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Some Remarks on the Development Potential of Ethnographic Museums in Poland

Reconsider the active and changing roles of communities in thinking about heritage and museums by focusing on decentralising decision-making, use, and care; the current and potential displacement of constituencies; the transformations of socially and legally recognised roles of individuals and groups; or the introduction of previously unrecognised individuals or groups and formal or informal participants, which would affect how both the past and the future are construed.

[Sladojević 2022: 86]

The reflections presented in this text are based on my over thirty years of experience, ten of which were spent as director of the Andrzej Wawrzyniak Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. Although interdisciplinary by design, due to the nature of its collections and activities, it has many characteristics of an ethnographic or ethnological museums. As an art historian who, over time, has expanded into the field of cultural anthropology, I have closely observed the dynamics within museums of this type in Poland, Europe, and parts of Asia. Through this experience, I offer my thoughts on the roles, tasks, and future directions for these institutions. These observations, shaped by years of museum practice and personal engagement, are not intended as theoretical or normative conclusions.

Especially, as the literature concerning ethnology museums proliferates. During last twenty years, since the classic “Muzeum etnograficzne”

by Katarzyna Barańska appeared (Barańska 2004), academic discussion on the Polish ground has been flourishing. ZWAM is an important space of this activity. Last two decades also marks time when postcolonial and decolonial topics appeared clearly in Polish museology, applied both to the collections of far away cultures and to those from (allegedly) much closer and obvious spaces. With just a few books by authors like Janusz Barański (Barański 2010, 2017) or Anna Nadolska-Styczyńska (Nadolska-Styczyńska 2011), bibliography of articles from the area covers hundreds of title and is still growing. Many of them present their authors' reflection on their own museum practice. My present text hopes to add to this pool of thoughts.

Ethnographic museums in Poland are deeply rooted in the nation's history and social consciousness. The oldest of them were founded during the Partitions of Poland, with the Warsaw museum opening in 1888 and the Kraków museum in 1911. These museums originated from social initiatives, as state support for Polish organisations was absent at the time. Such activities formed the basis for the creation of many cultural institutions, not just museums. This grassroots foundation is what today would be considered the essence of "civil society".

The new ICOM (International Council of Museums) definition of a museum, adopted in 2022, has reaffirmed processes that have been underway for several decades. Today, the image of museums as the institution "in the service of society", "accessible and inclusive", operating "ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities", is firmly embedded in mainstream culture [<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, accessed September 4, 2024]. Yet, it is crucial to recognise the distinct role that separates museums from other institutions: the collection, study, and presentation of both tangible and intangible heritage. The value system articulated in this definition serves as a foundation for rethinking the current status and future development of any museum. This development and possible changes must be approached holistically, beginning with something as fundamental as the museum's name.

The adjective "ethnographic" is a constant element in the names of Polish museums, and it is an adjective that is increasingly problematic and in need of problematisation. Contemporary associations with the word evoke the entanglement of ethnography as a science in now-deconstructed colonial processes, the reinforcement of racial and class inequalities, and the political propaganda of authoritarian regimes. While it is possible to

scrutinise the exact nature of this entanglement on a case-by-case basis and challenge some oversimplifications in decolonial interpretations, many museums worldwide are gradually moving away from this designation. The focus now shifts not to “ethnography” as a specific method of interpreting collections but to the collections themselves: testimonies of diverse cultures.

In recent decades, many museums initially established and described as ethnographic have been renamed to museums of culture or cultures, with examples including the Museum der Kulturen in Basel and the Dutch Wereldmuseum complex¹. This trend continues in Europe and is also evident in the naming of new institutions, such as Marseille’s Musée des civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée (MUCEM), which opened in 2013. A similar process with regard to Polish museums should become the subject of extensive discussion within the museum and its social contexts. This does not imply that museum names “should” be changed merely because of an intellectual trend; rather, each case would benefit from a careful analysis of the museum’s name, its history, current interpretations, and social reception. In some cases, such analysis could inspire creative changes. Rethinking a museum’s name, a fundamental aspect of its identity, can be an ideal starting point for developing a new overall strategy.

