

TOWARDS NEW NARRATIVES OF THE MULTICULTURAL NATION: NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCE IN THE MUSEUMS IN ATHENS

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Abstract

Changes in the concept of nation, accentuated by the challenges of globalisation and increasingly trenchant calls from minorities demanding representation, participation and inclusion, have prompted national museums in many parts of the world to review their mission and develop new cultural narratives of the nation. Whilst many museums have sought to represent previously excluded communities in more inclusive and equitable ways, there is nevertheless only a budding understanding of how the tensions and complex challenges that arise from museums working with these groups can be resolved.

Moreover, there is relatively limited research exploring how diverse audiences (majority and minority) perceive and engage with the new narratives that result from such initiatives. This thesis seeks to contribute to these gaps in knowledge and understanding by examining in detail issues of production and reception around a case study: the temporary exhibition *African communities at central Museums and galleries in the City of Athens (2014)*, developed in response to growing demands from African activists for inclusion in the national narrative. This central case study is used to explore, more broadly, the role that historical museums might play in fostering access to cultural rights in the multicultural nation. Based on a mixed methods research design, the analysis encompasses both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection with an emphasis on semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Results suggest that deeply entrenched stereotypes of minorities can be stubbornly resistant to change and that attempts to introduce new forms of representation can run the risk of essentialising or simplifying different cultures. At the same time, in-depth analysis of audience responses suggests that, despite these challenges, museum exhibitions can create arenas for productive intercultural exchange and serve as grounds for the observation and promotion of cultural rights for previously excluded groups.