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Re-presenting the religious: nation, community and identity in museums[1]

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This paper examines the roles that museums play as 'unofficially sacred' places, underscoring or challenging the religious life of a people and 'nation'. It focuses on three key questions: (1) Do sub-national and transnational religious formations pose a challenge to or present opportunities for nation-building strategies, and what part do museums play in this struggle? (2) In what ways do re-presentations of religion in museums contest or reinforce religious community and identity? and (3) What challenges do museum displays pose to the understanding of religious meanings? This paper explores these three key questions about the intersection of religion with politics and ideologies, social relations, and cultural interpretations and transformations using an indepth case study of an exhibition on the Jewish community in Singapore.

Key words: religion, nation, community, identity, museums, Jews, Singapore.

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The sacred and secular meanings of museums

Museums are institutional spaces infused with multiple meanings. For some, museums are emblems of virtue, good taste and civilized society (Duncan, 1991). These are the admirers who look to museums as arbiters of 'high class' taste (Riegel, 1996:87), rendering them gatekeepers of cultural value. For others, museums are authoritative and legitimizing spaces, 'imposing order' and 'mapping boundaries' through categorization and classification (MacDonald, 1996:7). They are thus spaces of intellectualization, entailing research and education, and are respected as sources of 'objective', reliable information (Riegel, 1996:87). As Da Breo (1990:104) put it, museums contain 'a history lesson at a glance, a confirmation of actual life as documented and preserved for our value-free absorption.' For yet others, museums are symbols of community (MacDonald, 1996:6), and embody national and 'sub-national' identities, not least through their role in social remembering (Prosler, 1996, Urry, 1996). All of these embody secular meanings, rendering museums secular space.

However, museums can also be imputed with religious meaning in at least three ways. First, as pilgrimage destinations, museums are sites of ritual (Duncan, 1991; O'Neill, 1996). They take on some of the roles the church used to play. Whereas children were taken to a cathedral to view its stone carvings, stained glasses, frescos or mosaics for instruction in life's mysteries, the museum fulfils that role today (O'Neill, 1996:191). Indeed, the museum visitor has been constructed as the 'tourist pilgrim' (Horne, 1984). Museum goers are like visitors to a temple shrine, bringing with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity. They follow a route through a programmed narrative. Not unlike traditional ritual sites, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as special, reserved for a particular kind of contemplation and learning experience and demanding a special quality of attention – what Victor Turner called 'liminality' in the context of pilgrimage sites (Duncan, 1991:91).

Second, within the museum, the experience has been described as akin to religious devotion and veneration. O'Neill (1996) argues that the veneration of religious

relics has been replaced in secular society by the veneration of art. This in itself is viewed as a religion, the religion of high art, the haloed ground of cultural elites. The attitudes towards such art are the attitudes characteristic of mystical religion (Wolterstorff, 1996). In this sense, O'Neill (1996) makes the point that art museums maintain the holiness of paintings as authentic relics, and their own sanctity as cathedrals. The message of modernity and secularization is that 'religion is a thing of the past, but if there is anything sacred in society it is art' (O'Neill, 1996:191).

Third, museums are sometimes implicated in 'story-telling' about religions and religious groups, and are sometimes the site of display of religious art and artifacts. O'Neill (1996:190) argues that this is infrequent, for there has been a secularization of museums. Few general museums include a section on religion, which he attributes to the triumph of rationality and secularization in society. However, there remain abundant examples of special displays, and permanent and traveling exhibitions, to suggest that O'Neill was unnecessarily pessimistic (for example, see http://www.museumstuff.com/museums/types/religion/index2.html).

Given the variety of re-presentations of religion and religious communities in museums, several significant questions emerge. For example, what roles do museums play as 'unofficially sacred' places, underscoring or challenging the religious life of a people and 'nation'? Do sub-national and transnational religious formations pose a challenge to or present opportunities for nation-building strategies (a question about politics and ideologies), and what part do museums play in this struggle? In what ways do re-presentations of religion in museums feed into contestations or reinforcements of religious community and identity (a question about social relations)? What challenges do these displays pose to the understanding of religious meanings (a question about cultural interpretations and transformations)? This paper explores these questions using an indepth case study of an exhibition on the Jewish community in Singapore. Before analyzing the empirical case, I will turn attention first to some theoretical discourses about the study of museums by way of conceptual context.

Approaching the study of museums

Museums may be examined as social and cultural sites, as well as sites of power relations. In the former approach, the concern is with: what stories are told; what devices and technologies are employed to tell the stories; and the relationship of those stories to other sites (MacDonald, 1996:3). This is the stuff of museum studies and museology. In the latter approach, the questions are about power and ideology: whose knowledge and identity is (re)presented, by whom and how; who is appropriating what symbols of status and community; and what kinds of struggles for ownership are apparent in the re-presentational process? In this paper, my concern is less with the former than it is with the latter.

