

# ***Museums' Education and Cultural Contestation. The case of the Malta Maritime Museum.***

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This paper deals with the role of museums as sites of cultural politics. The focus is exclusively on one specific museum, namely the National Maritime Museum located in the maritime city of Birgu in the south of Malta. It provides a chronicle of events leading to the establishment of the museum, a detailed account of the permanent exhibition housed within the building, background information regarding the surrounding localities and an account of views, deriving from taped interviews with key informants from the area, regarding the relationship between the museum and its surrounding communities. Whose voice/s does the museum represent and celebrate and which relevant voices are overlooked? These questions are examined within the context of power-knowledge relations. The paper concludes with a discussion concerning the museum's potential in furnishing visitors with a decolonising space for cultural contestation and renewal.

## **Introduction**

This paper, written in the hope that it resonates with the thinking of those who explore the interface between museums and their surrounding communities in other parts of the Mediterranean region, draws on recent studies by Borg and Mayo (2000a & b). These recent studies deal with museums as sites of cultural politics; they focus on a cross section of museums in Malta and explore their potential as educational sites. The approach in these earlier studies is comprehensive in scope. In contrast, this particular study focuses on just one museum in Malta – the Malta Maritime Museum, which is situated in the city of *Birgu*. The study is intended to provide an exploration of the Malta Maritime Museum's potential as an educational site. The Museum's present and potential links with its surrounding community are explored. Once again, the idea of museums serving as sites of cultural politics and contestation is carried forward, as is the idea that a democratic approach to the process of representation in museums should entail attempts at converting the institution from a colonising to a decolonising space (McLaren and Allen, 1998: 229)

## **A particular methodological approach**

It is the authors' intention to explore the dialectic between the museum and surrounding communities through an in depth focus on the Malta Maritime Museum (situated

on the Birgu waterfront) which necessitates exploring and throwing into sharp relief some of the realities of the surrounding localities of *Birgu*, *Isla* and *Bormla*, locally referred to as the ‘Three Cities.’ The authors reject the traditional view that museums provide ‘neutral’ or innocent displays of historical artefacts. The authors attempted to review the ‘realities’ portrayed on the Museum shelves and then sought to enter into ‘dialogue’ with representatives of those who live in the surrounding areas and whose stories one must excavate. A question that arises is: which stories? Those subscribing to post-modern views of narration argue that “totalizing master narratives [...] necessarily exclude the stories and experiences of the ‘other’, while artificially privileging the stories of powerful insiders.”(Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997: 1).

Ideologically the authors sought to develop a ‘decolonising methodology.’<sup>1</sup> This included, in Edward Said’s terms, the constant interchange between the scholarly and the imaginative construction of ideas (Said, in Tuhawai Smith, 1999: 2).<sup>2</sup> Thus the authors’ main aim was to engage in a dialogue with Cottonera inhabitants. The declaration of one’s educational, cultural and economic background – our personal historic memories - highlights the limit of the authors’ decolonised methodology. Our site of practice is education and we all work within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta. Our familiarity with the Three Cities was facilitated by our experience of participating in educational projects involving schools from the Cottonera area and the local communities.

In practice, the authors observed the permanent exhibition at the Malta Maritime Museum several times within a one year period. The exhibits were noted, interpreted and discussed according to the perspectives outlined by the authors above. A second phase of the study involved choosing individuals who could be interviewed to contribute different and illuminating narratives that shed light on the Museum’s surrounding communities. These narratives were meant to capture the historical, philosophical and technical perspectives involved. The authors interviewed the Museum’s Curator, Antonio Espinoza Rodriguez and the Restorer, Joe Abela. The interview with Antonio Espinoza Rodriguez concerned the

Museum's history, *raison d'être* and philosophy. In our interview with the Restorer we sought to derive insights from his knowledge of the maritime trade and model-making technology, besides his knowledge of the community at large given that he hails from Isla, one of the Three Cities. The next step was to interview the political leaders of the Three Cities, namely the Mayors of Birgu, Isla and Bormla, together with the Mayor of Kalkara; Kalkara is the suburb of the Cottonera area. The individuals involved were John Boxall, Mayor of Birgu, Paul Muscat, Mayor of Bormla at the time of the interview, Joseph Casha, Mayor of Isla and Michael Cohen, Mayor of Kalkara. Three of these individuals were reconfirmed in their posts, with a large majority vote, in the 2003 local councils' elections. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for some narrative space.

We also interviewed a priest who hails from and carries out his pastoral work in one of the 'Three Cities.' The priest in question can easily be regarded as a community leader.

### **A History<sup>3</sup>**

The development of the Cottonera-based Maritime Museum is tied to attempts at 'reviving' an area which, for quite a number of years, has been generally regarded as 'depressed'. Peter Serracino Inglott makes the following point regarding the Museum's connection with its immediate surrounding community:

The conversion of the former British naval Bakery building into a maritime museum [...] is a good harbinger of the potential renaissance of Birgu (*Vittoriosa*). (Serracino Inglott 1993:799).