Each museum possesses a unique capital, which includes the knowledge and perspectives generated within its sphere, the experiences of generations of its staff and visitors, its connection to the development of ethnology as an academic field, its collections, and its physical resources. Often, museum premises are themselves landmarks, providing points of reference in their respective cities. The key question is how this capital can be fully harnessed to maximise the museum’s potential.

While collections distinguish museums from other cultural institutions, the other essential pillar of any museum is its people. The success of an organisation relies heavily on the competence of its staff and the quality of their relationships. And just as everywhere, high turnover, low identification with the institution, lack of agency, uncertainty, and a deficit of trust in leadership can all detract from a museum’s effectiveness and, ultimately, its service to society. Therefore, it is vital to build teams not only

¹ Being from 2008 to 2023 the only representative of Polish museum in European Ethnology Museum Directors Group, I had opportunity to follow these processes and to participate in their discussing.

on the basis of professional qualifications but also through transparent operations and healthy interpersonal dynamics.

Fostering a sense of agency and shared responsibility within the team is crucial, and this process should engage everyone, with the assistance of external, neutral specialist moderators. At the Asia-Pacific Museum, we began such a process near the end of my tenure as director, initiated by the staff themselves. I remain deeply grateful to the colleagues who took this step, as I view it as an expression of their trust in me as a leader.

The goal of these processes is to enhance staff participation in decisions regarding the museum's activities and development through a consultative approach. This relatively new management model has proven highly effective in large and influential institutions, enabling the positive engagement of both internal staff and external collaborators, such as stakeholder communities and NGOs. By forming voluntary working groups and implementing grassroots ideas, this model increases the sense of agency for all those involved in shaping the museum, its image, and its social environment. It offers opportunities to discuss and reflect on development ideas as well as concerns about potential changes. Consultation processes should cover all aspects of the museum's statutory responsibilities, from strategic development plans and collection expansion to setting research directions and organising exhibitions and events.

Another key element for a museum's effective functioning is ensuring the autonomy of both the institution and its director in personnel selection, as mandated by law. This includes freedom from external interference in the appointment of managerial positions. Transparent recruitment processes at all levels are crucial not only for attracting the best specialists but also for boosting team morale. Unfortunately, in Poland, regardless of the political party in power, this autonomy is often compromised, with staffing decisions subjected to political interests. It should be stressed all the more that such practices are legally and ethically inappropriate and socially damaging, as they erode public trust in museums as institutions serving the common good.

The role of the director, as both a leader of the team and the person responsible for the institution, is critical. Leadership means working collaboratively with the team, focusing on the museum's and the public's interests, and making bold, sometimes difficult decisions—such as staff changes and assessing the weaknesses and strengths of the organisation.

However, if these decisions are made transparently and with integrity, they can be met with understanding. A director should not be an authoritarian figure issuing arbitrary orders or driven by short-term motivations. Equally unacceptable is the overt promotion of narrow political interests – in the narrow, party sense – within a museum, which, as a long-standing institution, must serve society irrespective of shifts in electoral outcomes. The political entanglement of museums and their directors is a well-recognised issue within Polish museology, requiring permanent legal solutions, as ethical standards alone have proven insufficient.

Management should aim to foster an atmosphere of cooperation, respect, and security. Employees need clearly defined areas of competence, tasks, and responsibilities, and within these, they should have the freedom to make independent decisions and take initiatives. Delegating responsibility and moving away from a hierarchical, top-down decision-making process not only streamlines work but also empowers employees, allowing them to grow and develop a stronger sense of identification with the institution.

Under such conditions, the team can collectively work on shaping the museum's strategy, outlining its objectives and core policies. The museum's value system needs to be articulated first, as this will guide decisions on foundational elements such as the name and mission, which in turn form the basis for developing a comprehensive strategy. The direction of this strategy will naturally be influenced by the specific nature of each museum, its history, and its current situation.

