Museum/City/Nation: Negotiating Identities in Urban Museums in Indonesia and Singapore

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Introduction: Museums as “Cathedrals of Urban Modernity”

A recently published volume on the history of museums in Europe poetically heralds museums as “cathedrals of urban modernity” (Lorentz 1998). Like cathedrals, the author observes, museums are an essentially urban phenomenon. “If the existence of a cathedral-church

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was in medieval [European] times, one of the defining criteria to distinguish between a 'city' and a 'town,' the provision of public museums became, from the Enlightenment onwards, one of the most typical urban features" (Lorente 1998: 1). These parallels between museums and cathedrals, I suggest, extend beyond their shared status as markers of a (Western) metrome. Museums and cathedrals are not only indices of urban landscapes; both are also sites for the dissemination of authoritative texts or scripts for viewing the world. Moreover, both signal entrance into imagined transnational communities.

My concern in this chapter is not so much with cathedrals in relation to these issues, but with museums. As Carol Duncan has noted, fine arts museums have long been regarded in the West as "fixtures of a well-furnished state" (1994: 278). Beyond conveying urbanity, the establishment of art museums communicates engagement with national and international audiences. Duncan suggests that this perspective on museums has been embraced in other parts of the world: "Western style art museums are now deployed as a means of signalling to the West that one is a reliable political ally, imbued with the proper respect for and adherence to Western symbols and values" (ibid. 1994: 278). While one may question the Eurocentric dimensions of Duncan's assertions concerning non-Western nations' adoption of art museums to convey "adherence to Western symbols and values," her recognition of the political role of these museums is astute. In broad terms, this chapter addresses the political dimension of urban state-run museums in Southeast Asia. More specifically, my interest here is in examining urban, state-run museums as artfully-constructed texts for the rehearsal of various identities, be they metropolitan, pan-provincial, national, regional or transnational. Additionally, I seek to go beyond textual readings of these museums' displays and structures, to examine the ways in which various museum visitors, guides, and even staff, rewrite and recontextualize the narratives with which they are presented. My focus is on ethnographic or cultural museums, and not on art museums, as I believe that the differences between these genres of museums warrant conceptual separation (although similar dynamics may well occur in both).

The observations presented here are based on field research conducted in Indonesia and Singapore in 1996, 1998 and 1999. This research incorporated participant observation, perusal of government documents pertaining to museums, as well as interviews with museum personnel, guides, educators, museum visitors and museum-avoiders. The interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, in particular, suggested a complex array of identity issues under negotiation in and around urban Southeast Asian museums. As entrance into these issues, I offer the following vignette which silhouettes some of the themes at the heart of this chapter.

Gazes of the Nation: The Central Museum in Jakarta

The Central Museum in Jakarta occupies a prominent residence in a stately white-washed colonial building at one end of Freedom Plaza, in the administrative heart of Indonesia's capital city. Popularly dubbed "gedung gajah" (Elephant Building) in homage to the carved stone elephant statue adorning the museum's front lawn, an 1871 gift from Thailand's Chulalongkorn, the museum's colonial exterior and decorative statuary teem to historical and international ties. As befits Indonesia's premier ethnographic and historical museum, on a typical morning the front parking lot is cluttered with tourist-laden taxis, buses bearing Indonesian students and vendors hawking snacks and souvenir postcards. The cool darkened interior of the Central Museum contrasts sharply with its bright bustling exterior. In the entry lobby, multilingual volunteer guides linger alongside solemn guards and weary tourists. Traffic flows out of the lobby and into the museum's spacious orienting gallery, where visitors encounter their first museum display: three enormous number-coded maps of the provinces and regencies of Indonesia. Framing each of these maps are dozens of small oil paintings, each depicting a face representative of a different ethnic group from Indonesia's provinces and regencies (Fig. 1). Painted in 1930 for the museum (which was then a Dutch colonial establishment), these hypnotic portraits of traditionally
dressed colonial subjects cast sombre gazes on the swarms of Indonesian schoolchildren on field trips and jet-lagged tour groups receiving their initial orientation to Indonesia.

