“Thus our display will be honest but may be controversial”

Exhibiting pre-history during the South African democratization process

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to re-describe democratization of heritage by focusing on controversies connected to the work with the exhibition entitled Stories of People's History in Southern Africa staged at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum (South Africa). The investigation is based on archival material as well as participant observation and qualitative interviews. The material is analysed using performance theory and theories about democratization processes. The article comes to the conclusion that a focus on curatorial performances reveals controversies and developments that fall outside the traditional conceptualization of a democratization process. The text argues that this focus assists in moving beyond the binary position that democracy and “non-democracy” have received in scholarly publications. The text proposes that a democratization of heritage involves an entanglement of ideas and values. It does not necessarily involve a “better” heritage but instead an appropriation from a different political perspective.*

Key words: Exhibitions, South Africa, democratization, apartheid, performance theory, archaeology.

Democratization processes are filled with controversies; many more than are usually admitted within the discourse of museum and heritage studies. Yet democracy is often presented as a success story and democratization is portrayed as the way to success. I will, however, show that the positive connotation given democratization conceals controversial matters needing to be addressed for a comprehensible understanding of the issue. To

exemplify this, I will investigate controversies related to curators' work with the exhibition *Stories of People's History in Southern Africa* (hereafter referred to as the SOPHISA) staged at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum located in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The plan for the exhibition was initiated in 1979 and is currently still under development. Consequently it provides a biography of local negotiations and attempts

34 to democratize the South African heritage. By referring to the work with the SOPHISA, I will offer a re-description of the ways in which heritage was democratized.

Democratization processes are usually defined as moving a society from an unjust situation towards fair governance and are filled with values such as access, representation, inclusivity and equality. Democracy is usually referred to as government by the people (Held 1987:17 f., 363 f.). These ideas have come to shape the discourse of “democratization of heritage” where scholars have focused on the (mis)representations of heritage (cf. Cameron 1982:179 f., Ames 1988:157). The South African discourse, initiated in 1987, draws heavily on the discourse of (mis)representations in order to exemplify how white curators distorted heritage, and offers suggestions towards fair and equal representation in museums (cf. Stuckenberg 1987, Davison 2005, Marschall 2010).

During the late 1990s and the 2000s the international discourse centered on three themes: the social role of the museum, participation and social inclusivity (Kaplan 1994, Hooper-Greenhill 1995:5, Message 2007:236). These themes are particularly used in the South African discourse, where it is stressed that museums should assist in educating people about the wrong-doings of past regimes and encourage people to participate in the democratic culture in order to rewrite history. The need to deconstruct the museums’ authoritarian role and bridge the gap between professionals and visitors so that subaltern voices, memories and representations could appear was considered particularly vital as museums were seen as Eurocentric (Rodéhn 2008, Mpumlwana *et al.* 2000). Scholars often argue in favor of democracy, and in doing so

they locate democratization in a binary position where the past and the present is juxtaposed, democracy is contrasted with apartheid, and groups are compared to other groups. I suggest that this is a simplified understanding that needs to be reconsidered.

This text seeks to show that democratization processes of heritage are more complex than usually described. In order to visualize this I have appropriated political scientist Daniel Silander’s model. Silander divides democratization processes into three different phases: (1) the pre-transition phase, a period of liberation in a non-democratic environment and a phase of unity; (2) the transition phase, that refers to a political change e.g. from dictatorship to a democratic society; and (3) the consolidation phase, that refers to a long phase where institutions and values become stable (Silander 2005:195). Silander offers a linear understanding of democratization processes. I will, however, show that the process is not completely linear and cannot fully be predetermined and, furthermore, that it is a process that leaps back and forth in time and borrows notions from previous periods in order to advance. So in this text I use Silander’s linear model to locate what is considered non-linear – that which falls outside the model – in order to argue, in keeping with Laurence Whitehead (2002:26 ff.), for an understanding of democratization of heritage as a long process of open-ended social constructions. Using Silander’s model to analyze the ethnographical material what Whitehead (2002:7,18 ff.) writes becomes clear: that democratization processes are neither fully stable nor entirely predetermined. Democratization of heritage, drawing on Whitehead, is contestable and debatable and there is not one kind of democratization of heritage but many.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORY

In order to offer a re-description of the ways in which heritage was democratized I focus on the curators' performance when working with the exhibition. Thus, the material culture, the exhibition, is not at center of the investigations; instead this paper focuses on the curators' intended messages, ideas and statements as well as recollections thereof. In order to isolate this I carried out ethnographic fieldwork at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum during 2004–08. This included documenting the SOPHISA: taking pictures and describing it. I continued to revisit and re-document the exhibition throughout the fieldwork period. I also carried out participant observation, and this included participating in the staff members' daily work with exhibitions and collections, participating in meetings, fieldwork and other activities. This was all documented using a field diary. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were also carried out with the staff members who worked with exhibitions, collections, education and with those in management positions. I acknowledge that the answers and the recollections were shaped by the present political environment; however, when comparing their statements to archival material I found them often concurring. All of my informants have been coded to protect their anonymity. To gain further information about the SOPHISA I have used exhibition proposals, governmental policies, political speeches, letters and newspaper clippings. The many examples in this article and the rich ethnographic material are part of a deliberate method to reveal the complexity of the process in which heritage was democratized.

I approach the issue from the angle of

performance theory combined with the above mentioned theories on democratization. I hold that studying exhibition development is studying something that is performed which can be explained as an action or a "doing". Studying a performance is complicated, because performances disappear as fast as they are made. Yet Rebecca Schneider (2012:66) argues that although they are lost, an archive of "performance remains" is produced. Drawing on this, I suggest that an exhibition is an archive of performance remains. Schneider (2012:66) continues explaining that performance remains cannot incorporate the entire performance, and therefore I suggest it is important to study that which precedes the exhibition – the curatorial performance. What I suggest is contrary to what recent research by Sharon Macdonald (2011) and Rodney Harrison (2011) proposes. They recommend an investigation of how material is (re)assembled in order to shift focus away from how heritage is created. I hold that there is a need to shift focus back to how heritage is created in order to explore the power and responsibility of curators in order to offer a re-description of the democratization of heritage.

This approach suggests not only a discussion of how curators perform but also how the performance is embodied knowledge that is learned and furthered by, and between, different curators across time (cf. Schechner 2002:28 ff.). The performance of democratization of heritage can be understood as imbued with values, and to analyze this I have used Richard Schechner's (2002:22, 24, 41) term "as performance". This entails an analysis of how e.g. social, political, cultural or academic discourses are coded into the performance. I suggest that the work with exhibitions can be analyzed "as performance"

36 of democratization of heritage. The text is, thus, concerned with the curators' performance and not primarily about the exhibition itself. Instead the exhibition is here regarded as a fragmented archive of vanished performances.

The reason for adopting this approach is because scholars, writing on exhibitions and particularly so in South Africa, have focused on reading exhibitions from a visitor's perspective and they often evaluate exhibitions according to how well they mediate the values associated with democracy (cf. Skotnes 2002, Dubin 2006). This has limited the understanding of democratization of heritage and I argue that the curators' performances and their recollections of producing, e.g., the SOPHISA disclose more information about how these processes are negotiated. This acknowledges that the curators' act of performing democratization of heritage is different than a visitor's experience of a democratized heritage. Furthermore it enables an appreciation of exhibitions as performances within the wider acts of democratization of heritage regardless of whether the curators are successful or not in conveying the ideas associated with it. Consequently, it highlights that many democratization processes are ongoing within the museum space.

INTRODUCING THE SOPHISA

In the KwaZulu-Natal Museum the SOPHISA was placed in shallow display cases on the balcony on the second floor. Rebuilding activities transformed the balconies into a floor space and the SOPHISA started to meander along the walls and across the floor, creating winding intimate display spaces. The SOPHISA consists of these smaller displays, here referred to as sections,

and they tell about South African history from the hominids to the 1400s. As the exhibition has developed over the past 30 years, each section is a remnant of the time in which it was produced. When entering the SOPHISA today the section *Human Origins* (2001) is first encountered, this is a partial redisplay of the *Human Evolution* (undated). This section is followed by *San Hunter-gatherers in Natal* (undated) and the *Drakensberg Cave* (1992). The latter is a life size cave, and after walking through it one ends up in San Rock Art (2001). Turning to the left, a village appears and this is the section titled *New Way of Life* (1994). One exits this section by turning to the left and into yet another town which is the display *Towns and Trades* (2006). Continuing straight ahead, one walks into a stranded ship and this is the section *Gold, Spices and Portuguese Trade* (2005) which is a re-display of *The Portuguese Age of Discoveries* (1988). I will approach and discuss the sections in the order they developed, not in the order that they can be visited.