Ethnographic museums are often perceived as documenting ancient, dead, and historical cultures (especially when it comes to the legacy of the society in which they operate) or cultures that are timeless, suspended in “ethnographic present” (which is more frequent in the case of cultures far removed from this society). Updating and, at the same time, historical contextualisation has been occurring much more dynamically in recent decades with regard to museums of “foreign” cultures, driven in part by the migratory shifts that blur the boundaries between “own” and “foreign” heritage. However, when ethnographic museums were first established, they were not just spaces for encountering otherness, but also places to engage with living, contemporary cultures, despite the 19th- and 20th-century scholars lamenting their rapid disappearance. The people, that “inner Other” of ethnographers, were vital communities, and while museum

collectors sought to preserve heritage considered traditional, they were, in fact, musealising the present moment.

The focus on forms of culture disappearing under the pressure of modernisation intensified during the latter half of the 20th century, when visitors to ethnographic museums came to expect—and found—an embalmed version of customs as well as objects and symbols that, while no longer in use, were still faintly recognisable. Even today, visitors to open-air museums are sometimes disappointed or amused when they encounter something “modern”, connected with everyday experience. Yet, during the same period, ethnology and cultural anthropology began to expand their focus, studying popular, post-folk culture, phenomena initiated by decolonisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, and the accelerating processes of migration and social emancipation. These shifts in academic research paradigms have been reflected in the vibrant work of Polish academic anthropology but are less apparent in museology.

Museums engaging with the present are not a new phenomenon, but it remains relatively uncommon among Polish ethnographic museums, with a few notable exceptions like the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków, but this does not only concern Polish institutions. As I already mentioned, this relevance is already almost the norm in museums of non-European cultures, while those documenting the past of European societies often remain uncertain of their direction and remain in limbo.

It is also worth noting that in former colonial metropolises, the 19th-century division between “Volkskunde” and “Völkerkunde” remains largely intact, with separate museums dedicated to “own” and “foreign” cultures. The various “world museums” (the aforementioned Dutch Wereldmuseum, the Vienna Weltmuseum) paradoxically exclude Europe from the global narrative (the name of Munich’s Museum Fünf Kontinente is telling). Of course, new projects are emerging, such as the aforementioned MUCEM in Marseille, with its successful integration of the former Parisian collections of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions populaire and the Musée de l’Homme. It is also a good example of building contemporary collections that document new social phenomena.

The longstanding integration of Polish, European, and global collections in our museums is a significant advantage. It resulted from the mundane fact that, in the absence of colonies, world collections in Poland were relatively small and marginal, in contrast to the metropolises of the partitioning

states. Today, this history provides an opportunity to view cultures from a broader perspective, showing them in relation to one another, in a shared space, and on an equal footing.

This historical context also informs the ongoing debate about how Poland's subjugation under the three partitioning powers has shaped a different view of colonialism among Polish elites. Researchers continue to explore whether the Polish perspective on non-European cultures has a distinct specificity (e.g., in relation to the peoples of Russia's Asian regions) or whether it was entirely shaped by the colonial narratives of empires (as in the case of African societies, though there are exceptions such as Joseph Conrad and Tadeusz Dębicki). These issues present an intriguing curatorial challenge for future exhibitions.

The future of ethnographic museums—or, more aptly, museums of culture and society—in Poland lies in researching current phenomena while addressing the past in ways that connect it to today's world, emphasising cultural continuity. The growing interest in folk history provides an ideal framework for this. For obvious statistical reasons, most Poles trace their ancestry, at least in part, to the former lower strata of society, to the idealised, repressed, or victimised people. One of the main goals of such museums should be showing its history as an important social heritage, as our own legacy, a context for understanding the present. A good example of this was the recent “*Krzyże wolności*” (Crosses of Freedom) project by the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków, which documented ways of commemorating the abolition of serfdom through both ethnological and historical lenses.