On an October morning in 1996, in a pre-crisis Indonesia when funding for museums, arts festivals and touristic nation-building ventures still flowed, I stood in front of this assemblage of ethnic images, amidst some seventy Jakarta junior high school students who were awaiting the arrival of their museum tour guides. The Javaese students nearest me were boisterously bantering, taunting one another about imagined resemblances to the portraits of darker-hued peoples of Eastern Indonesia. When a museum guide arrived and signalled that he was soon to begin his tour, several students produced tape recorders and notebooks. Noticing me following suit, the junior high schoolers adjacent to me tittered and produced a flurry of questions: did I understand Indonesian? Why was I taping the tour? Would I join them on their all-day multi-museum study tour of the ethnic groups of Indonesia? Explaining that I was an anthropologist, I indicated my ultimate destination on the map, the island of Alor in Eastern Indonesia. One student in the cluster quickly located the nearby portrait labelled “Alor person” (Orang Alor). Several others shyly confessed that they had never heard of Alor before, and observed that this museum tour was probably as close as they would ever get. Studying the portrait, one of the male students jestfully advised me to be careful, as this Alorese looked tough. His classmate quipped that perhaps I would come back with feathers in my hair, just like the Alor person depicted in the portrait, which prompted a burst of giggles. Our conversation was abruptly abandoned, as the guide launched into his orienting speech about the diversity of peoples that comprise the glory of Indonesia.

Despite its brevity, this encounter stuck with me during my subsequent research in Indonesian museums, as it encapsulated some of the recurrent themes of my fieldwork, themes that are at the core of this chapter. These themes include (1) the role of the museum as a text for constructing urban identities and sensibilities and (2) the ways in which museum visitors rewrite and renegotiate the government’s nation-building and identity-consolidating scripts embodied in cultural and heritage-oriented museums.

Since Benedict Anderson’s (1991) treatise on nations as “imagined communities,” there has been an emergent interest in exploring state strategies for imprinting the imagined national community in the everyday experiences and memories of diverse citizenries. Over the past decade a number of writers have begun to chronicle the role of museums in cementing national identity and promoting national agendas (e.g. Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992; Coomber 1998; Duncan 1990, Kaplan 1994; Hamlish 1995; Steiner 1995; Kalb 1997, Ledgerwood 1997). In the Southeast Asian context, there have been some particularly insightful studies of cultural displays as spaces for the construction and negotiation of urban, national, and local sensibilities (e.g. Acciaioli 1985; Errington 1998; Hitchcock 1997; Kipp 1993; Kreps 1994, 1996, 1998; Lim 1999; Pemberton 1994; Tso and Huang 1995). However, despite the many merits of these studies, most examinations of Southeast Asian museums tend to overlook what actually transpires in them. That is, ethnographic work on viewers’ varied readings of these cultural displays remains limited. In keeping with Handler and Gable’s recent call for more research on the “museum as a social arena in which many people of different backgrounds continuously interact to produce, exchange, and consume messages” (1997: 9); my interest here is in examining these processes in urban Southeast Asian museums.

Originally, I had envisioned exploring and contrasting these dynamics in two distinct museums in two very different Southeast Asian nations: the Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum in the Eastern Indonesian city of Kupang and the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore. However, at the time of my Singapore fieldwork, the Asian Civilizations Museum was only half-complete with the new branch yet to open. Thus, my observations concerning the Singapore arena remain incomplete and partial, given the “partial text” available to me. The bulk of this chapter therefore addresses Indonesia’s Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum, although some exploratory observations about Singapore’s Asian Civilizations Museum are also included. As I aim to illustrate, inscribed in the
landscapes of each of these museums, and in the ways in which
visitors and staff members respond to these spaces, are distinctive
re-articulations and renegotiations of the Indonesian and Singaporean
states’ conceptions of museums, conceptions that vary yet also
overlap.