Maritime activity throughout the ages constitutes a key aspect of Malta's history. In 1986, the idea that there should be a maritime museum, and that Fort St Lucian at Marsaxlokk should serve as its site, was floated around. The idea was eventually dropped since the St Lucian site was considered inappropriate. The issue of the setting up of a maritime museum was raised, once again, by the then Minister of Education, Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, after the Nationalist Party was voted into power in 1987.

Apart from providing a museum documenting the country's maritime history, the project was to serve other purposes, namely the restoration and utilization of the Naval Bakery at Birgu, the provision of an innovative approach to education and the start of the implementation of the Structure Plan for the rehabilitation of the Cottonera area.

Much work was carried out between 1988 and 1992, the latter being the year which marked the Museum's official opening. This work comprised the logistics of restoration. A number of exhibits, to be displayed at the Museum, particularly anchors and machinery, had been housed at Fort St. Lucian, in view of the earlier plans for this fort to be turned into a maritime museum. Many of the items currently on display had previously been scattered throughout the different museums administered by the Museums Department. Some were also found in private collections in Malta and abroad. The *Vaxxel* (ship of the line), for example, was previously at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. It had been restored in 1974, the year that marks the official opening of the Fine Arts Museum. Individuals from Malta and England donated items to the Maritime Museum. These items included uniforms, medals and models. Other donations were made by the Malta Drydocks, private firms such as Cassar Shipyard, and local fishing communities. The last mentioned were instrumental in the museum's acquisition of a collection of boats.

The Museum was officially opened in 1992 and started functioning under the administration of the centralized Museums Department which came into being as a result of the 1925 Antiquities Protection Act. The speeches delivered during the official opening focused on the Museum's role as a national institution. They provided lip service to the Museum's potential relationship with the surrounding community.

### **The Exhibition**

The display strategies reflect the Curator's perception of what constitutes an effective exhibition, in keeping with the Museum's mission statement. The main characteristics of the display are: simplification, no cluttering, lucid exhibition and telegraphic information (labelling). This telegraphic information is intended to arouse the onlookers' curiosity and to

encourage them to delve deeper. Popular appeal is meant to be aroused by the presence of a wide variety of primary materials, reflecting the activities of people from different walks of life. The collections are organized through a mixture of chronological and thematic approaches. The organizers are thus seeking to capture the complexity and the broad interdisciplinary nature of the Archipelago's maritime history. Furthermore, current projects include the development of a maritime history. They also include the development of a maritime reference library containing around 3000 titles, an archive and a laboratory for the restoration and preservation of maritime models. All of these are to be housed at the Museum.

As one makes one's way up the flight of stairs leading to the Malta Maritime Museum's permanent display one is confronted by specimens of marine art, a number of works in this section being donated by Gollcher & Sons. Prominent among the watercolour paintings in the section is the work of one of the country's main marine artists, the water-colourist Edwin Galea (b.1934). The section also contains models of different types of vessels, particularly the model of the Gozo ferry, *M.V. Ghawdex*, owned by the Gozo Channel. There are also half models of tankers as well as models of the *Kajjikk* (a light boat),<sup>4</sup> the *Dghajsa tal-Pass* (harbour passenger boat), the *Frejgatina* (a type of small boat), the Maltese Barque, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Austrian Barque and a Maltese merchant ship.

We then move into the main hall where the collection starts off with a section consisting of archaeological findings. These include anchors dating back to Roman times (there is also a large reconstruction of a Roman anchor), models of Egyptian and Phoenician ships, a 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek *Trireme* (this is a "war galley with square sails and powered by 156 oars, 78 per ship side in three superimposed orders"<sup>5</sup>), drawings of Punic/Carthaginian warships and pottery consisting of remains of Roman amphorae.

The main hall contains a collection relating to maritime life during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when the islands forming the Maltese archipelago were under the rule of the Sovereign Order of St. John. Paintings can be found among these exhibits; there is a representation of the Naval encounter off the island of Sapienza in 1706, a painting by a

Maltese artist (the painting is attributed to Gaetano Calleja) depicting the 'Madonna of the Fleet' and prints such as the one representing a funeral cortege of a Venetian admiral. The paintings also include such portraits as that of the Captain General of the Galleys and Juan Batista Azzopardo (1772-1848). The latter is an important figure in Argentina's naval history, a 'Coronel de Marina' who, in this representation, is hailed as 'the hero of the Argentinean Armada' (in Spanish).<sup>6</sup> In this section, one also comes across such exhibits as anchors, a swivel gun, 18<sup>th</sup> century naval uniforms, accessories of the Order of St. John as well as navigation instruments including compasses, nocturnal navigation instruments, sextants, telescopes, compasses, dividers and a ship's clock. The bulk of the exhibits consists of models of various vessels such as the Maltese third rate *vaxxel*, ceremonial Grand Master gondolas (one of the models represents an 18<sup>th</sup> century ceremonial gondola and the other represents the gondola of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt), the 18<sup>th</sup> century Ceremonial Barge of the General of the Galleys, the Maltese 18<sup>th</sup> century merchant *chebec*, the demi-galley ('mezza galera') of the Order (there is also a model of one of its details) and the mid-section of a Maltese XV11 century galley. There are also actual size models of naval artillery, a representation of a gun as mounted on a galley besides models of such details as the stern of the 'San Gioacchino' galley.

