“Sacred Things in the Postsecular Society” ran at the Museum of Ethnography during 2010 and 2011, with funding from the Swedish Arts Council. The project was led by Associate Professor Lotten Gustafsson Reinius, curator at the Museum of Ethnography, and comprised studies by Ylva Habel, Ph.D., lecturer in media and communication studies at Södertörn University College, and by Erik Ottoson Trovalla, Ph.D., an ethnologist from Uppsala University. See also the articles Iconoclasm and Boundary Maintenance: Nigeria in the Wake of the Muhammad Cartoons (https://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/forskning-samlingar/forskning/publicerat/heliga-ting/) by Ottoson Trovalla and The Domesticated Uncanny: VooDolls, Swedish-brand Pseudo-magie (https://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/forskning-samlingar/forskning/publicerat/heliga-ting/) by Habel.
INTRODUCTION

One day in June 2004, a mass meditation was arranged at Gärdet, opposite the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. Suddenly it began to pour with rain, and the numerous, mostly young, participants had to take shelter in the auditorium of the museum. During that time the artiste and meditation leader Thomas Di Leva spoke about everything that was particularly promising that day. First of all the planet Venus was passing across the sun, and secondly the group, albeit mostly by chance, had ended up in the Museum of Ethnography. Because there were so many artefacts charged with power here, ritual objects brought together from different parts of the world, this had become place that Thomas Di Leva found to be charged with exceptional spiritual force.

Working at an ethnographical museum, or a museum of world culture as it is now commonly termed, is rarely boring. For anyone interested in matters of globalization and cultural heritage, it is almost like being in a fieldwork situation, where one is confronted with alternative perceptions of the world and one has to face various dilemmas. This particularly concerns the handling of the many collections and objects which have their origin in different religious contexts. The ethical and practical questions that have been raised include how one can exhibit and preserve human remains in a way that is respectful, also in the light of the great many different burial customs that their plac-

---

1 Through its oldest collections, the Museum of Ethnography has roots going back to the early eighteenth century and the Academy of Sciences. Today the museum is part of a state authority, the National Museums of World Culture, along with the Mediterranean Museum and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, and the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg.
ing in the museum makes impossible or replaces, depending on how you look at it (see Hallgren 2010, published in connection with the exhibition “(In)human”). In the work on a new permanent exhibition about the Indians of North America (opened in 2008), solutions were sought to yet another paradox: How can one make charged objects accessible to the interested public while simultaneously taking a conscious stance on demands that they should be protected from other contexts than closed and ritual ones (Brunius 2011:24)? It is not just opinion moulders among indigenous people and their support groups in different parts of the world who contact us on matters like this. A strikingly large share of the museum’s local audience also seem to nourish similar thoughts. Whether the museums of world culture want it or not, they sometimes find themselves in a kind of crossfire of conflicting considerations and demands concerning the religious aspects of the museum’s exhibitions and artefact collections. These gain further topical relevance by virtue of the changed and often politicized role that religion has acquired in today’s globalized and postcolonial society.

The project “Sacred Things in the Postsecular Society” ran at the Museum of Ethnography during 2010 and 2011, with funding from the Swedish Arts Council, with the aim of reflecting on the practical and scholarly challenges posed by the situation sketched above. As

---

2 Theoretically, conservation can also involve religious and ethical problems, for example when charged artefacts which originally had the character of mediating between worlds, or were objects intended as part of processes of change, are transformed into more clearly demarcated and durable matter (Gustafsson Reinius 2009).