The Context: Background on Indonesia’s Museums

Before turning to examine the identity politics at play in the Nusa
Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum, a quick tour of the context
for museums in Indonesia is crucial. The notion of the museum in
Indonesia is anchored in the colonial experience. The nation’s oldest
museum is the aforementioned Central Museum of Indonesia in
Jakarta. Established in 1778 by Dutch colonialists, this museum
houses a major collection of Indonesian ethnography, archaeology
and Asian ceramics. As Bambar Soemadio, the former Director of
Indonesia’s Directorate of Museums suggests, this and other colonial
era museums were closely tied to the priorities of the colonial govern-
ment as well as to the local elite: cultural museums and their affiliated
research institutions were mines of information about the cultures of
the colonized, just as science museums were tied to the exploita-
tion of Indonesia’s natural resources (Soemadio 1987a: 2). Perhaps
because of this colonial legacy, Indonesia’s museums generally receive
fewer Indonesian visitors than do their Euro-American counterparts
(Taylor 1994: 73). With the exception of school groups, the
Indonesians frequenting their country’s museums have tended to
be relatively affluent members of the middle and upper classes.

According to Soemadio, since independence the orientation of
Indonesian museums has shifted toward “developing the national
culture and instilling pride in being Indonesian.” Moreover, as the
Head of the Central Museum’s Anthropology section elaborated to
me, the museum has a role as a social instrument for smoothing
over inter-group tensions:

Lately, there have been incidents involving religious intolerance,
church burnings and mutual mistrust between Christians and

Muslims. Here at the Central Museum we hope to do a
religion-focused exhibit, highlighting the similarities between
Christianity and Islam, to help further mutual understanding.

Given the national government’s scripting of the museum as a
text for forging shared religious and national orientations, how do
these themes get digested, articulated or reconceptualized by
museum visitors? The response of the Jakarta junior high school
students and other youth groups I shadowed during a subsequent
week at the Central Museum would suggest that the museum’s
aspirations for building nationalist subjectivities are often confounded,
concocted and reconfigured by viewers. At least at the Central
Museum, the portraits and exhibits of Eastern Indonesian
peoples frequently evoke remarks about primitivity and remoteness
rather than admiring recognition. For instance, the sight of a diorama
of an Asmat (Irian Jaya) village more often than not prompted
exuberant wild-man whoops from the Jakarta school boys I
shadowed, along with snickering comments like, “Where’s the VCR?”

On one occasion, an Eastern Indonesian girl was teasingly asked by
one of her male classmates if this was her village. Comments such
as this, in tandem with the heckling of darker-skinned adolescents
by their lighter hued (presumably Javanese and Sundanese) classmates
about resemblances to the “wild” outer-islanders map portraits,
suggest ways in which the museum texts concerning shared
Indonesian glory are reconfigured by young visitors. Not only does
the museum excursion become a space for demonstrations of urban
sophistication, but it also can be transformed into an arena for
replaying ethnic hierarchies in the urban Jakarta context, albeit jestfully.

One of the implicit ironies of the urban ethnographic museum
emerges in these vignettes: despite its status as a “cathedral of urban
modernity,” a key “text” in this genre of museum is that of the “non-
city” or the anti-urban. It is, after all, peoples who are remote from
the contemporary urban context (either historically or geographically)
who are showcased in the museum’s galleries. Such ethnographic
museums can serve to construct the urban and modern, to the
extent that they focus on depicting its inverse. These glimpses of
how the nation-building project is rewritten by youthful urban museum audiences in the Indonesian capital give rise to questions about the identity dynamics at play in the museums of Indonesia's Eastern cities, cities that are marked as hinterland locales. That is, how does the national script get negotiated and reconfigured at the provincial level?

The Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum in Kupang

Indonesia's museum system grew dramatically during the 1980's and 1990's, hand-in-hand with the intensification of nation-building and tourism-generating enterprises. During this period, centrally-planned regional museums were established in every provincial capital (Taylor 1994: 71). For some local elites, the opening of the Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum in Kupang in 1988 signalled Kupang's arrival as a regional cultural capital. Housing collections and displays of the material culture of Nusa Tenggara Timur Province, the museum also boasts an active research and education agenda and also serves as the arena for Nusa Tenggara Timur cultural performances. Here the emphasis is on cultivating in-visitors a strong sense of provincialized "NTT (Nusa Tenggara Timur) identity." Recently, Anstewell (1993), Picard (1993), and others have noted the Indonesian state's efforts to channel local identities along regional, provincial lines and the Nusa Tenggara Timur museum appears to embody these goals. From the composition of its staff, to its research programmes, displays and cultural performances, the emphasis is on the construction of a pan-provincial identity based on scripting linkages between each of the groups in each of the regencies that make up Nusa Tenggara Timur province.²

The spatial texts of pan-provincial identity proffered by the museum are abundant. Built on a hill in the municipal district, at

²For a fuller discussion of the ways in which the staffing, research orientations and educational programmes of the Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum are designed to foster pan-provincial solidarity, see K. Adams (1999).
In the main display area, visitors encounter a panel on the origin of galaxies followed by a wall devoted to Indonesia's diversity of flora and fauna. An alcove showcasing the megalithic era in each of Nusa Tenggara Timur Province's districts orients visitors to the local region (Fig. 3). This alcove also features drawings of traditional buildings from each of the districts in question as well as descriptions of the traditional governance systems in each of these areas before the arrival of colonialists. A flow chart underscores that while the terms for leaders varied, the overall structure of Nusa Tenggara Timur governance systems was the same throughout the province. Subsequent alcoves showcase various dimensions of local history up to the present. These alcoves include displays devoted to European exploration and trade routes in Nusa Tenggara Timur (enlivened by Portuguese canons, Chinese ceramics and other antique trade goods), old currency and ultimately, portraits of elected officials in contemporary Nusa Tenggara Timur Province. Finally, at the core of the museum the visitor encounters a spectacular visual festival of textiles from each of the districts in the province, as well as displays of traditional woven clothing worn by men and women from the various ethnic groups in the districts comprising the province.

Taken together, the underlying textual and material presentations in the museum are aimed to urge viewers towards a sense of shared provincial identity. In the comparative Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum displays, objects are generally being de-indexed from specific ethnic identities and specific localities and being re-linked with administrative districts and ultimately (it is hoped) with a pan-provincial identity. As the Head of the Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum's Education division underscores when we spoke about these displays, "A key concept here is to emphasize how our province of NTT can be seen as a single location — that is our challenge." In viewing these exhibit cases, one can certainly imagine museum visitors being struck by the continuity between their own material culture and that of their neighbours, and concluding that the provincial category is a "natural" one reflecting a broader shared identity. But how does this play out in actual practice? That is, how does the idealized text get read and processed by visitors?

In my observations of schoolchildren visiting the Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Museum, I was struck by the ways in which this museum text concerning the naturalness of the "NTT" category was simultaneously embraced and rejected. Elementary school children interviewed at the museum uniformly told me there were there to "see NTT culture" (in the singular) or to "draw pictures of NTT culture." Yet when they were observed sprawling on the museum floor, rather than sketching bronze drums or other classic icons of Nusa Tenggara Timur, many of these children were absorbedly drawing imported television superheroes such as the Power Rangers. And when asked to discuss which museum objects they liked best, a number of them replied "Balienee statues," although there were none on display in the museum, as Bali is not a part of Nusa Tenggara Timur Province. While the experience of the museum landscape is clearly prompting some visiting school children and teachers to speak in terms of a singular "NTT culture," there are some wrinkles in this provincial identity-building project. As their sketches and comments attest, these visiting children were reorienting the museum script, shifting it away from the provincial and towards a national and transnational television-derived world.

