

***Museums and the Making of “Ourselves”: The Role of Objects in National Identity.* By Flora E.S. Kaplan. (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1994, p. xi + 430 index, \$36.95 Cdn. pbk, ISBN 07185-1775X cloth, 0-7185-0039-3 pbk.)**

Mary Tivy

Volume 20, numéro 1-2, 1998

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087746ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087746ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Tivy, M. (1998). Compte rendu de [*Museums and the Making of “Ourselves”: The Role of Objects in National Identity.* By Flora E.S. Kaplan. (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1994, p. xi + 430 index, \$36.95 Cdn. pbk, ISBN 07185-1775X cloth, 0-7185-0039-3 pbk.)]. *Ethnologies*, 20(1-2), 234–237.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087746ar>

***Museums and the Making of "Ourselves": The Role of Objects in National Identity.*** By Flora E.S. Kaplan. (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1994, p. xi + 430 index, \$36.95 Cdn. pbk, ISBN 07185-1775X cloth, 0-7185-0039-3 pbk.)

Over the last two decades, the scholarly investigation of museums has flourished across several disciplines, including folklore. Studies have explored both the historical development of museums and the semiotic constructions that shape how museums collect and interpret objects. Recent works in this field have also examined the vested interests of government in heritage identification, object-collecting and museum-making. What has been fairly well documented in the West as a complex and politically contingent system of affirming identity and cultural authenticity has had little parallel study in developing countries.<sup>1</sup>

Flora Kaplan is an anthropologist, and founder and director of the graduate program in Museum Studies at New York University. A distinguished lecture series held in 1987-88 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of this program examined the role of objects and museums in creating political and cultural identity, and formed the foundation for this publication. As is suggested by the title of her book, the author is specifically interested in the connection between cultural nationalism and museums, especially as seen in new and developing countries. Appropriately, it draws on an international group of academics with expertise in these areas. Fourteen contributors have submitted case studies shaped by the editor's mandate to document the political transformation of an area into a nation-state, with a focus on the role of museums and artifacts in that process.

The first collection of essays is entitled "New Museums: Defining the Self and Nation-State." Kaplan characterizes new nations born in the 20th century as places where institutions seek unity amidst diversity. While this may be true of the Nigerian museums which were the subject of Kaplan's case study, it is patently not so in other areas. Instead we see in essays by Kaeppler on museums in the Pacific, Anderson and Reeves on museums in Australia, and Masry on

---

1. Other edited volumes on this topic include Karp and Lavine, eds. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991) and Karp, Kreamer and Lavine, eds. *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1992).

Saudi Arabian museums and archaeology, that museums in these areas are historically and politically contingent, that their shape is often determined by the detritus of colonial rule and the concerns of the dominant political or cultural group, as opposed to the population at large.

The highly political nature of museums and their collections, and ideological shifts in interpreting objects, is illuminated in the second section of the book entitled "Forging Identity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." Kaplan views this period as a time of national museum growth linked to scientific research and imperialism. Morales-Moreno's lead essay "History and Patriotism in the National Museum of Mexico" carefully illuminates the role of the National Museum of Mexico in creating a patriotic culture by legitimizing a historical and mythic age. Avgouli's essay on Greek museums and national identity echoes Morales-Moreno's study. In contrast, the equivocal role of museums in creating national identity is demonstrated by Cummins for the Caribbean, and Dickenson on museums in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Both authors show how poverty limits interest in institutionalizing heritage. Dickenson extends his argument to question the basic premise of this book — that museums are significant in creating national identity in the developing world. He asks if veneration of the past has the same resonance in the Third World as in Britain, Europe and the United States. In these countries the past may not be a refuge; it may be the future that provides respite from the present. And he adds, "If the past has an intrinsic value, it also has a real price," (p. 242) which many countries cannot afford.