THE PRE-TRANSITION PHASE

When the KwaZulu-Natal Museum decided to develop the SOPHISA in 1979, South Africa was experiencing apartheid, an unjust, racist and segregated society dominated by white minority rule. The system created laws based on racial categories determining where people could live, work and socialize, who they could marry and what education they could receive. This resulted in the marginalization and discrimination of the majority of the population, and large scale suffering. Colonialism¹ and apartheid had the result that museums were created by white people, functioned in white environments

and catered mainly to white visitors. KwaZulu-Natal Museum was no exception, but there were efforts to change this during apartheid and the SOPHISA was one of these efforts (Rodéhn 2008:194).

Previously, the museum had presented archaeological artifacts exhibiting no insight into different social development, which resulted in the heritage of the African² population being marginalized (Wright & Mazel 1987:32). A consequence was that the pre-history, and especially that of KwaZulu-Natal, was practically unknown to visitors since the Afrikaner nationalist historical narrative tried to establish that whites and Africans arrived in South Africa at the same time (Maggs 1980:7). South Africa was described as an empty land, and the narrative was politically appropriated to justify apartheid, segregation and white minority rule (Hall 1990:59, Maggs 1993:73 ff., Esterhuysen 2000:160). Displaying pre-history thus legitimated African groups' right to land and acknowledged the unjust situation of segregation that resulted in restricted access to land for Africans. A display proposal noted that the SOPHISA would eventually contain strong elements of "origins" for Africans (Maggs 1980:7).

Although archaeologists had challenged the dominant narrative since the 1960s, little was done to serve the "black nationalist aspirations" and the role of politics was largely denied in the interpretation of the past (Hall 1990:69 ff., 2005:181). The SOPHISA addressed this and a display proposal states (Hall 1980):

We have attempt [sic] to break with the traditional barriers between ethnography and archaeology and present instead a coherent narrative of South African History. We have taken this story through to the

present day in the belief that the past explains the present and that in this manner historical research assumes relevance. This has involved an attack on a number of standard historical assumptions which have been replaced through recent research but which remain entrenched in the public mind. Thus our display will be honest but may be controversial.

The curators performed these ideas in the *Human Evolution* (undated) that displayed the genealogy of humankind, and featured replicas of skulls of hominids and humans. Small models of different lifestyles such as hunting-gathering, farming, urbanism and industrialization were also presented. The section, aiming at African features, was largely Eurocentric, as the humans depicted had European features and were of light color. Yet the focus, as stated in a display proposal, aimed to show similarities in cultural and human evolutions between different groups (Mazel 1989a). Other display proposals, as well as statements given by one of my informants, show that the museum wanted to display that people had a common biological heritage and that physical differences (such as skin color and facial feature) were a recent adaptation (Monica 3 March 2006, Ward 1989, SOMISA planning group 1988). This was a poignant political message in a country that had created laws and a culture that upheld segregation based on peoples' physical differences.

The SOPHISA can be regarded "as performance" of democratization as it propagated ideas associated with anti-apartheid politics. The approach was shaped by the curators' education at the liberal archaeological department at University of Cape Town. Some staff members even had sympathies towards the liberation movements that were banned by the

38 government. Despite this, museum work was, unintended or not, beneficial to apartheid and therefore politically compromised. This can be particularly seen in the section titled *Portuguese Age of Discoveries* (1988) that depicted the Portuguese arrival in Africa during the 1400s. The section featured a life size model of a ship and told about life onboard. It was planned to be the fifth section but opened in 1988 before the others, and was much larger in size.

