

# Taboos in Museology: Difficult issues for museum theory

Materials for  
a discussion

Editors / Éditeurs / Editores:

**M. Elizabeth Weiser**  
**Marion Bertin**  
**Anna Leshchenko**

 **ICOFOM**

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# **Taboos in museology: Difficult issues for museum theory**

**Tabous dans la muséologie :  
Questions difficiles pour  
les théories muséales**

**Tabúes en museología:  
cuestiones difíciles para la teoría  
de los museos**

*This publication brings together the papers submitted for the 45th symposium organised by ICOFOM under the general theme **Taboos in museology: Difficult issues for museum theory**, to be held in Prague and Brno (Czechia) 22 - 27 August 2022.*

The “Materials for a discussion” collection brings together, in an inclusive spirit, all the contributions selected for the symposium in the form of short articles, to prepare the ICOFOM Symposium. This publication has been made available before the symposium, in a very short time frame. In spite of the care given to the publication, some mistakes may remain.

The editors thank the following individuals who assisted in the selection and editing of this collection: Bruno Brulon Soares, Scarlet Galindo, Olga Nazor, Ross Tidwell.

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La collection «Matériaux pour une discussion» regroupe, dans un esprit inclusif, toutes les contributions sélectionnées pour le colloque sous forme d'articles courts, afin de préparer le symposium d'ICOFOM. Cette publication a été publiée avant le symposium, dans des délais très courts. Malgré le soin accordé à celle-ci, quelques coquilles peuvent subsister.

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La compilación “Materiales para una discusión” reúne, con un espíritu inclusivo, todas las contribuciones seleccionadas para el simposio en forma de artículos breves, a fin de preparar el Simposio de ICOFOM. Esta publicación se pone a disposición muy poco tiempo antes del mismo, por lo que, a pesar del cuidado puesto en ella, puede tener algunos pequeños errores.

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# The hegemonic taboo and collaborative social practices

*Marília Xavier Cury*

*Rebeca Ribeiro Bombonato*

*Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo – Brazil*

## **Introduction**

Taboos are created to guide practices of hegemonic interests. Therefore, talking about taboos is itself a taboo, for it affects interests. Hegemony in museology and museums, as well as the role of professionals (researchers and technicians) is at issue in the maintenance of taboos that favor certain points of view, in the absence of democratic perspectives in line with diversity and the rights to musealization. We recall the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005), which points to the relationship between identity and cultural goods, the responsibility of the signatory States of protection and promotion of diversity, and the need for international cooperation. In this article we look into the participation of museums in such relationships.

It is also possible to observe how cultural policies can be “used” when absorbed by museums to maintain the modus operandi of hegemony. In this case, the discourse is hegemonic and is promoted by using the discourses of diversity and difference – momentary uses that, even if seemingly well-intended, do not intervene in the museum’s hegemonic structure in order to modify it. The growing civil/social participation is counter-discursive to the current museum model and challenges its taboos.

Between the hegemony present in museum structures and the participation of identity groups, this article addresses issues that deserve the attention of museology. Our assumption is that taboos are legacies of a museology that is hegemonically perpetuated, adapting to management (administrative, collections and exhibitions), often supported by neoliberalism. On the other hand, taboos address actions engendered by identity groups around cultural and museum rights.

## **The power in the museum: The invisible and those who hide – alerts for public policies**

In November 2021, we were surprised by the American Anthropological Association's (AAA) apology to Indigenous peoples in the USA for the “field’s legacy of harm” (Parsons, 2022). Such news put anthropology (and museology through museums) in an unprecedented situation. It puts under reflection the anthropological field throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and part of the 20<sup>th</sup>, by reviewing issues related to racist agendas, cultural appropriations and/or extractivism, and controversial ways of collecting “material objects and human remains belonging to Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas in the name of scientific research” (Parsons, 2022). Many examples demonstrate an unequal and unbalanced relationship, “in which anthropologists declared themselves ‘experts’ and built their scholarly reputations by privileging their version of Indigenous knowledge over that of Indigenous communities themselves” (Parsons, 2022).