3 Since the project was located in the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, I mainly cite examples that arose in the work there. Yet it is obvious that our sister museums face similar challenges and dilemmas. The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, for example, has found itself in trouble in the media owing to art exhibitions whose content was provocative – or was judged to be potentially provocative – to religious groups in Sweden. See Klas Grinell’s (2011) article about the museum’s balancing act between valid but irreconcilable demands from groups that are subordinate in different ways in society, in the context of Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s exhibition “Jerusalem” in 2010.
part of the project, two studies were conducted, one by Ylva Habel, Ph.D., lecturer in media and communication studies at Södertörn University College, the other by Erik Ottoson Trovalla, Ph.D., an ethnologist who has worked, among other things, with exhibitions and research projects at the Nordic Museum. Based on their respective empirical fields, they elucidated the project’s common question of how objects are charged and recharged at the intersections between politics, religion, cultural heritage, and the creation of differences. In view of the task of museums of world culture, the focus was on how notions of identities, alienness, and alterity are linked to religiously charged materiality originating outside what can be called, in somewhat simplified terms, the Euro-American cultural sphere. The two analyses exemplify how religiously charged pictures and objects are recharged and transformed today by iconoclasm and popular culture, affected by both creativity and conflicts. The project was related to a growing scholarly discussion of the social, religious, and political meanings of materiality in different globalization processes. A more general aim was to problematize how the museums of world culture today handle, exhibit, and teach about “sacred things” (or to use less Christocentric language, power-charged objects) from different parts of the world.

The two studies are indirectly related to the museum theme, and they use different empirical approaches to the discussion of charged objects, the making of difference, media, and materiality. In his text Iconoclasm and Border Maintenance: Nigeria in the Wake of the Muhammad Cartoons Erik Ottoson Trovalla examines the effect of the Danish cartoons of Muhammad that were published in Jyllandsposten in 2005, causing a global protest movement, above all in the spring of 2006. He discusses how politics and religion were interwoven and given materiality in a global positional conflict about how to handle what is sacred to oneself and others. In The Domesticated Uncanny: VooDolls, Swedish-brand Pseudo-magic Ylva Habel is interested in how popular culture depicts the use of materiality in African animism. She is particularly concerned with how the “vodou” of everyday re-
ligiosity has been transformed into the terrifying “voodoo” of film, which she sees as an example of how the fear and fascination shown by the Western world about cultural difference is localized in “the Other’s” religiosity.

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN THE POSTSECULAR

As is evident from the title of the project, the theoretical inspiration comes from Jürgen Habermas’s (2008) ideas of the postsecular. With that concept he seeks to capture the changed social state in European societies whose public spheres, in his opinion, are still stumbling to find their balance in a new awareness of the survival and growth of religious positions in societies which used to be generally perceived as secularized. As a part of the globalized and postcolonial society, the Swedish public sphere is likewise searching for new attitudes in a time that is characterized in different ways by the growing presence of and interaction with different religious congregations and practices. The increased articulation of religious positions is expressed here in a cultural context which has seen a relatively long period of well-established secularization in frictionless coexistence with Protestant Christianity. Sweden is – or has at least been described for a long time as – one of the world’s most secularized countries. At the same time, church and state were not separated until as recently as the year 2000. A secular variant of Christianity lives on in the public space and in the official public holidays.

Part of the picture is that many of the religiously charged collections have come to the museums through Christian missionary projects. In certain contexts the struggle against “paganism” was an obvious part of the acquisition context: the museum functioned as one of several alternative ways to take charge of cultural risk items and render them harmless; missionaries hoped and demanded that converts would either hand them over or destroy them (Gustafsson Reinius 2005). During the project seminars, one question that arose
was about the Museum of Ethnography’s own religious status; was it perhaps naive to regard itself as a wholly secular institution when the collecting (and also the early exhibitions) had taken place in a kind of symbiosis with globally oriented evangelizing?

Diversity and the growing politicization of religious matters in Sweden today has created a growing demand, not least from schools, for a knowledge and understanding of the world’s religions. At the same time, these processes have shaken the Swedish majority culture’s ideas of a secular public sphere. For an ethnographical museum in its different roles as public educator, exhibitor, and social arena, this involves several paradoxical challenges. The large collections of power-charged objects seem like an obvious resource for meeting the new educational needs. There is a treasury to draw on here, with concrete examples of how people in different times and places have made the spiritual aspects of life present and possible to communicate with. A well thought-out selection could be used, for example, to illustrate a fact that is paradoxical from a Protestant perspective, that people’s relation to the immaterial is so dependent on materiality and finds expression through material things (Miller 2005:28; Engelke 2005:42). In a future exhibition it would also be possible to show recurrent features of people’s everyday religious practices. The collections of the Museum of Ethnography contain many objects with associations and traditions that have been given the epithet world religions, but also objects with their origin in religious contexts which, through historical processes of colonial subordination and Christian missionary activity have instead been perceived as “heathen” or downright demonic (cf. Masuzawa 2005: especially chapter 7).