1988 was significant, as it was the 500th anniversary of the Portuguese arrival. It was also the 150 years celebrations of the Great Trek. The Great Trek, a northward migration from Cape Town by white Dutch-speaking farmers and their servants and slaves during the 1830s, was politically appropriated by Afrikaner nationalism and by apartheid propaganda. Not all white groups associate themselves with this heritage, thus the Portuguese arrival served as an alternative version of white nationalism (Hall 2000:155). The KwaZulu-Natal Museum was an anglophile institution and therefore adhered to this form of nationalism as anglophile and Afrikaner heritage often conflicted with each other (Rodéhn 2011). Yet the section created a lot of resentment among the staff members. My informants argued that the museum was trying to open itself up to all groups of society, and that the museum did not need another display depicting only a fragment of the population's history (Ada 21 March 2006, Steph 4 April 2006, Gilbert 5 May 2006). They did not, however, go into details because their critique was explicitly directed towards the director. He had been in charge of driving the project, and he was also responsible for many positive changes in the museum. The disagreement among the staff members had

the result that the museum established a display focus group ensuring that decisions were taken in consensus (Rodéhn 2008:202). The SOPHISA was an effort of *trying* to democratize heritage and *attempting* to fulfill the prescribed values of democracy yet nationalist ideas were enforced. Thus, the pre-transition phase was an ambiguous process yet it is seldom depicted as such, because curators are either portrayed as champions of change or as nationalistic. This reading is problematic and instead I propose an understanding of the period as an entanglement of ideas, where curators alternately performed conflicting and contradictory values in exhibitions.

THE TRANSITION PHASE

The museum sector initiated a process of change in 1987, foregrounded by the KwaZulu-Natal museum, and in 1992 the apartheid government began an investigation of museums. The investigation was unable to come up with answers that could address the colonial and apartheid past. Thus the African National Congress (ANC) began their own investigation and they found museums overly racist, narrow-minded and incapable of upholding democratic values. After the first democratic election in 1994, the ANC took over governance and sought to promote a heritage that could heal the nation. Cultural heritage was now defined as both immaterial and material, and museums were seen as part of the process to abolish racism and sexism, and to support learning. New policies stressed the need to redress historical imbalances and foster a sense of pride of heritage. To achieve this, museums needed to be reorganized, collections and exhibitions needed to be redressed and new staff members employed

Fig. 1. Detail of the Drakensberg Cave. Photo: Cecilia Rodéhn 2008.

for the purpose (White Papers 1996, Rodéhn 2008).

The KwaZulu-Natal Museum tried to fulfill political demands, and focused on reaching out to the disadvantaged population and on assisting children's learning, a severe problem as 50 percent of the African children were illiterate (Stuckenberg 1990:1 ff., Mtshali undated). The efforts can be seen in the section *San Hunter-Gatherers in Natal 2000 Years Ago* (undated) and the *Drakensberg Cave* (1992). The *San Hunter-Gatherers in Natal 2000 Years Ago* features drawings of the San people hunting, fishing and gathering and life on the

homesteads. Stone-tools and models thereof are available for the public to touch. The *Drakensberg Cave* is a realistic model of a life size cave with rock art that is possible to walk into. The cave overlooks a Drakensberg landscape where two mannequins of San people are placed. The cave was produced to install a feeling of being in a cave, catering for those that due to financial constraint could not travel to a rock art site (Ada 21 March 2006, NMAR 1992/93). The purpose of the two sections was to produce tactile and pictorial displays that would enable learning.

Although it seemed uncontroversial, it was

40 not welcomed by everyone because it conflicted with their worldview. In South Africa, the history connected to African people was understood as “primitive” and these ideas were entrenched in people’s mindsets. The section therefore received harsh comments seen, e.g., in the museum visitor book. One of my informants told me that she was even called up by a white visitor. The visitor complained that Africans could not have as advanced a culture as presented in the displays, and accused the museum of falsification (Monica 16 March 2006). Many white visitors did not readily accept new versions of history and the negative reception of history hampered democratization of heritage as the curators had to consider this in future performances. It was, however, not only whites who hampered the rewriting of history, but also the advocates of South African democracy.