The main hall also contains a section on popular Maltese maritime activity featuring different kinds of vessels and instruments, some of which have become prominent features of Maltese folklore. The viewer comes across models of vessels such as the *Dghajsa tal-Pass*, the Gozo boat known as *Dghajsa tal-Latini* (boat with lateen sails) and a *Firilla* (the fishing boat which was a forerunner to the *luzzu*, the latter being the foremost traditional Maltese fishing boat which is brightly coloured and is pointed at both ends)<sup>7</sup> with sails.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these models, the collection includes a full-scale, eight feet long, small harbour passenger boat. There is also a selection of tools used by boat builders as well as fishing nets. The popular element in this selection of exhibits, that connects the Museum to its surrounding

communities, is enhanced by the presence of a votive (*Ex Voto*) painting depicting a *Firilla* in a gale with the overlooking figure of St. Joseph conceived of as the crew's protector.

Attention switches to the Customs House and its features. This section of the collection includes the Malta Customs official hand-seals (19<sup>th</sup> century), instruments for the measuring of grain, a display of Malta Customs standard measures, an original Customs House cupboard containing old standard measures, the Customs standard measuring rods, a customs officer's uniform, the Malta Customs bell (1873), the Malta Customs standard weighing scale, a Custom's model of a clipper type ship, a framed passport (it was issued in Malta in 1794 to the *Pollacca's* crew and passengers) and a Certificate of Appointment of a Marine Police inspector.

The visitor then moves into the Royal Naval section and among the exhibits there one finds memorabilia and many other items attesting to the presence of the British Naval base in Malta from the beginning of the nineteenth century till 1979 (the year when the British troops withdrew from the islands). It is divided into two parts, one focusing on the base proper and the other on actual warships and historical events.<sup>9</sup> There are photos capturing the building of the breakwater at the entrance to the Grand Harbour, the construction of docks in what was then known as the Dockyard and other scenes dating to the presence of the R.N. in Malta. The section includes draught drawings by students from the Dockyard School (this was an important centre for vocational/technical education in Malta at the time) and such items as fenders, a metal impact assessor, patterns for jack staves, uniforms of personnel in the Women's Royal Naval Service and standard divers' equipment. Also on display is the Ship's Bell of what was then HMS St. Angelo (Fort St. Angelo). The social and entertainment side of the naval presence is represented through the section on sporting activities, including trophies and a full sized competitive rowing boat and its oars. One also comes across the reconstruction of the façade of a canteen frequented by sailors, including the original wooden panel bearing its name: 'Young Glory' (a name that is typical of canteens and bars catering primarily for British servicemen during this period). Popular stock figures such as John Bull

and Jack Tar are also on display to capture some of the more popular symbols of British presence in Malta and Gozo. On the more sinister side, there is a torpedo originally fired by a German submarine. The tragic side of naval events is also represented by a small section consisting of memorial plaques and slabs to servicemen who lost their lives. This particular section also provides accounts of such tragedies as the sinking of HMS Victoria that resulted in 358 people (including officers and sailors) reported dead.

The most impressive exhibit in the R.N. section is undoubtedly the towering figurehead of HMS Hibernia. Large scale exhibits such as this contrast with the small-scale models that abound throughout this section, including models of such engineering and architectural landmarks of the R.N. presence in Malta as the Dockyard Creek and the 'Somerset' Dock extension as well as the neo-classic Bighi Naval Hospital. There is an impressive collection of numerous minute models of ships constituting the R.N. Mediterranean fleet as well as models of such vessels as the naval cutlass, R.N. auxiliary vessels, the destroyer HMS Mohawk and the *Ohio tanker*. The Ohio tanker withstood heavy bombardment to reach Malta's shores on August 15 (feast of the Virgin Mary's Assumption, known as 'Santa Maria' in Malta and other traditionally Catholic countries), 1942, and provide the island with much needed oil supplies, while the accompanying vessels provided food and other supplies, so that the country could continue to hold out against enemy action. It therefore represents an important event in the country's history, an event that is commemorated, in a painting in this section, by the contemporary artist Frank Portelli. Portelli provides a cubist depiction of the blitz exerted on what has since been dubbed the 'Santa Maria Convoy.'

