

The National Museum of the American Indian

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After a research visit to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, I decided to visit another Smithsonian museum: the National Museum of the American Indian. Ever since I saw the building works in progress in 2003, I tried to keep updated on what was happening in the museum. It was a unique opportunity for me to see the museum now that it had been open for a little over two years.

Architecturally, the museum building built in hand-cut Minnesota goldstone, with its curvilinear forms and its surrounding garden which includes one hundred and fifty native species contrasts with the other stark white, rectangular buildings on the National Mall and other parts of the city. The visitor enters from the east – the other Smithsonian Museums have their entrances situated on the Mall side or one of its parallel running avenues – , goes through the now ubiquitous bag search routine, and is welcomed into the circular Potomac area, the meeting point for guided tours, arts and craft markets and demonstrations. This area spans the four levels of the museum and is closed off by a step-dome on which daylight, caught by prisms in one of the windows, is reflected. The ground (first) floor is dedicated to the Museum's Mitsitam café, the small Chesapeake museum store and the Rasmuson theatre, while the second floor holds the large Roanoke museum shop and an exhibition entitled 'Return to a native place' which focuses on the native peoples of Washington D.C.'s local Chesapeake region. The third and fourth floors have the exhibition spaces which are organised thematically into our lives, temporary exhibition space (third floor), our universes, our peoples and the Lelawi theatre (fourth floor). In each section, respectively looking at contemporary native life, native beliefs and native history the voices of indigenous curators

representing groups from North, Central and South America are heard. The third and fourth floors are also home to object-rich cases where part of the museum's vast collection is presented and where visitors can have a self-guided experience through the use of interactive screens. The museum argues that its aim is to give visitors the opportunity to listen to the stories of people that are geographically and culturally related, not taking into account political boundaries. However, it seems to me that existing political boundaries were the major drive force to include the Hawaiian Islands and to exclude Greenland from representation in the museum.

Hawaii which became the fiftieth state of the United States of America in 1959 is represented – only to a limited extent I must admit – by a photo in the 'our lives' section and an outrigger canoe outside the main theatre on the third floor. The Hawaiian indigenous people would traditionally be categorised as Polynesians, sharing cultural and linguistic traits with their other Polynesian neighbours. It has been argued that the concept of Polynesia first used in its current meaning in 1831 by Jules Sebastien Dumont d'Urville is still valid. It would thus seem that the main reason to include Hawaii, is its political affiliation with the United States in whose capital this museum of the American Indian is based.

Greenlandic Inuit have many linguistic and cultural affinities with the arctic peoples of North America. Even geographically Greenland belongs to the continent of North America. However, Greenland's political affiliation with Denmark - as a former colony and since 1979 as an autonomous part of Denmark – seems to have been reason enough not to be one of the museum's indigenous voices. I would be interested to know how indigenous Hawaiians feel about being included into the National Museum of the Native American Indian and what Greenlandic Inuit feel about being excluded. The answer to this question depends in part on the type of political and cultural relations Inuit from Greenland uphold with those from Canada and Alaska and consequently to what extent Greenlandic Inuit feel they have affinities with the other indigenous peoples of the American continent.

Another thing that struck me when visiting the museum was the issue of identity which is addressed both in the exhibits as in the guided tours: Who is an 'American Indian?' One of the guides who introduced herself as a Navaho woman from a water clan showed us, almost proudly, a copy of her husband's certificate proving he was a full blood Navaho which is expressed in blood quarters. Native American Indians living in reservations need these certificates if they want to benefit from the 18th and 19th century based peace agreements which promise them free healthcare and education in return for staying on their reservation land. Our guide however was only half-blood (2/4) Navaho and half-blood south Ute, which made her and her husband's children $\frac{3}{4}$ Navaho. I was utterly surprised to see that the American Federal government upholds principles practised by nineteenth-century physical anthropologists that measured craniums and looked at other physical characteristics to determine the race and thus the step on the evolutionary scale people had taken. We all know the ravages this theory made during the Nazi regime in Europe and we also know from the documents visitors to the USA have to fill out, how clearly the American Federal Government refuses entry to the territory to people with a Nazi past. Hence my surprise at the official use of those physical anthropologists' theories! My experience with Maori people in New Zealand and England, has showed that more flexible approaches exist which are

based on self-determination: upholding and living according to the cultural values of your communities and having the support of your community elders is a major determining factor of belonging to that particular community. The concept of self-determination is actually practiced internationally. Indeed, the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples written by the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) upholds the principle of self-determination as one of the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples.

The fact that the guide did not seem to see any problem with this, struck me as perhaps a consequence of these agreements where people who fit the model, gain health and educational benefits. Could it be that even though these laws may not reflect the determining facts for belonging to a nation, the fixing on paper of what belonging to a nation consists of, becomes a point of reference and ultimately something everyone aspires to?