In 1997, the ANC handed the cultural portfolio over to the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). This party was also in power over the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The parties had different, and often conflicting, conceptualizations of heritage and nationalism. Furthermore, during the 1990s the parties had been on opposite sides during the violent internecine war fought in KwaZulu-Natal, where different African groups fought in the townships of Pietermaritzburg and the rural area of KwaZulu-Natal. Nevertheless, the cooperation between the IFP and the ANC resulted in an increased Africanization of the heritage sector. This came to marginalize representations of coloured and Indian heritage in museums, as national policies stated that “the transformation of the heritage sector should primarily address the repositioning of African heritage” (NHC

2007:38). This rhetoric foregrounded a heritage that was equally as politically compromised as the one during apartheid. Yet this has not been overall recognized because that ideas connected to the South African democracy was/is understood as something positive (Rodéhn 2008:235, 239 f.).

In 1996 the Department of Arts and Culture Science and Technology (DACST) visited the museum and demanded more displays of African, especially Zulu, material culture (NMAR 1998/1999). The work with the section the *New Way of Life* (1997) can be regarded “as performance” of these demands but also as a negotiation of it. The section deals with the Iron Age communities’ way of life during the first millennium AD. To show this, and to show its difference from Zulu heritage, the curators modeled the section as a village looked during the Iron Age. One of the curators also chose themes such as settlement patterns, production of crops, metal working, cattle herding and ceramics. The purpose of the themes was to show complex social systems and pre-historic economies and technologies (Thomas 2 November 2005). One of the curators stated to *The Natal Witness* (“Linking the past to the present”, 31 January 1997) that:

Archaeology can be a politically fraught discipline because we’re dealing with people and their pasts. Even though the communities we study are dead and this allows us to remove ourselves from them, we still have to be aware they may be ancestors to people living today. Archaeology teaches us an appreciation of different cultures and different ways of viewing the world which, hopefully, we can pass on.

The curators sought, explicitly, to show a difference between today’s Zulu culture and the African farmers 400 AD, because they

Fig. 2. Detail of the section New Way of Life. Photo: Cecilia Rodéhn 2008.

wanted to avoid further connections between politics and heritage. The reason was that IFP favored rural and traditional Zulu ethnic values, while the ANC favored urban values and those connected to the struggle against apartheid (Thomas 26 November 2004, see also Piper 2002). At the time there was an increased Zulu nationalist political agenda within the DACST and, recollecting the internecine war, one of my informants told me that it was imperative to avoid any connection to politics. The museum did not want to be seen supporting the ANC or the IFP (Gustav 7 November 2006).

The curators therefore chose material culture to try to circumvent any connection to Zulu history, as images of kings, warriors and certain material culture have strong political resonance (Thomas 22 October 2004). The Zulu king symbolized the head of the nation

in Zulu nationalism, and the ANC and the IFP favored different kings (Maré 1992:63 f.). Material culture like houses and beadwork has a strong ethnic affiliation, as it was used within the IFP to foster a sense of ethnic pride during apartheid, and traditional weapons were used during the internecine war and connected to masculine identity (Klopper 1989: 33, 37, Waetjen & Maré 2001:195 ff.). Despite the curators' efforts, one of my informants told me that the section was interpreted as being about Zulu culture by the museum's Board of Trustees when they were introduced to it (Gustav 7 November 2006). Another informant said that the Board of Trustees consisted of IFP Zulu nationalists, and that they did not understand that there was a difference between the Zulu ethnic identity that emerged 150 years ago and the Iron Age farmers (Charlotte 28 October

Fig. 3. Detail of the section Stories of Human Origins. Photo: Cecilia Rodéhn 2008.

2005). This was also verified by another informant, who recalled a conversation with a board member who said that the ceramic pots on display (although hundreds of years old) were the same as those produced by relatives of hers. Yet the curators did not approach this because the ANC was in power over the country and the IFP was in power over DACST and in the province. My informant expressed that in terms of the museum's exhibition there was a need to please both sides in order to be able to survive as a museum (Gustav 7 November 2006).

The museum experienced firsthand the difficulties of maneuvering the heritage environment during the democratization process. This can be seen in the section *Stories*

of Human Origins (2000), a new introduction to the SOPHISA, that focused on human evolution from the earliest hominids to homo sapiens. The section begins with a panel asking the question: where do we come from? It is followed by religious iconography from four different religions showing creation myths. Across from this panel human and hominid skulls illustrate the human evolution.