The Museum therefore provides the visitor with a variegated collection of items that is carefully and systematically laid out. Items which, when viewed in their original surroundings, would have seemed mundane, here take on an almost monumental appearance. The flip side, though, is that there is the danger that their de-contextualisation can serve to alienate them from the very same community of which they were once an important feature.



The challenge, therefore, remains that of linking the Museum to the surrounding community.

This can take different forms. As Serracino Inglott argues:

The Museum itself can be conceived as the seed of the multiple development beyond its already planned enrichment with the display of more objects of artistic or scientific or technological interest. It can move if given the right funding and staffing, from the static to the dynamic, by integrating its indoor activities with new uses of the outdoor space of Birgu waterfront and the Dockyard Creek, linking the present with the past (Serracino Inglott, 1993: 800)

### **Context: The Cottonera<sup>10</sup>**

The Malta Maritime Museum, the site of practice in question, is situated in the Cottonera area. When viewing the Cottonera from the nearby towns of Paola and Zabbar, as well as from the Valletta peninsula, one is struck by its impressive fortifications, erected by the Order of St. John, that testify to the area's prominent role and importance in Maltese history.

One should first and foremost contextualise and analyse a discourse surrounding the concept of a uniform communal area. The Cottonera involves the so-called Three Cities, literally enveloped by the Cottonera fortification lines. Perhaps, historically, this metaphor was perpetuated by a dominant discourse intended to encapsulate a 'problem area' in one uniform military, economic, political and somewhat mythical discourse. As Dominic Fenech argues:

While for some purposes it is reasonable to regard the Three Cities as one aggregate, they cannot be regarded as a single entity in every respect. Although, with their growing collective dependence on the naval sector, the people in all three towns came to be exposed to similar economic factors and subject to similar conditions of living, the three communities did retain a separate identity, which survives to the present day. (Fenech 1993: 153)

This 'orientalising' discourse,<sup>11</sup> which was often used by the dominant classes and which permeated popular language, did not resonate with the inhabitants of *Birgu*, *Isla* and *Bormla*. It did not suite their perceptive logic. In addition, a 'deficit' image was attributed to the Cottonera area in the post-war period. The Cottonera gradually also bore on itself the proletarian metaphor. Dom Mintoff, the charismatic MLP Leader from Bormla and a

protagonist in the final chapters of Malta's quest for independence, was a key promoter of proletarian discourse.

The Cottonera fortifications, erected during the time of Grand Master Nicholas Cottoner (hence the name Cottonera), together constitute a compact and massive geometric construction. The skyline, nevertheless, also features the Dockyard's heavy machinery. And yet, despite the contrast in aesthetic appeal, provided by these two different forms of geometric constructions, one can easily regard them as two interrelated aspects of what constitutes an important feature of the area's and, indeed, the country's economic history. The Cottonera's 'fortress' image is inextricably bound up with the type of activity represented by the steel constructions. The region's one time economic strength derived from its location in the harbour area and from its prominent role in the development of the country's 'fortress economy' during the period of British colonization.

Economically, the Cottonera area revolved around British garrison and naval needs. It was a war economy characterized by a situation of 'boom and bust'. The bulk of the labour force, which directly sustained this economy, hailed from the Three Cities. An entire educational programme for the working class was provided in these three cities, particularly by the Lasallian religious community, and this focused on enabling men to gain employment at the Dockyard (see Ellul Galea, 1993; Sultana, 1995; Mifsud, 1997). The Dockyard and its surrounding working class milieu constituted an area where one would come across a lot of incidental learning (see Foley, 1999) and alternative forms of education.

Sadly enough, this once prosperous area, with its fortune revolving around the harbour activity, gradually fell on hard times (Fabri 1997:90). The economic returns from maritime sources of activity dwindled during the latter part of the 20th century, especially following the process of British decolonisation (read: rundown of British forces).

## **A Social Perspective**

The constructed identity of people hailing from this area responded to the geographical and environmental constraints as well as to the historical realities of this area. In this respect, Ghirlando remarks:

..that a technological society should have evolved out of a maritime technological centre is not surprising ... At any point in time the ship has also embodied the technologies of its time, perhaps more than any other human endeavour (Ghirlando, 1993:537).

As argued, the population in this area historically constituted the nearest thing the islands had to an industrial working class. The Cottonera has, over the years, provided the power base for Malta's labour politics, having traditionally been a Malta Labour Party (MLP) stronghold.

Ironically, the increase in affluence enjoyed by the militant dock workers during Labour's sixteen year rule (1971-1987), the developments in the means of transportation, as well as the area's environmental and social degradation (partly owing to the constructed popular discourse surrounding the Cottonera) led many of the inhabitants to move out and live in other communities throughout Malta. Parts of the area are now characterised by cheap housing and a concentration of members of low income groups coming from other parts of the island. Because of its cheap housing, the area is (or parts of the area are) also proving attractive to immigrants from the Southern Mediterranean and the rest of Africa, especially those who have not been granted a work permit (Caruana, 1999). This demographic shift, or process of displacement/dislocation, continued to render the Cottonera an architectural *mélange* in which baroque churches and palaces exist alongside impressive old dwelling places, plain housing estates (products of the Labour government's social housing programme in the 70s and early 80s) and an alarming number of decrepit houses.