Likewise, the museum's intended message of "pan-provincial pride" was not always uniformly received by local adult visitors. This was evident during the 1996 Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Cultural Appreciation Week. This event-packed festival was held at the museum in the hope of drawing more Indonesians to the museum, thereby encouraging museum-mindedness and fostering a modern, urban consciousness (see Kreps 1994). One of the components of the Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Cultural Appreciation Week was a conference for Indonesian teachers, high school and university students on the topic of the teaching of local culture (masyarakat lokal). Following a lecture on "The Role of the Museum in Relation to the People," one student observed that museums have a hard time achieving their goals when the young generation is more interested in foreign culture than their own culture. Another high school student followed up by offering his reading of the museum,

Looking around the museum, we've seen that there are few museum publications on NTT culture. Why is this so? Is it
the low quality of research done here, so it isn’t published? Or is it something to do with the quality of our NTT culture? What do you think about cultural development in NTT? Is our culture already advanced? Or is it not yet advanced?

Questions such as these convey hints of the deeply rooted cultural anxieties that colour some Nusa Tenggara Timur visitors’ encounters with a museum and cultural festival scripted to instil regional pride. Attuned to their city’s secondary status in the Indonesian hierarchy of cities and regions, and equally aware of their poverty and remoteness, for some local visitors the museum texts bring these ambivalences to the fore.

The 1996 Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial Culture Appreciation Week featured performance groups from each of the NTT regencies, exposing performers from distant regions of the province to the urban museum. All of the performers I interviewed explored the display areas of the museum during their visit. While impressed with much of what they saw, some dimensions of the texts disturbed some of these visitors. For instance, dancers from the island of Alor were dismayed by the initial lobby display featuring the Alor district, which listed only one language on their island. Deeply proud of their district’s local celebrity as one of the most linguistically diverse islands in the archipelago, these Alorese viewers urged me to convey to the museum curators that this “misinformation” be corrected. Even more troubling to these performers from Alor were the museum’s photographic representations of their district, all of which were drawn from a 1930’s anthropological volume by the American anthropologist Cora Du Bois. Although Du Bois’ volume was entitled *The People of Alor*, her focus was on the Abui people, one of the many linguistic groups on the island. As one dancer told me, “Alor is more than Abui ... and we are not like those old pictures of naked people.” Others quickly chimed in that these photographs needed to be updated. For these rural Alorese visitors, experiences in the urban museum space appeared to be prompting anxieties about being stereotyped by urban visitors as rural, remote and primitive.

Members of a performing entourage from the Amerasi area emerged from the displays not with a fortified sense of Nusa Tenggara Timor provincial identity, but rather with a surge of ethnic embarrassment. One regal Amerasi woman summarized her compatriots’ response to the displays, telling me that the museum’s weaving display had them ashamed, as the quality of their displayed textile was quite poor when compared with that of their neighbours.

“How can we hold our heads high as Amerasi people when every museum visitor sees that our weavings are not good. We’ll have to send the museums better ones when we get home.” It appears that despite the intentions of museum planners and government officials, the museum-scape does not always nourish broader provincial and national identifications. In the cases of the Alorese and Amerasi dancers with whom I spoke, the displays heightened inter-ethnic and inter-regional comparisons and competitions. Still, as Rita Kipp (1994) has suggested, in these sorts of cultural exhibitions the competition is at a defused, aesthetic level, and serves to distract groups from more potentially dangerous themes that unite them (themes such as their province’s economic disadvantages vis à vis Indonesian’s inner island provinces).

Likewise, despite the museum’s goals to display the diversity of cultural traditions in the city and province, certain groups are absent in the exhibition cases. In museum galleries, just as space speaks, so do voids. These voids tell us much about local power relations and politically charged identities. Significantly, despite the large, historic Chinese population in the city of Kupang, Chinese cultural practices and traditions were not represented in the Museum-hosted Nusa Tenggara Timor Provincial Culture Appreciation festivities. Likewise, there are no museum displays concerning the history and cultural traditions of the Chinese in the province (although the archaeological section of the museum displays a few ancient Chinese porcelain trade items).