The documentation and integration of contemporary phenomena into museum resources is, of course, already taking place now. However, it is partly concerned with tracing what in the present is a vestige of the past, while current phenomena, however present, are still underrepresented in collections and exhibitions. This represents a vast field of potential, particularly during a time of rapid social and cultural change. Migration, which has intensified in Poland in recent years, is one such area ripe for exploration. The fears and opportunities associated with them, the challenges and crises, the growing multiculturalism and multilingualism of society, are all subjects well-suited to museum-based reflection. However, these transformations go beyond migration, its causes and consequences. They also cover the growing visibility and empowerment of many other minority groups, long ignored, exoticised, or outright discriminated against.

This concerns both traditionally understood national, ethnic, or linguistic minorities and those whose identity is linked to sexual orientation, worldview, or disability.

This does not imply that museums should exclusively focus on minority groups or those culturally distinct from the dominant one. Decolonisation, in the sense of deconstructing stereotypes, shifting narratives, and democratising relationships, should also extend to the local heritage of the mainstream. What was once referred to as folk culture now finds partial continuation in popular post-rural culture, non-professional forms of expression, and emerging social rituals. Cultivating a sense of continuity, connection, and shared legacy across successive generations of Polish society is a vital part of the museum's mission and a significant opportunity for cultural institutions to embrace.

Each museum is embedded within the landscape of its city and region, reflecting their unique dynamics. As such, it serves as an ideal platform for exploring new forms of communication, fostering social ties, and promoting integration and cooperation in the broadest sense. The anthropology of everyday life should be explicitly recognised in the museum's strategic programmes, which implies expanding collections and documenting contemporary urban culture. For the first time in history, more than half of humanity resides in cities, a reality that also applies to Poland.

The establishment of the first ethnographic museums during the time of the Partitions, followed by the brief two decades of sovereign statehood and the subsequent period of the Polish People's Republic, aligned these institutions with the task of shaping and promoting national identity. Despite the vastly different political conditions of each era, this often led to unifying tendencies that subsumed regional or ethnic distinctiveness under the broader vision of a Polish "imagined community" (though this community undeniably existed). In this sense, these museums have always been, to some extent, "national museums". Perhaps now is the right moment—and museums the ideal space—to redefine, or at least critically reconsider, what it means to be Polish.

According to both the letter and spirit of the Constitution, the concept of the nation today encompasses "all citizens of the Republic of Poland". In this crucial context, it is the museum's responsibility to shape an open canon of Polish culture, bringing to the forefront the heritage of regions and the minority groups connected to them—such as Silesian identity, the revival

of Kashubian culture, and the traditions of the Lemkos and the Bammers. Equally important is acknowledging the contributions of socially visible and culturally significant new minorities, like the Vietnamese community. Together, these elements, along with established ethnographic images, form a living and evolving national culture, which also integrates the legacies of communities now absent or minimally represented within Poland's borders. This includes, for example, the German folk culture in the western territories up to 1945 and the renewed interest in aspects of that heritage today. This brings us to the fascinating question of what constitutes new, recovered, or even invented traditions. These processes—ranging from the history of the Mazowsze Ensemble to the latest trends in Podhale fashion—merit both presentation and analysis.

At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, these are museums with a global scope—museums of cultures from all over the world. They should not only present their heritage but also engage with contemporary issues, not shying away from difficult topics. The subject of migration, for instance, involves both legal and illegal pathways, related crimes, and the mechanisms of adaptation, or the lack thereof. The climate and ecological crisis elicits diverse responses and coping strategies across cultures, ranging from new construction methods and a return to traditional agricultural practices, to the creation of innovative social networks and the application of advanced technology. A museum dedicated to cultures must make space for their present forms, which are as captivating as their past. Moreover, documenting the present is a responsibility we owe to future generations, ensuring the creation of a living museum resource.

In summary, a museum should work towards social engagement, foster modernisation, embrace openness to minorities, and encourage discussion as well as independent, critical thinking about the complexities of the world. Museums no longer provide definitive answers to difficult questions but instead assist in the honest and rational search for them.