Evolution theory is controversial among Christians in South Africa and is not only the result of an aspiring Christian fundamentalism in the country but also due to the legacy of Christian National Education (CNE). CNE existed from 1967 to 1993, and served as the core of the school curriculum installing Christian values. It affected people's awareness

of history, as it excluded evolution theory, which meant that archaeology was also absent from the curricula formula (Maggs 1980:2, Esterhuysen and Smith 1998:138, Esterhuysen 2000:161). To deal with this, new national policies stated that cultural heritage should be free from "religious chauvinism" (White Papers 1996). Yet Christian nationalism still influences people's way of thinking, and many people reject evolution theory, among them a number of Christian staff members, the new director and the Board of Trustees at the museum.

Consequently, the proposal for the display was rejected and the issue was brought to the Board of Trustees, who demanded that the curator be more sensitive to Christian beliefs. In order to comply with the demands, the curator added not only the Christian creation myth but also Hindu, Muslim and Zulu religious beliefs to the section. He emphasized, although he did not agree with this himself, that religion and science were all "stories" of human origins (Thomas 25 September 2005). He hoped that visitors would leave the display with an appreciation of different belief systems and not favor one explanation over the other (Origins display text, undated). When the exhibition opened, the curator said in an interview to the local newspaper (Coan 2000):

Religious origin stories place us on earth in a context in which we must seek salvation or live a moral life, while science investigating our origins in an effort to understand the details of human evolution. I would like to see people visiting the display acknowledging not just the belief system they belong to but reading the other stories and finding some common ground – as well as acknowledging the difference – while also accepting the validity of the other stories in the

context of belief. I'd like to think the display might contribute towards a greater tolerance of others and a breakdown of fundamentalism.

The democratization of heritage in South Africa, according to national policies, was supposed to "correct" the heritage and its previous "imbalances" and "distortions" and introduce freedom of expression and critical thought (White Papers 1996, NHC 2007). Yet apartheid ideas and religious chauvinism were so entrenched in the mindset of the advocates of democracy that they hindered expressions of critical thinking. The transition phase, as pointed out through these examples, does not show a transition to a better or more equal heritage. It does, however, show a heritage that caters to the interest of the dominant group. Yet the transition phase has been largely glorified in scholarly publications, and controversial matters have been concealed because of the desire to show how museums changed. These controversies need to be discussed for a consideration of how heritage is politically compromised also during democratic regimes.

ENTERING THE CONSOLIDATION PHASE

Although there was a need to deal with the politically compromised heritage in the present, the curators focused on addressing the negative effects that apartheid had inflicted upon historical narratives. This can be exemplified through the section *Drakensberg San Rock Art* (2001), an addition to the *Drakensberg Cave*. The section features an introduction to the epistemology of rock art and San mythology. It is an interactive display that also features rock art collected from the Drakensberg. The section was an attempt to

Fig. 4. The section Gold, Spices and Portuguese Trade.
Photo: Cecilia Rodéhn 2008.

change peoples' attitudes to San people, as in museums during apartheid they were presented as natural trackers, primitive people, childlike, and beings in between "nature" and "culture". Furthermore, the San people's heritage were presented as ahistorical and not contextualized with the general South African history (Mazel & Stewart 1987, Ouzman 2005:205). Thus the aim was, according to two display proposals, to deconstruct these stereotypes and acknowledge that the San people were part of a larger historical and political context (Mazel 1989b, Solomon 2001).

The museum clearly tried to break with the apartheid narrative, but at the same time rock art became increasingly politicized, with a new political appropriation borrowed from the apartheid narrative. During the South African transformation, rock art was chosen

to feature on the South African coat of arms because rock art was interpreted as a symbols that unites all South Africans in an essential universal humanity (cf. Smith *et al.* 2000:467 f.). It was also used in political rhetoric as a conscious historical reference intended to deconstruct the colonial legacy and racial division and create reconciliation (cf. Mbeki 1996, Mbeki 2006). Although politicians sought to convey the message of reconciliation, and chose this group to represent the legacy of the oppressed in South Africa, it stripped the San people of political and historical agency. The current political usage clearly draws on apartheid narrative of the San people as "childlike" and "innocent". That is why the curators tried to portray the San as adults and as having political agency rather than portraying them as victims.