Any hope for silence in this area is disturbed by the sounds emanating from the Malta Drydocks, especially those of grit blasting and the sirens regulating the Dockyard employees' work day. There have been occasions when the sounds had a tragic ring to them, being the

sounds of explosions resulting in injuries and death (Falzon, 2001). The spectre of nine coffins being carried through the nearby working class town of Paola, in 1995, still haunts the memory of Drydocks' employees (on this tragedy, see Falzon, 2001: 367).

The region is also regarded as among the hardest hit in terms of environmental degradation (Callus, 1997). In addition to sound pollution and the other effects of grit blasting, the area also suffers from pollution deriving from intense marine activity (Axiaq, 1997: 11-24). The scars of World War II are ever present throughout the Cottonera. The harbour area was indeed the main target for bombing by the Axis powers. After all, the British naval base was to be found in this part of the island, as the Museum clearly indicates.

To what extent does a museum, situated in this specific area, connect with the environment described above? We sought to examine the situation in this regard and explore possibilities for the future through a series of interviews with key informants from the area.

### **Our Project/Their Project? Views from the Area**

The interviews conducted by the authors revealed that the concept of Maritime Museum as a liberatory project might encounter several contextual difficulties in the process of its realisation. These difficulties might range from alienation to material deprivation and to a perceived lack of vision and leadership.

One of the major difficulties, highlighted by all interviewees, is the fact that more and more non-Cottonera people are pouring into the area. With exceptions, newly arrived residents choose the area because of its low rent status. This implies material deprivation and, in the Maritime Museum's restorer's own words, "the newly arrived residents do not have the same emotional rapport with the sea as 'real' Cottonera people." According to the same interviewee, himself a community activist, people who are not sea-oriented and who do not identify themselves readily with the area will not come forward to participate in such a project. Moreover, it is difficult to build relationships of trust and working cooperation, important ingredients in community projects, in a demographic context that is markedly relatively transient.

All mayors agreed that time is not on the project's side. Many residents with a family history of seafaring activities died or are very old. This fact, if not addressed, can easily jeopardise any chance of developing an oral history component in this museum's display, one approach that we shall be advocating further on. Moreover, all mayors agreed that trades connected to shipping and boating are declining at a fast rate. This situation can adversely affect the possibility of extending the Museum's perimeter to include workshops and trade activities carried out within the harbour area.

Two mayors dismissed the Museum as essentially an academic exercise and therefore far removed from the community. One of these mayors referred to the site in question as "another Government department." Both complained that they have never been approached by the Curator in connection with the organisation of potential popular maritime activities. The same mayors admitted, however, that they have never approached the Curator, with one of them intimating that the Museum "is not within our territory." This comment, together with other similar comments, attest to the inter and intra-city rivalry that characterises the Cottonera area. This territorialism, expressed in terms of 'us' and 'them', accompanied by frequent accusations that one particular city is being privileged over others, can very well prove to be an insurmountable hurdle for a Cottonera-oriented project. On a positive note, this also confirms the statement from Dominic Fenech, cited earlier on, that the Cottonera is not to be perceived as a unitary area; the inhabitants of each of the three cities perceive themselves as having an identity which distinguishes them from the inhabitants of the other two cities.

Two interviewees highlighted what they sensed as being a lack of true leadership and vision within the Museum's surrounding communities. Both the Restorer and the Priest complained that most activities are organised in an ad hoc and haphazard manner and not as part of an overarching vision or strategic plan. As a result, it is very rare that an initiative is sustained. Moreover, both interviewees assert that it is rare that people come forward with exciting and innovative ideas. Both interviewees attribute this fact to the depleted middle-class residing in the Cottonera, arguing that "once they (middle-class) leave they rarely return

to work in the area.” Referring to his own project, a *frejgatina* (once again, a type of small boat) exhibition held in a local band club, the Restorer complained that very few people around him understood his project and the process of setting up the exhibition was marked by suspicion and insinuations.

Alienation was mentioned by an interviewee as another serious challenge to a liberatory project. Alienation takes two forms. There is alienation between the Museum culture and the Cottonera residents; conflicting social class values are exacerbated by high levels of illiteracy (Central Office of Statistics, 1995) and low formal educational achievement (see Baldacchino, 1999: 210).<sup>12</sup> People in this area also mention “low self-esteem” as a feature of the community (see Borg and Mayo, 2001, p. 251). There is also alienation caused by a lack of cultural awareness that, according to one of the interviewees, has led to “a collection of rare clay statues, of modern art and sedan chairs” being “removed from the Cottonera without a hue and cry being raised.”