These notions of object significance, "price" and group identity ring loudly in the final section of the book, "Transforming Objects, Collections and Nation." This concluding section is intended to examine recent changes in museums and communities as well as an increased awareness of "nationness". Three case studies look at issues of artifact interpretation and national identity among indigenous groups in post-colonial countries. Newton's essay on the development of an exhibit of Maori artifacts and culture for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York illustrates well the range of responses and interpretations both within and outside an indigenous group to the use of objects for Western museum purposes. Abram's detailed study examines the complex political circumstances of the Six Nations Confederacy which shaped the creation, ownership and meaning of certain wampum belts acquired by the Museum of the American Indian – Heye Foundation in 1899. After almost a century of negotiations these belts were repatriated to the Six Nations Reserve

located in Brantford, Ontario. Abram's essay also underscores the importance of the actions of individuals in the broader issues of repatriation, and his dispassionate discussion of the many facets of this case, and the motives of its players, reinforces the political basis of object value and nationalism. Eyo's essay on the repatriation of African artifacts from Western museums comprises a well-developed argument connecting museum wealth in the First World with cultural disparity in the Third World, especially Africa. He argues that the refusal of Western museums and collectors to repatriate objects of national value to their originating countries, such as objects associated with the Ashanti throne, is a form of cultural hegemony at odds with these countries' need for national treasures. He asks "Can you imagine the British Magna Carta or the American Declaration of Independence in Nigeria?" (p. 346). The other chapters in this section: Teixeira on Portuguese museum collections, Broshi on archaeological museums in Israel, and Winters on ecological anthropology and the mis-interpretation of Native food gathering in North America, all provide useful observations on the formation of, and bias in, existing museum collections in these countries.

This book's strength lies in its case studies; its weakness is the editor's introductory musings on museums, democracy and nationalism. This preface does not provide an adequate interpretive framework for the essays; the fact that this dimension is missing perhaps serves to explain the somewhat eclectic arrangement of chapters in the volume, and their uneven attention to the question of museums, objects and nationalism. This reviewer would rather have seen either a discussion and subsequent analysis of general principles raised by these essays or a more profound review of the provocative arguments and observations made by contributors. For instance, do countries emerging from colonial rule always seek an autonomous identity in a pre-colonial past? Are there particular "non-Western" ways in which emerging nations both view and institutionalize their cultural heritage? Evidence from this book certainly suggests a preference in many places for cultural centres which utilize artifacts for the maintenance and renewal of traditional cultural practices rather than for isolating and protecting objects, as in a Western-style museum. What then are corresponding issues of ownership and nationhood? What is the relationship of icons to nationalism? In fact, one might begin by asking, does the museum model fit other cultural systems? The paradox of examining the function of a Western institutional construct in a non-Western country is barely discussed by the editor, something of an oversight in a book she describes as being about a (democratic) process that is historical, reflexive and ideological. Many of

these countries simply inherited museums built by and for colonial settlers. The author would have done well to pay more attention to such issues. These shortcomings aside, the essays in this volume provide valuable information and raise important questions about the role of museums and objects in promoting cultural nationalism in developing nations. Along with other recent compilations on museums and communities, chapters in this book should be required reading for all those concerned with understanding the institutional and ideological development of non-Western museums and differing concepts of heritage in other parts of the world.

MARY TIVY  
Guelph, Ontario

---

***Fields of Folklore: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Goldstein.*** By Roger D. Abrahams, editor. (Bloomington: Trickster Press, 1995. P. viii + 340, tabula gratulatoria, photographs, selected bibliography, \$14.95 US, ISBN 0-915305-05-4, pbk.)

The maxim “imitation is the highest form of flattery” often come to mind when we recognize the true value and importance of another deemed worthy of such imitation. From an academic perspective, we have come to learn that on specific occasions fellow colleagues and former students of a particular mentor are afforded the honor and privilege of demonstrating their expertise through an appropriate and relevant essay. Very often the influence of the honored scholar is evidenced in the resulting endeavor. This collection of scholarly essays, contributed by twenty of the most notable and renowned folklore scholars working in the field today, represents a tribute and a testimony to the depth and scope of Kenny Goldstein’s strong and far-reaching influence upon the life’s work of each. Former students and colleagues alike are found among the contributors. A Tabula Gratulatoria includes names of many additional former students who share a deep sense of affection for Kenny. They are his legacy to the field of folklore.

Abraham’s (p. 1-10) introduction to this labor of love dedicated to Goldstein clearly and effectively characterizes the man for whom the essays were written. He speaks well about, and reveals the special interests of, Goldstein’s followers; more importantly, he highlights the tremendous influence Goldstein has had on so many who have elected to form the ranks of a special