Having already discussed people, it is now time to focus on objects—namely, collections. Poland's thousands of collections document a vast spectrum of human creativity across different times, places, and social contexts. They present immense opportunities for research, interpretation, and presentation. This is why the policy of expanding and managing collections is so important. Although this document is not yet mandatory for Polish museums, it is already becoming the norm, recognised by competitions

from the Minister of Culture and National Heritage. However, it must not be treated as a mere formality; it must stem from serious reflection. Work on the policy should be carried out by a dedicated team of curators, conservators, and collection supervisors. To guide future development, it is essential to critically assess existing resources, reconsider current criteria for distribution and evaluation, and not shy away from revisions or, if necessary, a complete overhaul. Regular updates to the policy are crucial to maintaining its relevance.

Incomplete or partially outdated documentation is a common issue, practically unavoidable in larger collections with long histories. However, ongoing, gradual verification should be prioritised, along with the thoughtful development of a curatorial team suited to the collection's profile. Building a solid body of knowledge about the museum's collections—their scientific development—is classic “grassroots work” that should never be neglected in favour of ad hoc activities, no matter how spectacular. On the contrary, time-bound research and exhibition projects should always serve to enrich this resource. From my own experience, incorporating new information and studies—such as those produced during exhibition work—into existing documentation can be challenging, often resulting in serious discrepancies between the state of knowledge in the latest museum publications and databases. Updating the latter should always be considered a key project outcome. Databases, while vital and self-evident tools, are only as effective as the classification systems they rely on. A coherent, consistent, and not overly complex system is crucial to ensure the best possible access to information about objects and ease of conducting queries. The widespread online availability of these databases increases the responsibility to maintain accurate and reliable information.

Closely tied to the development of collections is provenance research, which has gained significant emphasis in contemporary museology. This relates to the “ethical turn” in the field, reflecting on the methods, circumstances, and contexts in which collections were acquired. A well-known example involves collections gathered by Europeans during the colonial era in non-European regions, whether directly colonised or otherwise exploited. However, the unclear contexts and power imbalances between collectors and the original authors, owners, or communities can also apply—or potentially apply—to collections assembled on domestic soil. For instance, further research into the provenance of folk art collections from

the communist era, created under a system of state patronage, could yield valuable insights.

Provenance is often a complex, multi-layered story. A significant issue, already researched and openly discussed—most recently at the Polish Ethnological Society seminar “Muzeum Etnograficzne na Rozdrożu” (Ethnographic Museums at the Crossroads) in Chludowo in May 2024—concerns part of the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw’s collection, which comes from museums located in territories that were German before World War II but were incorporated into Poland afterwards (e.g. Wrocław, Szczecin). The often colonial, non-violent history of these objects is overlaid by their acquisition and relocation in a new political context, as well as the evolving attitudes towards them across generations in regions once seen as “post-German”. Moreover, the post-war processes of forced and arbitrary centralisation affected museums that were situated in pre-war Polish territories, whose collections were closely linked to their place of origin, as is the case with Poznań. This centralisation, of course, extended beyond ethnographic collections, as it was a broader policy in Polish museology during the 1940s and 1950s.

This calls for the courage to ask uncomfortable questions and seek non-obvious answers. One such approach is conducting joint provenance research between different museums, and it is also worth considering the involvement of other interested parties. Collaboration and transparency must be central to these processes, with the understanding that they may sometimes lead to restitution, both domestically and internationally. Restitution of cultural property often provokes strong emotions, both within museums and in society at large. In my view, restitution should be approached with care but not seen as an existential threat to institutions, as it is often perceived. Rather, it is part of the lifecycle of a collection and its management, though not always easy for all stakeholders to accept. This issue must be addressed within collection policies, alongside the broader and equally sensitive topic of deaccessioning, a legally complex matter and something of a taboo in Polish museology, still haunted by the legacy of historical losses.

The direction of collection expansion must always stem from an analysis of existing resources and the objectives set by the policies of specific museums. The future of collections is undoubtedly linked to the phenomena mentioned earlier—namely, research into social groups whose cultures,

even when part of the so-called mainstream, have not traditionally been the focus of ethnological museology. This includes research and collection work on the activities of new folk classes, popular culture (e.g. music, festival, sports, hobby subcultures), and minority group cultures (including those not previously highlighted, such as new religious associations). Additionally, the growing field of interspecies anthropology, which intensively develops in Polish science, fostering dialogue and cooperation between the social and natural sciences, is worth noting. Building a collection around such themes would present an intriguing challenge.