3 One may speculate that these archaeological objects are so removed in time from the present (and a number of local groups have adopted such vessels as their own, ritual objects) that their connection to contemporary Chinese culture is diffused.
performances and display cases is revealing, particularly in light of recent eruptions of anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia. As the museum cases silently testify, the Nusa Tenggara Timor Chinese community does not figure into the state’s vision of Nusa Tenggara Timor provincial identity. Spotlighting the Chinese in such a display would be spotlighting more profoundly explosive ruptures in the nation-building enterprise.

Some of the more cosmopolitan Chinese residents of Kupang that I interviewed were painfully aware of the significance of their absence from the museum cases. One wealthy fabric manufacturer I spoke with told me she had looked forward to the opening of the museum, which would bring culture to her city. She visited the museum only once shortly after it opened, and when she saw that how little [of her culture] there was in the museum, she opted not to return. For her, the museum was a reminder of the political erasure of Indonesian Chinese. Another prominent Chinese resident of Kupang paged through the programme for the 1996 Nusa Tenggara Timor Provincial Culture Appreciation festivities with dismay. “Why were local Chinese traditions not included in the festival? We are local culture, too.” Noticing that one ethnic group’s festival performance entailed cooking demonstrations, she observed that there should be space for Chinese-Indonesian cooking demonstrations in the festivities, given the fame of Chinese delicacies in Indonesia. She vowed that next year she would approach the museum organizers of the festival to ensure the inclusion of local Chinese culture. As many have observed (e.g. Poucault 1998 [1984]), space is a contested domain of urban social life. In visitors’ responses to the displays and performances at the Nusa Tenggara Timur Provincial museum, we see not only engagement with the nation-building messages, but also contestation. That is, while the Indonesian urban museum displays we have examined aim to foster civic and pan-provincial pride or nation-building, when one views the museum as a social arena in which identity-related messages are produced, exchanged and deliberated, a richer complexity emerges.

The Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore: A Partial, Unfinished Text

The dynamics at play in the urban Indonesian museums discussed above contrast in significant ways with the themes and issues embodied in culturally oriented museums elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Whereas the Indonesian urban museums are largely oriented towards fostering civic and national identities, Singapore’s recently reconceptualized Asian Civilisations Museum suggests more global orientations and concerns. As the Asian Civilisations Museum is an unfinished work, this portion of this essay is exploratory.

The Asian Civilisations Museum is a newcomer to the Singapore landscape. The context for its birth differs dramatically from that of the Indonesian museums chronicled above. Although both the Central Museum in Jakarta and the Asian Civilisations Museum have their roots in colonial collections and both are urban, national, ethnographically-oriented institutions, the raison d’être for the recent emergence of the Asian Civilisations Museum reflects a contrasting set of orientations. The original core of the Asian Civilisations Museum’s ethnographic collections derived from the colonial Singapore Library and Museum, established by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1823. By 1887, a building with formal galleries was completed and, as the Southeast Asian natural history, ethnological and archaeological collections grew, so did the museum’s reputation. (ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information 1988: 160). After Singapore gained independence from the British, the museum was renamed the National Museum in 1960. By the 1980s, the National Museum had developed three units that were each running independent exhibits, and by the mid-1990s the National Museum of Singapore was reconfigured into three distinct museums: the Singapore Art Museum, the Singapore History Museum, and the Asian Civilisations Museum, with the National Heritage Board overseeing all three (Kenson Kwok, 1999, pers. comm.). One of the official missions of the Asian Civilisations Museum is to promote understanding and awareness of the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans (Kenson Kwok 1999, pers. comm.). As the museum’s web page proclaims in its byline, the Asian Civilisations Museum is “where the story of Asia unfolds” (anom. 2001: n.p.).
And, as the museum’s senior curator Lee Chor Lin explains, “We need to educate Singaporeans that many of their ancestors come from Asia. We also need to relate to Southeast Asia because that is where we are” (Yap 1997: 1). As the above quotes hint, however, tracing ancestral roots is only one of the imagined roles for the museum. Another role envisioned for the museum entails projecting Singapore’s identification as a world-class city and nation. The extensive renovations and reconstructions of historic neighbourhoods in the 1980s and 1990s paved the way for Singapore’s promotion of its role in the “New Asia,” as a “vibrant, multi-cultural, sophisticated city-state where tradition and modernity, East and West meet in comfortable companionship” (Singapore Tourism Board 1997: 1). In 1995, the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board and the Ministry of Information and the Arts released a blueprint to make Singapore into a “Global City for the Arts” (Ooi Can Sing 1999: 1). One component of this vision was the Asian Civilizations Museum, which, in tandem with the Singapore Art Museum, would transform Singapore into a “regional heritage center” (ibid.: 1). According to a 1997 statement by Minister of Information and the Arts George Yeo,