Finally ‘internalised oppression’ constitutes another possible hurdle for such a community project. The process of schooling tends to devalue the knowledge and cultural practices of the residents. Our cultural institutions tend to further accentuate the cultural contradictions obtaining between official knowledge and different types of knowledge generated by subaltern groups. As a result, activities generated by museums are generally perceived as elitist by non-dominant groups and resistance is frequently manifested through lack of participation and withdrawal.

In light of the above, how can the Museum’s politics of representation resonate with the aspirations and lived experiences of the people in the area? How can the Museum deal with change? Does it simply document change or does it act as a catalyst for change to occur? Given the specific focus of this paper, does it provide an education that simply reconstructs the past or does it provide one that attempts to surmount the obvious difficulties, just mentioned by the interviewees, to be socially transformative?

## **The Educational Function of Museums: Sites of Contestation**

Recent collective works have underlined the role of museums as educational institutions (Chadwick and Stannett, 1995, 2000). The essays contained in these works deal with efforts by museum personnel to turn their institutions into sites of lifelong learning. The learning is to take place not only informally or incidentally but also through planned intervention by teams involving trained museum educators. This aspect has been markedly absent from Malta's museums over the years, although it has to be said that the more recently opened arts centre at St James Cavalier in Valletta provides a welcome and overdue break with tradition in this respect, in that it provides opportunities for interactive learning among children. Education, even of the formal type, has traditionally occurred within our museums on an *ad hoc* basis. With no specialized personnel in the field of museums education available, curators often have to assume the role traditionally taken on by persons operating in small states (these states cannot afford all the specialisations they require) or in small scale institutions such as local authority or community museums in Britain. Curators take on multifunctional roles. The person concerned assumes the roles of curator, educator and so forth. (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995:51). The provision of educational opportunities "will be one of the many tasks undertaken, and decisions will have to be made in relation to competing calls on limited time and resources" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995:53).

In previous works by two of the authors (Borg and Mayo, 2000a & b), a parallelism was drawn between curricula and museums, both implicated in the promulgation and contestation of power/ knowledge relations. They both comprise selections from the cultures of society and therefore reflect what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'cultural arbitrary'. They both give legitimacy to certain forms of knowledge and representation at the expense of others, rendering the former, in the words of Michael Apple (1993), 'official knowledge'. The selections made are never neutral. They reflect the interests of those groups whose forms of representation have traditionally been dominant in society (for evidence of this, see Borg, 1995; Lapira 1995; Rountree, 1999; Borg and Mayo, 2000 a & b). And yet the structure of

domination, in both the curriculum and the museum, is never monolithic. There is often contestation, with occasional demands being made by those seeking legitimacy and whose work, as yet, belongs to a veritable *salon de refuses*. To what extent do the museum and the general situation concerning identity and representation allow such contestation to take place? As with curriculum development, a democratic process of museum development is one marked by contestation and cultural ferment. The museum, like the curriculum, would thus be conceived of as a site of cultural politics. It is a site which would lead to questions being posed concerning dominant and subaltern cultures, remembered and forgotten/repressed histories, boldly projected and marginalized images, listened to and silenced voices, besides questions regarding who represents whom and on what basis (Jordan and Weedon, 1995: 4). In short, it is concerned with the question regarding whose cultural arbitrary (cultural preferences) is reflected throughout the institution.

In view of these considerations, the struggle for inclusion becomes an important feature of a museum that, like a progressive curriculum, is conceived of as being a dynamic feature of civil society.<sup>13</sup> It should be dynamic not only in terms of allowing visitors to ‘learn’ through interaction with exhibits, involving the use of consoles and other technology, alas sadly lacking in most of Malta’s museums, but mostly in its being constantly open to change. Contestation, in this contest, becomes a healthy aspect of the Museum’s cultural life. It would be the sign of an ongoing democratic renewal of that public space which museums, like other institutions of civil society, represent.

### **Museum Artefacts as Political Texts**

The artefacts which museologists handle constitute the externalisation of the hidden consciousness of the human will. This will is cultural in nature and, therefore, is the product of a range of social relations exercised within social structures and material conditions that are asymmetrical. Within this conceptual paradigm, a neutral engagement with museum artefacts serves to reinforce the ‘curriculum of domination’, which reproduces class discrimination, racism, sexism and a disabling environment for some.



We argue that museum artefacts can be regarded as political texts. This therefore implies that artefacts can serve as ‘counter-memory’, where current concepts of truth and justice, products of specific historical processes, are understood and challenged by means of a changed relationship with the past.

Viewed from an emancipatory perspective, artefacts could also allow opportunities for ‘border crossing’. This means that some of the artefacts in a museum build on the tacit knowledge derived from the cultural resources of the community. It is through ‘border crossing’ that the museum becomes a truly democratic institution of civil society, where the equation of power and knowledge is redesigned to accommodate post-modern resistance to exclusively expert interpretations of collective and peripheral knowledges. In the process of demythologising reality, artefacts embody the voices of marginalized groups by foregrounding biographies and autobiographies of authentic members of these groups.