Educators and exhibitors at the museum may assume that many of the young visitors, who are the most important target group here, experience religious expressions – and perhaps especially the kind that are not recognized as Protestant and Christian – through a filter of images of the exotic, alien, and magical spread by popular culture. For young people who are themselves religious, it can be a challenge
to encounter a presentation of religion as something relative or historically changeable. This applies in particular to the relationship to the religiosity of indigenous peoples, which has been injected with new meanings in recent decades. In a time of postcolonial awakening and new-age spirituality, the museum’s attempts to establish a framework of rationalism, objectivity, and public enlightenment about other groups’ religiosity can be perceived as spiritually and politically provocative.

**RESEARCH CONTEXTS**

In the study of how concrete things and practices act in religiously and politically sensitive recharging processes, the project “Sacred Things in the Postsecular Society” is part of a growing discourse about the social meanings of materiality (e.g. Miller 2005; Henare et al. 2007). It is also a continuation of the research about collections that has developed at Swedish museums in the last decade (e.g. Sivén and Björklund 2006; Svanberg 2009). At the Museum of Ethnography alone, a number of scholarly and popular texts, exhibition projects, seminars, and new national and international collaborative ventures have been produced in projects enabled by finance chiefly from the Swedish Arts Council and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, illuminating and problematizing the acquisition contexts of the collected objects and their new roles in the present day. This field is reflected in titles from the museum’s publications, such as *Med världen i kappsäcken* (“With the World in the Suitcase”, Östberg 2002), *Förfärliga och begärliga föremål* (“Dreadful and Desirable Objects”, Gustafsson Reinius 2005), *Mänskliga kvarlevor* (“Human Remains”, Hallgren 2010), and *Vem tillhör föremålen?* (“Who Owns the Objects?”, Östberg 2010).

Also belonging to this context is my own project, financed by the Swedish Research Council, “Rituals of Reconciliation in the Postsecular Museum” which deals with restoration matters from a
ritual perspective. This in turn is part of the research programme “The Socio-material Dynamics of Museum Collections” (Gustafsson Reinius, Silvén and Svanberg 2012), which also includes ongoing studies of shifts and watersheds in the handling of remains (Fredrik Svanberg) and Sami collections (Eva Silvén) at the Nordic Museum, the Historical Museum and the Museum of Ethnography. The self-reflexive museum discussion of difficult objects and acquisition contexts, and of the meaning-making roles of museum practice, is linked to the growing international research field of new museology (Vergo 1989; Karp and Lavine 1991; Lavine 2006) and not least to the critique of representation expressed there about museums of ethnography (e.g. Ames 1992; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006).

A methodological gain from the research project “Sacred things in the postsecular society” is its model for integrating external research perspectives in the museum’s internal discussion. Ongoing studies and exhibition projects were able to derive examples and energy from each other’s thinking and problem-solving. The way this happened in concrete terms was that a group consisting of all the museum’s curators, educators, exhibition staff, and the librarian, together with the two external researchers, took part in a year-long series of seminars and excursions, conducted by the undersigned project leader. To link up with an international discussion, a multidisciplinary workshop was held at the Museum of Ethnography on 5–6 May 2011: “Secular Frames and Sacred Matter in the Postsecular Society”. Besides the invited speakers Chris Wingfield, John Cussans, Annette Rein, and Christian Schicklgruber, twenty or so specially invited research and museum people took part.

Apart from the articles made available here, in English and Swedish, the project has also been presented in a chapter of the edited volume Forskning vid museer (“Research at Museums”, Brunius, Gustafsson Reinius and Habel 2011: 20–47). Last but not least, “Sacred Things in the Postsecular Society” has provided ideas for two exhibitions: the travelling exhibition “Vodou”, in the version shown at the
Museum of Ethnography in the spring of 2011, and a forthcoming permanent exhibition with the working title “World Religions?” preliminarily planned for 2015.

*Lotten Gustafsson Reinius*
Curator (globalization), the Museum of Ethnography
REFERENCES