Collections, and therefore their display, are central to the museum experience. Over the past two decades, substantial funds have been invested in Polish museology, improving the exhibition infrastructure of several ethnographic museums. However, some museums are still waiting for their turn. Unfortunately, the modernisation of infrastructure has not always been accompanied by thorough work on the content and messaging of exhibitions. A particularly unfortunate example is *Afrykańskie wyprawy, azjatyckie drogi* (African Expeditions, Asian Roads) at the Warsaw Museum of Ethnography. Despite being created only a few years ago, this permanent exhibition reproduces outdated stereotypes and simplistic solutions, especially in the Asian section, which feels like an arbitrary and unreflective juxtaposition of objects with strong colonial undertones. While I appreciate the team's efforts to counterbalance this with a more thoughtful programme of events, a complete revision—or rather, a thorough overhaul—of the exhibition is clearly needed. Incidentally, the museum has an entirely different and highly interesting collection from Latin America that has not been exhibited for years. In the 1970s, a permanent exhibition was dedicated to this collection, where field workers chose to include *artesanía*—artwork intended for tourists—and documents of urban popular culture.

For many years, the potential of the collection at the Archaeological and Ethnographic Museum in Łódź has remained underutilised. The permanent exhibition on Polish folk culture is nearly a quarter-century old, based on conceptual and scenographic approaches rooted in the 1960s. Meanwhile, the museum's non-European collections remain out of view, and temporary exhibitions, despite their interesting concepts, are limited by material constraints. This stagnation in such a significant institution is disheartening. One can only hope that recent changes in personnel will lead to shifts in direction. The creation of a new permanent exhibition—something Łódź

has long deserved—would be an exciting challenge and a great opportunity for renewal.

It would be highly beneficial to see a permanent, problem-based exhibition in a Polish museum—one that tackles a cross-cutting issue, clearly articulated and tied to common human experiences, illustrated by exhibits from diverse cultural contexts. While such approaches are typically found in temporary exhibitions, perhaps it is time to apply this method to core, permanent exhibitions as well. An excellent example of this kind of thematic exploration was the recent exhibition *Etnografki, antropolożki, profesorki* (Female Ethnographers, Anthropologists, and Professors) at the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw, which traced the history and evolution of the concepts of “folklore”, “folk” culture, and art, alongside the development of the discipline and its research.

When discussing museum spaces, it is essential to mention non-exhibition areas, which are becoming increasingly visitor-friendly and should serve as welcoming meeting places for groups, communities, and individuals. In addition to physical space, the virtual realm is equally important. The internet has long been a subject of anthropological study, making it all the more vital that museums in this field take the lead in utilising digital platforms effectively.

Collections and their contexts are naturally the focus of research, while exhibitions serve as a means of disseminating scientific discourse to a broader audience. Identifying priority research directions, developing appropriate programmes, collaborating with academic institutions, and securing funds from research grants should be strategic elements of museum policy. Museums play a critical role in promoting thoughtful analysis in an age where the speed of information dissemination often replaces its analysis, while lack of its verification poses real risks. The relative autonomy and flexibility of museums, compared to the more rigid procedures of academic institutions, provides unique opportunities for research freedom. This includes the ability to complement academic knowledge with expert insights from cultural practitioners and hands-on interactions with material heritage. The exchange between museum practice and academic theory is a particularly fruitful process, as demonstrated by the successes of the Asia-Pacific Museum during my tenure there.

In conclusion, if a museum—nowadays called ethnographic—is to fulfil its mission of showcasing the richness of the world and the diversity of

human thought and activity, it must continue to evolve. It should engage in extensive networks and partnerships, both formal and informal, to build trust between itself and its various stakeholders. Moreover, it must participate in public discussions and processes. Such a museum should be grounded in professionalism, courage, and respect. Museum professionals, in turn, must always set high standards for themselves, recognising that freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin.

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