Furthermore, a truly emancipatory perspective on this issue is one that shuns the traditional idea of an artefact that is developed to unload accumulated knowledge. The static nature of traditional artefacts contrasts heavily with the movement generated by the emancipatory artefacts. The latter artefacts create a charged atmosphere characterised by active interaction with, interpretation and reinvention of the text. Such a process reskills the museum guide, educator or any another intermediary who has been for long deskilled by acting as a passive transmitter of pre-packaged messages.

Artefacts constructed in the liberatory idiom are therefore perceived as objects of hope. While trying to understand the ‘what was’, the liberatory artefact inspires the reader of its text to question and answer the ‘what can be.’ The emancipatory artefact reconceptualises knowledge as a new form of ideology and a new paradigm. In this way, ‘resistance’, that is, the challenging of the notion that ‘naming reality’ is the exclusive preserve of the ‘expert’, opens up new avenues for the reconstruction of past and present.

## **Museum Artefacts and the link between Culture and Power**

The reading of artefacts as political texts necessitates an examination of the link between culture and power. Definitions of culture have generally been located in showcases where the viewer's gaze is impressed by the accumulation of items within it. Within this collector's paradise, culture is perceived as a neutral phenomenon that can only be studied in a positivist manner through 'value-free' inquiries and interpretations.

There is no attempt in this view to understand culture as an ensemble of social interactions emerging from and within asymmetrical relations of power. Foucault (1980) asserts that, in order to understand the relationship between culture and power, one must also try to understand the dynamics that exist between what is considered truth (or knowledge) and power. It is this relationship that has seldom been questioned with respect to its effect on museum pedagogy and its control of what constitutes knowledge in our museums.

An implicit but important assumption, drawn from Foucault's work, is that, if museums are to move toward a context of cultural democracy, then one should recognise that the ability of individuals from different cultural groups to express their cultural truths is clearly related to the power that certain groups are able to wield in the social order. Therefore, any educational theory of cultural democracy must challenge how meanings and values concerning 'truth' are imposed and perpetuated in museums through the dialectical and social mechanisms of economic and political control found throughout society at large.

## **The Maritime Museum and the Language of Possibility**

The concepts of accessibility, 'border crossing', 'counter-memory' and 'contestation' challenge the notion that experts' viewpoints regarding museums are the only legitimate ways of looking at these institutions. According to this perspective, while the Maritime Museum represents a genuine attempt to situate an educational institution within the community, the artefacts presented, the pedagogy provided and the activities organised within the museum do not challenge fundamental power relations and traditional models of museum interactions.

Despite the fact that the Maritime Museum provides great possibilities for grassroots activism, the site has, for a number of years, been treated as an 'academic exercise' by the Museum Department. As a result, notwithstanding the great potential that this museum has in terms of community building and engagement, culture is conceived of as a domain wherein flashes of historical facts are handed down from one generation to the next, rather than one which grants people the opportunity to examine stories of domination, survival, resistance and emancipation.

At present, while it is evident that the community has contributed significantly to the display by loaning or by donating artefacts, none of the discourse generated by the artefacts provokes community members into engaging in the 'pedagogy of questioning'. The section dealing with the Dockyard is a case in point. Set up as the result of a generous donation by the Malta Drydocks' management board, the display transmits sporadic historical facts on, for example, dock building and the Dockyard School. It does not provoke dialogue on, for example, the role of dockyard workers in the colonial economy, their resistance to colonialism, workers' emancipation and workplace democracy. By focusing mainly on such events as the building of new docks, the display fails to shed light on the social locations, perspectives, cultures and languages of the community from where the artefacts derive. Despite the fact that the community has contributed materially to the display, the main contributors remain those who are the recipients of the museum service within the 'service exchange' logic. In this section of the display, the popular was appropriated by the museologist and transformed into formal museological knowledge.

The section in question also overlooks a very important aspect of critical and emancipatory museology, namely the concept of *voice*. For example, within the dockyard display, expert knowledge is privileged over other community-based ways of knowing. The harsh reality of dockyard life, the disabilities endured through years of exhaust inhaling, grit blasting and other dangerous emissions, the death of several workers, the various struggles for worker emancipation, the anxiety generated by intermittent work, are basically sanitised in a

display which fails to foreground real faces and genuine voices. Secondary sources were privileged over the primary source of the workers' voice.

In fact, oral history offers great opportunities for capturing the authentic voice of the seafaring community that traditionally belonged to the localities surrounding the Malta Maritime Museum. The community where the Museum is situated provides an invaluable wealth of real Maritime experiences. There are no indications within the Maritime museum of an urgency to record and share such genuine experiences. Alternatively, and probably more accurately, the Museum lacks the wherewithal to be able to make use of such a facility. Moreover, the complete absence of a modern technological infrastructure indicates that the issue of accessibility through a range of possible routes is still a distant possibility.