For a long time, Indigenous peoples have been against the old anthropological practices, whether due to the way they recorded or developed their theories, for not clarifying their purposes to the Indigenous people involved or providing feedback regarding the research results. The collection of objects and human remains for museums is at the heart of criticism of museums, as there were many controversial ways of collecting and forming collections. Sacred objects and human remains are always brought into discussions on how the museum should act in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, overcoming old practices and actively practicing repatriation, whose number of requests has increased over the last few decades largely due to implementation of national legislation and international declarations.

But the AAA’s apology brings us to the realization of the “ambiguous and ambivalent legacy” (Parsons, 2022) that we must face with actions in collaboration with Indigenous peoples, a legacy which impacts not only anthropological and museological practices but also the teaching of subjects and professional training for museums. The statement becomes even more relevant when we recall the AAA’s Committee on Anthropological Research in Museums, which, in the 1970s, expressed concern about the repatriation of Indigenous objects due to their great historical importance (Simpson, 1996).

What we emphasize here are Indigenous rights in the museum and participation in musealization processes, reversing past decisions while placing the museum in another social and political position, acting in reciprocity with Indigenous peoples and their political agendas.

## **The power of the museum: The visible and the self-narratives – contributions to public policies**

Collaboration with Indigenous peoples is already a reality in museums. As mentioned by Parsons, in the USA:

*Both the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of Natural History have proactive repatriation policies mandated through federal legislation in 1989 and 1990. They are working to return bodily remains and cultural items to tribes across the country, from Alaska to Florida. (Parsons, 2022)*

The restitution of human remains is one of many collaborative actions possible. We can also recall traveling exhibitions, such as *Tuku Iho | Living Legacy* by the Maori of New Zealand, with a passage at the National Museum of Natural History and countries in Latin America, including Brazil; and *Inquiry* (later renamed *Thunder in our Voices*), shown for eight years in more than 40 locations in Canada and the US; or the exhibition *Speaking to memory: images and voices from St. Michael's Indian Residential School* at the Museum of Anthropology in Canada (Roca, 2019).

In Brazil, collaborative actions (Cury, 2017) tend to include exhibitions due to their potential to generate visibility for Indigenous peoples and provide self-representation and Indigenous texts about their lives and cultures, as well as their views on museums (Oliveira, 2021; Melo & Pereira, 2021). Through collaboration, dialogic relationships develop, and discussions bring new parameters into the museum regarding objects that are sacred to Indigenous peoples (Babosa, et al., 2020), and human remains, especially in exhibitions and research (Pereira & Melo, 2020). The involvement of shamans brings Indigenous spirituality into the museum, as well as the presence of the “enchanted ones” acting as museum curators (Cury, 2020). Another current topic that involves research with human remains and archaeologists and Indigenous peoples—and their histories – refers to ancient DNA (Alpaslan-Roodenberg, et al., 2021), reminding us that if there are old views, collaboration between researchers and Indigenous people reveals that conflict can be overcome with dialogue, mutual respect and common interests (Caires, 2021).

Alongside with the development of these new exhibitions is the requalification of collections by Indigenous peoples. Within the museum, Indigenous groups recontextualize and bring objects produced by their ancestors into the present. When such reconnection occurs through new methods of collaboration, new knowledge is also created. The Museum of Archeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo, for example, has gone through – and continues to go through – its collections with many Indigenous groups who look for their heritage in the museum. Such is the case of the Terena from the Icatu Indigenous Land and the Ekeruá Village, Araribá Indigenous Land (São Paulo, Brazil) (Camilo, et al., 2021), with the Guarani Nhandewa of Aldeia Nimiundaju, Araribá Indigenous Land (São Paulo, Brazil) (Marcolino, et al., 2021), and the Kaingang of the Icatu and Vanuíre Indigenous Lands (São Paulo, Brazil).

The right of Indigenous peoples over their heritage and history must be a primordial focus of such collaborative practices. The few examples commented on here help bring to light the many experiences in which a change in the status and the relation between museums and Indigenous peoples gains space. Museums

and many disciplines, such as anthropology and archaeology, have recently begun to re-evaluate their own practices, but it is the entrance of the Indigenous voice into the museum space that truly demonstrates a collaborative practice.

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