The Asian Civilization Museum provides the larger setting for the study of Singapore’s past, present and future in Southeast Asia, in Asia and in the world. Singapore is only Singapore because of its myriad, multi-layered links with different parts of the world. This has been so since the days of old Temasek. (ibid.: 17)

The museum’s mission, then, as conceptualized by government and museum officials, appears to be less exclusively about constructing shared national sensibilities (as was the case with Indonesia), and more about creating a space for re-articulating Singapore’s past, present and future centrality to the region and the world.

This dimension of the museum’s role was further underscored by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s 1999 National Day rally speech. In this speech, the Prime Minister stressed his vision of transforming Singapore into a “world class home” and noted that one component of this was the Information and Arts Ministry’s goal of making Singapore a “Renascence City for the Arts” (Goh 1999: 17). Subsequent newspaper accounts of the three year-in-the-making Renaissance City Report declared that this initiative, and accompanying funding for the arts, would enable Singapore to develop a vibrant arts scene which in turn would help “turn Singapore into one of the top cities in the world to live, work and play in” (Lim 2000: 1). The Sunday Times headline on the Renaissance city theme declared, “Florence, Rome and Singapore” (Tong 1999: 3). A number of newspaper accounts made allusions to the economic and pragmatic overtones of the “Renascence City” campaign (Ng 1999: 1), prompting us to underscore that urban museums and arts programmes enrich the local environment in more than aesthetic ways: Just as the cathedral did for European cities of the past, contemporary urban museums signal to the world that a particular city has “arrived” as a suitable locale for international businesses, banks, embassies and tourists. Given the role of museums in Singapore’s Global City for the Arts campaign as well as in the Renaissance City initiative, it appears that the Asian Civilizations Museum is as much a symbol for the external world as it is for the internal world of Singapore.

The first wing of the Asian Civilizations Museum opened in April 1997 (Fig. 4). Its permanent displays focus more heavily on Chinese civilization, as noted by museum officials. The second wing, which will be housed in the old Parliament House and the Empress Place Building, is to open in 2001. The ethnographic galleries in this wing will address Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. Although some of the museum’s temporary exhibits have focused on products from specific Asian cultures (e.g. “Chinese Snuff Bottles”), a number of the changing exhibitions have been thematic and cross-cutting, profiling continuities and convergences. The museum’s opening exhibit, for instance, profiled the Ramayana epic and its representation in India and other parts of Asia. Subsequent
exhibits have addressed "Calendars and Time in Asia," and "The Monkey as God and Hero in China, India and Southeast Asia." In some of the temporary display cases, then, one can discern some threads of the nation-building themes found in the Indonesian museums. The museum's director, Dr. Kenson Kwok, notes that while this occurs, it is not central to the Asian Civilisations Museum: rather, it is the Singapore History Museum that has the most overt goal of nation-building (1999 pers. comm.).