Directly connected to the issue of voice is the concept of *space*. The Maritime Museum strikes us as somehow being a site that looks inwards. It is essentially a static museum. The concept of the 'dynamic museum' entails the transcending of the building's perimeter to embrace sites that are intimately connected to Malta's maritime history, as the earlier quote from Serracino Inglott suggests. The Drydocks, the Marsa Shipbuilding, the Regatta (competitive rowing) workshops, the Zabbar, Herba and Ta' Pinu sanctuaries, the Maritime Authority, the Manoel Island Yacht Yard, and the Marsaxlokk fishing community are but a few of the satellite sites where real people can share their maritime stories with the visitors.

Furthermore, the concept of voice is predicated on a refusal of tokenism. Unfortunately, the Museum is plagued by token representations of important aspects of Malta's maritime history. For example, the socio-economic history revolving around the crossing of the Maltese 'fliegu' (channel between the nearby islands of Malta and Gozo) is tokenised and trivialised by collapsing it into a nostalgic model of the *dghajsa tal-latini* (boat with lateen sails).

Physical access is perhaps the most basic requirement for engaging in the cultural politics of the Museum. Unfortunately, this museum, like most of the museums in Malta, was

neither built purposely as a museum, nor built in the era when physical accessibility constituted an important socio-architectural issue. The Museum does not facilitate the presence of people with disabilities and, more specifically, people with mobility impairment (and it is significant, in this context, to note that maritime life has disabled people); the complete absence of the disabled person's voice is another indication that the Maritime Museum's curriculum is exclusionary.

We would argue that an accessible museum is essentially an inclusive museum. It builds on an appreciation of every community member's potential to contribute towards the definition and development of Maltese *cultures*. It also builds on the appreciation of every community member's potential to contribute towards the definition and development of Maltese cultures. Furthermore, it builds on the principles of solidarity and affirmation of difference and adopts an unconditional positive regard towards each user/learner. Inclusion is based, amongst other things, on partnership. The partnership model emphasises co-creation, imagination, emancipation and the ability to change.

There is also a strong connection between language and accessibility. In contrast with other museums on the island, this museum ought to be commended for privileging the national language while recognising English as the medium of communication with the international visitors who patronise it.

On the other hand, the dearth of organised activities constitutes a continuation of the logic of display. Popular culture, which, like all forms of culture, has its contradictions and should not be romanticised, provides an excellent moment of *counter-text* within museums. Events revolving around popular culture, traditional ballads connected to the sea, exhibitions of *ex votos* and other popular manifestations should feature in the museum's calendar. They could help strengthen the links between the Museum and the surrounding communities and, in so doing, help create possibilities for cultural renewal in the Cottonera area.

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<sup>1</sup> This term is also the title of a book by Linda Tuhawai Smith (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Although Said referred to an Orientalising discourse, discourses about subaltern communities were often developed in a similar manner.

<sup>3</sup> The main information for the 'genealogy' of the Maritime Museum was obtained from private conversations with Mr A. Espinosa Rodriguez, the Museum's Curator.

<sup>4</sup> The *Kajjik* has an average length of 4.6 metres and is flat ended at the stern. Information provided by Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment. [maltafisheries.gov.mt/ginfo\\_fishingvessels.htm](http://maltafisheries.gov.mt/ginfo_fishingvessels.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Information provided to visitors.

<sup>6</sup> A bust of J.B. Azzopardo, which, like this portrait, was donated by the Argentinean Government, stands opposite the Maritime Museum along the waterfront of his city of origin, Isla (Senglea). The two cities of Isla and Birgu stand opposite each other.

<sup>7</sup> Information provided by Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment. [maltafisheries.gov.mt/ginfo\\_fishingvessels.htm](http://maltafisheries.gov.mt/ginfo_fishingvessels.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Aquilina (1987), p. 342.

<sup>9</sup> See text by the Curator, Antonio Espinosa Rodriguez, in the Museum brochure.

<sup>10</sup> This section on the Cottonera has been adapted from a similar section in an article by two of the authors which appeared in the British Journal of Sociology of Education, Vol. 22, No.2, pp. 246-266.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the report in 11-Gens, 24th July, 1992. 'orientalising' is used here in the sense adopted by Edward Said in Orientalism, the book which focuses on cultural colonialism (see Said, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Writing on higher education, Baldacchino states that the area has a "graduate density which is a staggering twenty times less" than that of "the fashionable, upper middle class areas of Attard, Balzan and Lija." (Baldacchino, 1999: 210).

<sup>13</sup> The term 'civil society' is being used here in the sense intended by Antonio Gramsci, namely as a complex of ideological institutions which affect one's construction of reality. They are not conceived of by Gramsci as monolithic institutions since they allow space in which counter-hegemonic action can be engaged.