Considering how apartheid and democratic narratives are interlinked the curators faced a real challenge to try to reposition heritage. This can also be seen in the section *Gold, Spices and Portuguese Trade* (2005). The section is a redisplay of the *Portuguese Age of Discoveries* (1988) and is shaped as a stranded ship on a beach where the display cases are built into the side of the ship. A display proposal states that it shows the contact with Portuguese traders, and describes the African response to the Portuguese expansion (Our Dynamic Past: A southern African story, undated). It is narrated from an Africentric perspective, not a Eurocentric perspective like its predecessor, and shows what African societies had to offer the Portuguese sailors, not the other way around. The curator told me that he wanted to challenge the perceived superiority of the Europeans and downplay it, and he aimed to present the Portuguese as ignorant and unaware of the sophisticated

African societies and their trading partners (Thomas 17 October 2005).

Instead of presenting African people as victims of colonization, the curator showed how they took advantage of the colonizers and used them in internal African conflict. In addition, the curator showed how African people traded with other continents and with slaves before the Europeans engaged in such trade (Thomas 2 October 2005). The display proposal describes the period as affected by internecine war, divide and conquer rule policies and the undermining of economies, instead of referring to it as the beginnings of colonialism (Our Dynamic Past: a southern African story, undated). The curator told me that he wanted to use these historical references to make people compare it to the apartheid system, the civil war in KwaZulu-Natal and the late apartheid economic recession. The purpose was to make people able to relate to the past and understand the connection between the past and the present (Thomas 22 October 2005).

He also told me that he wanted to deconstruct the African nationalistic appropriation of the period, as African nationalist narrative draws heavily on the African Diaspora. Politicians and nationalists do so in order to position the subordination of Africans and the suffering during apartheid, argue in favor of the South African democracy and position their political beliefs (cf. Moloto 2008). The curator said that he sought to deconstruct the notion of African Diasporas as solely a result of white domination. Instead of drawing on the distortion that colonialism inflicted upon African cultures, as seen in political speeches, he tried to present African cultures as dynamic and evolving. He believed that the focus on distortion and suffering victimized people and

installed an inferiority complex. Instead, he wanted to show powerful and resilient African nations (Thomas 2 October 2005).

The section *Towns and Trades* (2006) also questions the nationalistic and political appropriation of heritage. The section focus on the development of towns such as Swahili towns (Tanzania) and Mapungubwe (South Africa) and Great Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe) as well as the trade in the area. This is not unproblematic, as Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe are highly politicized heritage sites. During the 1960s and 1970s, Great Zimbabwe was a symbol for black liberation and it is currently appropriated within the nationalist discourse in Zimbabwe. Mapungubwe is currently appropriated in South African political debates to bolster the African Renaissance (Maggs 1993, Meyer 2000). The African Renaissance is an ideology based on finding and resurrecting African political ideas and academic discourses to challenge Eurocentric ones. The ideology is built into the idea of how to democratize South African society and its heritage. Mapungubwe has therefore come to be used in political rhetoric arguing for democratization. It has become a symbol for overcoming apartheid and for revival in the political system and it legitimizes current leadership (cf. Molefe 1998). In addition, South Africa's highest national order is also named after Mapungubwe.

The nationalistic use of heritage has proven to have serious consequences, especially considering the xenophobic violence against immigrants from other African countries in 2008. Yet this and other controversies are seldom brought to attention when discussing the democratization of heritage as this process of change in South Africa is understood as the solution to the apartheid problem. As already

46 stated, I argue that the issue of democratization of heritage should be understood as involving complex interplay between the past and the present, and this can be exemplified in how the curator adhered to normative archaeological discourses in order to mediate knowledge about a historical period that was generally unknown to the public.

For instance, the section *Towns and Trades* centered on urban development, economic and social change, class distinctions and sacred leadership, drawing on Thomas N. Huffman's research. Huffman (1989, 2005) suggests that the development of language and ethnic groups, in the area of Great Zimbabwe, can be traced by studying patterns on ceramics. These ideas have also come to be used in the interpretation of Mapungubwe. This is a complicated interpretation, because the division of groups according to language played a central role in conceptualizing and creating the homelands during apartheid. Furthermore Huffman's approach suggests an understanding of culture as timeless and static (cf. Hall 1995:42, 2005:184, Alexander 2001:141 f.). Although the interpretation is problematic, the curator told me that he used Huffman's approach to empower African history and create awareness of the diverse societies during pre-colonial time, as well as present extensive knowledge that were up to date with contemporary research (Thomas 2 October 2005).

Although the curator's effort was to question the assumptions about the past, this section as well as many of the others presents normative archaeological discourses to a public that does not have the tools or the knowledge to question it. This has created a predicament for curators, who need to educate the public through normative archaeological writing in order to

curb, past and present, political appropriations of heritage. The conciliation phase shows a balancing act between empowering African history, mediating recent research and challenging past and present political agendas. The consolidation phase is usually understood as a period when values and institutions become stable but, as pointed out, it is filled with controversies needing to be brought to attention.

CONCLUSION

In this text I have proposed that there is a need to re-describe the ways in which democratization of heritage is perceived. In order to do so, I have focused on the controversies and interconnectedness of values, ideas and performances as expressed in the work with the SOPHISA. Thus I have shifted focus from reading the exhibition to concentrating on the intangible performance of producing the exhibition. This has allowed me to address the discourse of "democratization of heritage" where the past and the present are juxtaposed, and where democracy is presented as a "bettering". The dualism built into the discourse creates and furthers a schism between groups and also assists in bolstering new kinds of nationalistic appropriations of heritage. I have tried to show that a democratic heritage is not necessarily better, but instead one argued from a different political perspective.

I have used Daniel Silander's model because it considers democratization processes over a long period of time and assists in locating controversies that fall outside the traditional conceptualization of the process. For instance, the pre-transition phase shows that although heritage was largely politically compromised, there were efforts to change. Curators were

caught in the predicament of wanting to rewrite apartheid narrative while also being obliged to act out white nationalism. The transition phase in the South African discourse has been described as the period when democratization was initiated. Yet the KwaZulu-Natal Museum had been changing for some time, and instead experienced how heritage was increasingly politicized in new ways. Even the conciliation phase shows how the politicization of heritage increased, and compromised museum work.

In conclusion, I hold that a long-term perspective and an in-depth ethnographic investigation of curators' performances are vital in order to realize that the ways in which heritage is democratized cannot be predetermined. Instead they should be regarded as long non-linear processes of open-ended heritage constructions. These performances should be seen as interlinked, connected and furthered by different curators across time instead of being regarded as dialectically positioned. This proposes a more conciliatory description of the ways in which democratization of heritage is carried out, one that acknowledges curators' agency, power and efforts in *trying* to democratize heritage. A conciliatory approach is one that does not judge curators' performances as "succeeding" or "failing". It does not evaluate the ways in which heritage is democratized according to predetermined values, but instead recognizes the knowledge imbued in the performance seeking to contextualize it.

NOTES

1. Colonialism is in South African political and academic discourses appropriated as a discursive position and as a locus to describe white

domination. It includes a combination of migrations connected to the East Indian Company and the Afrikaners as well as British colonialism.

2. During apartheid the South African population was according to law divided into different groups of whites, Indian, coloureds and Africans. Although the law was repealed during the transformation, and South Africans are now free to assume any preferred identity, the classification is still in use in order to assure democratic representation when e.g. employing people. So when referring to Africans I referred to the current South African classification of people, thus I acknowledge that the group is culturally, ethnically and economically heterogeneous. In Kwazulu-Natal the dominant African group is Zulu-speaking people. The term Zulu-speakers are used to highlight that there is not one Zulu identity but many yet similar cultural expressions connected to it.

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INTERVIEWS

Ada 21 March 2006
Charlotte 21 April 2006
Gilbert 4 May 2006, 5 May 2006
Gustav 7 November 2006
Monica 3 October 2006
Steph 4 April 2006
Lindiwe 4 April 2006
Thomas 26 November 2004, 22 October 2004, 25 September 2005, 17 October 2005, 2 November 2005

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