The museum's location in the old Tao Nan Primary School provides an additional, potentially powerful reading for the museum by many of its Singaporean visitors. As the Museum's booklet Collecting Memories underscores, "This school's history has been a microcosm of the development of Chinese education in Singapore since the turn of the twentieth century" (Foo 1997: 11). Whereas the colonial government provided cost-free elementary Malay education, Chinese language education was left to the Chinese community. The Tao Nan Primary School was a key site in this enterprise, as it was established to introduce Chinese education and cultural values to Singaporean Chinese. As the president of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan suggests, in its new guise as the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Tao Nan School "continue(s) to serve its original objective — namely, to cultivate a better understanding of Asian [author's emphasis] culture and values among Singaporeans" (Foo 1997: 7). Again, then, the museum seems to be an aspiring text for underscoring Singapore's placement in the broader Asian region, a dynamic not seen in the Indonesian museums examined earlier.

But how do visitors engage with, negotiate, or re-articulate the texts presented to them in the Asian Civilisations Museum? My experiences in and around the portion of the museum in the Tao Nan Primary School offer some hints of how future visitors may engage with the museum and its displays. Even before I arrived at the museum for my first visit, I had a glimpse of a non-visitor's perspective. Riding a taxi to the museum, I began conversing with the driver about his museum experiences. The driver, a middle-aged male Singaporean, told me he had only been to the Singapore History Museum on a free admission day with his children. He had not entered any of the other museums in Singapore. As he told me, only half in jest, "There are too many museums in Singapore." On subsequent visits to the museum, I shadowed junior high school student groups as they made their way through the museum in small groups, with notebooks in hand jotting answers to class assignments. Their responses were as varied as their jottings: a pair of young girls I spoke with expressed their interest in the Chinese ceramics displayed upstairs, commenting on the glaze colors and noting that some would make nice lipstick shades. Another young working woman visiting the museum on a Saturday with a female friend told me she had come to see the temporary exhibit on Asian jewellery. When I interviewed her about her impressions of this temporary exhibit, she commented not on Asian glory, but on the value of all the glittering gold in the display. While some visitors expressed their appreciation of how much of Asia was to be found in Singapore, others left the museum with their own unique re-articulations of the intended museum messages. These re-articulations appeared to be tied to their identities, ages, economic statuses and ethnicities. However, the question of how visitors engage with the texts and subtexts offered by the Asian Civilisations Museum remains to be fully and systematically explored, once the museum is complete.

Reflections
In this essay I have tried to show how the urban museum can be constructed as an instrument for constructing urban, provincial, national, regional and even global identities. I have also tried to convey a sense of the complex and contradictory nature of identity negotiation in urban Southeast Asian museums. The Jakarta students' ambivalent responses to the portrait gallery in the Central Museum, the sketches of Power Rangers (rather than bronze drums) drawn by Kapang children visiting the Nusa Tenggara Timor Provincial Museum, and the Singaporean teenagers' lipstick colour responses to the ceramics in the Asian Civilisations Museum each suggest some of the negotiation of meanings and identities that takes place with the public spaces of urban museums in Southeast Asia. While many
visitors do emerge from these ethnographic museums with new perspectives on their own personal identities and places in the world, practising ethnography in museum galleries offers us a richer understanding of these complex arenas.

To close, let us return to the opening image of the museum as a cathedral of urban modernity. These museum snapshots suggest that, like cathedrals, museums are not only markers of a metropolitan landscape, they are also sites for disseminating authoritative scripts for viewing the world. As the Indonesian cases suggest, however, scripts (and scripture, as well), are not always read without reinterpretation and revision. Museum visitors re-articulate and renegotiate museums to underscore their own notions of identity and their own sensibilities about local hierarchies.

References


Fig. 1. Display orienting visitors to the peoples of Indonesia in the Central Museum in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Fig. 2. Entry gateway to the Nusa Tenggara Timor Provincial Museum in Kupang, Indonesia, fringed by decorations incorporating the textile motifs of different Nusa Tenggara Timor Province groups.
Fig. 3. Alcove display comparing traditional megalithic structures from various provincial districts in the Nusa Tenggara Timor Provincial Museum.

Fig. 4. The Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore.