery, between urban spaces and rural spaces “out there” constitutes a major theme in the study of nationalism and nationality.

Conclusion

Naturally, a paper of this length cannot be exhaustive, and there remain fruitful questions and avenues of research to pursue, especially for those interested in understanding everyday practices of nationalism, museums, and the relationship between the center and the peripheries. One such question could be how the nation is imagined outside large urban spaces like capital cities. How do “provincial” towns and institutions see themselves in relation to their purported nation? How is “the nation” imagined on the “peripheries”? What is their reaction to the ways in which they are represented elsewhere? What centrifugal or centripetal tendencies are there? While ethnic and linguistic minorities are obvious subjects for studies addressing these questions, how is membership in “the majority” defined or determined? Similarly, while exclusion and discrimination are often topics of academic and activist research, how does forced or otherwise

non-voluntary inclusion happen, if at all? Can a person be forced to identify with a group against their will? Is indifference to identity possible, or even at all desirable?

To conclude, this paper has shown how the Ethnographic and Náprstek Museums in Prague participate in the reproduction of the nation and national identity, and thus how they symbolically homogenize multiple regions into a cohesive, national whole. It has also highlighted the often quasi-colonial aspects which arise when urban museums wield rural places as instruments in pursuit of an implicitly nationalist or nationalizing agenda. Thus it has attempted to point out certain colonial-like symbolic practices within a basically nationalist context. In doing, this paper touches upon the often complex relationship between nationalist and colonial ideologies and practices.

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