The crux of the latter approach hinges on the view that, in fulfilling its roles of display and re-presentation, museums also embody less obvious political and ideological tasks (Duncan, 1991:90). Museums represent the identity, interest and ideology of certain social groups. For example, when recontexualized as art history, the luxury of princes becomes constructed as the spiritual heritage of a nation (Duncan, 1991:95). Another case in point is when the lives of pioneer settlers are distilled in museum art and become cast as artifacts and displays. Their sufferings then become constructed as the heroic cradle of a 'nation'. In this sense, museum exhibitions can become ideological tools to serve a nation-building agenda.

To control a museum therefore means to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths (Duncan, 1991:103). In other words, power resides with those re-presenting the subject, including museum directors, heritage boards, curators and the like. They decide what is to be re-presented and how. This view is ameliorated only by a sense that this power is not always consciously effected, but sometimes subconsciously or unconsciously realized, since it is inevitable that every museum exhibition 'draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it' (Karp and Lavine, 1991:1).

While museums may be criticized for the fact that they 'control, interpret and impose classifications onto other peoples' histories' (Riegel, 1996: 89) through the power they wield, it is critical to remember a cautionary counter-position. Museums are not 'unproblematic reflections of dominant ideological interests' (Macdonald, 1996:5). They only appear so when we adopt a broadly semiotic approach which 'seeks to analyse … museum displays in order to reveal the cultural assumptions and political motivations that they may contain.' The assumption in such an approach is that those involved in creating exhibitions are conscious manipulators, and the public is a passive and unitary consumer. Yet, it ignores the often competing agendas involved in exhibition-making, the 'messiness' of the process itself and the interpretive agency of visitors (Macdonald, 1996:6). From the process of production to consumption, contestations can and do occur, and can come from all manner of groups, including the powerful.

However, Macdonald (1996:10) points out that just because exhibitions are contestable does not mean they are always contested. Further, contestations may not be overt challenges but take the form of alternative readings by visitors (see Yeoh and Kong, 1994; and Kong and Yeoh, 1997, on alternative readings as contestations). When alternative readings emerge, they are sometimes the outcome of visitors contextualizing museums in their own lives, reflecting their own positionality, be it in class, race or other social terms (see, for example, Fyfe, 1996; and Fyfe and Ross, 1996). This paper uses these ideas about the political and ideological roles of museums, as well as their community construction and contestation capacity to frame the empirical material, to which I now turn.

'Settling in: Jewish life and history in Singapore'

Between November 1999 and April 2000, an exhibition titled 'Settling in: Jewish life and history in Singapore' was held at the Singapore History Museum (SHM), one of three museums that make up the National Heritage Board.[2] The museum's mission is 'to explore and to enhance the national identity of Singapore by preserving, presenting, and interpreting the nation's history and material culture in the context of its multi-cultural origins' (NHB, 14 January 2003). In recognition of Singapore's historical links with the

rest of Asia, the Singapore History Museum also stages exhibitions that trace the roots of Singaporeans to their homelands. As part of the National Heritage Board, SHM is also concerned with education, and runs an active school membership programme, which provides free admission to students and guided tours on request. Perhaps more so than the other two museums, SHM is engaged in developing exhibitions, public programmes and educational material that complements the national curriculum (NHB, 14 Jan 2003). Its national remit is clear, and to that extent, it is viewed by its counterpart museums as directly obliged to beat the same ideological drums as the state (personal interview, curator, ACM, 27 Dec 2001).

The Jews are a very small minority in Singapore, a minute component even of the 'O' in the 'CMIO' (Chinese/Malay/Indian/Others) official categories imposed on the population. The majority of Jews who migrated to Singapore in the 19th century was of Baghdadi origin and some came to Singapore via India. These orthodox Sephardic Jews were mainly engaged in trading. The earliest town plan (1826) in Singapore showed designated space for the Jews around Synagogue Street, acknowledgement of their presence as a distinctive group. The Jewish population grew with migrations from Germany, Russia, Egypt and Palestine in the 1860s and beyond, and by the 1920s, there were approximately 2,500 Jews living in Singapore, a period hailed the 'Golden Years' before World War Two. During the Japanese Occupation (1942 to 1945), some left for England and India; others were interned. After the war, many migrated to Australia (especially Sydney), US (especially Los Angeles) and Israel (particularly with its independence in 1948). In 1990, the official census showed 18 local Jewish families with 197 members. In 1999, the record showed 220 local Jews belonging to the pioneering Jewish settlers in Singapore, with another 70 Israeli families working there, and unaccounted numbers of expatriate Jews (from Australia, Canada, the UK, and US). While small, the Jewish community has contributed prominently to Singapore life in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most well-known was David Marshall, a Jew of Iraqi descent, who led the United Labour Front to victory in Singapore's first election after self-government in 1955 and became Singapore's first Chief Minister.

The exhibition comprises six sections. The first, 'Who is a Jew?', explains Jewish ancestry and history, with a brief account of the creation of Adam, up to the Diaspora. The second, 'Growing up Jewish', focuses on how Judaism permeates all aspects of life, including diet, dress, behaviour and thoughts. The third section 'Life of worship' deals with various aspects of Jewish worship, and highlight the two synagogues in Singapore. The fourth section 'Pioneering trades, families and communal life', illustrates the contributions of early Jewish settlers in Singapore. This is followed by a fifth, on 'Jewish internment experience', focusing on how the Jewish interns during the Japanese Occupation tried to observe their religious obligations. Finally, the last section focuses on 'Jewish hopes and dreams', conveyed through Singapore Jewish children's arts and crafts.

Museums and the political: religion in the construction of the 'nation'

The Jewish exhibition at SHM was an idea mooted by the then Minister for Information and the Arts, Brigadier-General George Yeo. Curators involved[3] did not have a clear sense of the impetus for the project, and could only inform that they had been asked by their Director to stage the exhibition. From the start, therefore, the politicization of the exhibition was real, even if it was not readily apparent. Beyond the political prompt to cultural activity, however, the ideological intent of constructing 'nation' through the SHM was certainly evident in a number of observable ways. In the main, through this exhibition, the museum engaged with issues of multiculturalism and multireligiosity in the construction of a Singapore 'nation', and particularly with the place of minorities in it. Further, in its 'explor(ation) and enhance(ment) (of) the national identity of Singapore', the exhibition on the Jewish encapsulated the need to balance religious sensitivities in a multireligious society, and between the secular state of Singapore and its Islamic neighbours.

Minorities and multiculturalism

Beyond the political encouragement to stage an exhibition on the Jews, SHM's internal rationale for such a show was anchored in its 'intention to feature the minority groups in Singapore' (personal interview, curator, 20 Jan 2000), in celebration of an ideology of multiculturalism. From this perspective, this state museum's articulated mission was to contribute to continued efforts at constructing a Singapore national identity, built on a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual, and not least, multireligious ideology (see Kong and Yeoh, 2003). Such an ideology was anchored in a belief in eliminating division by race, religion or language, in forging mutual understanding and increased inter-racial interaction among the young, and in eliminating discrimination against minorities (Chiew 1990,13). The Jewish exhibition targeted some of these desired goals in spotlighting, and thus enabling understanding of a minority group. It gave space to minorities and showed 'care for the(ir) interests' (Article 152(1), Constitution).

This ideological platform of the museum is not an isolated one, and has to be contextualised within a polity which explicitly and constitutionally acknowledges and emphasizes equality and the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth, and which formally acknowledges freedom of religion (Articles 12 and 15, Constitution of the Republic of Singapore). Constitutionally, there is also provision for the Government 'constantly to care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore' (Article 152(1), Constitution of the Republic of Singapore), with provisions for a Presidential Council of Minority Rights to 'consider and report on such matters affecting persons of any racial or religious community in Singapore as may be referred to the Council by Parliament or the Government' (Article 76(1), Constitution of the Republic of Singapore). SHM's efforts are thus situated in this context.

Even as instrument to the state in reinforcing and legitimizing multiculturalism and multireligiosity, SHM encountered stresses in the process, albeit achieving multiple ideological successes. One of the key stresses was the level of suspicion within the

minority population that was being spotlighted. This was apparent to the curators involved and experienced by the Jewish individuals whom the curators approached for help. One curator commented on the cautionary response of many Jews approached to contribute their views, experiences, memories and artifacts:

> They were very suspicious at first. They only began to really open up to us when they saw the exhibition. They were shocked that it was given such a big gallery space (even though we had already told them so earlier). … Initially, they were wary of the exhibition, but after seeing it, I got several calls of their willingness to lend more artifacts to the exhibition.

Perhaps it is to be expected that an acutely minority community within a national framework will express suspicion at the attention it is bestowed, and wonder at the coincidence of media attention[4]. This is ever more so with a group like the Jews, who have historically faced persecution in many societies. A member of the community sought to explain this wary approach while helping to facilitate the work of the curators:

> Very often, people in all circumstances are very chary of speaking to a stranger about their struggles and their poverty in their own family history. [They will ask:] What are they doing this for? Are they doing this to run us down? Now you have to remember that while Jews in Singapore have never been persecuted as Jews, all Jewish people carry in themselves the fact that Jews have been persecuted, massacred, exterminated for reasons that, I think, to any Jewish person seem very, very embittering. Not only embittering, it makes them easily defensive (Sarah, personal interview, 28 Apr 2000).

Quite apart from the Jewish history of persecution, Sarah also sought to explain the suspicion in terms of a 'minority mentality', an unwillingness to be the object/subject of curious gazing:

> People don't like to be considered quaint, you know. I don't know if in your work if you had thought of this: ‘Ha! Ha! What a quaint idea! Oh! You mean, how very odd.’

Beyond the suspicions and wariness, however, the museum’s exhibition helped to win some of the ideological ground for this minority group. Several interviewees expressed appreciation and applauded the museum’s, and by extension, the state’s willingness, to acknowledge their contributions to the ‘nation’ via the exhibition, as illustrated below:

> I think people are very happy, as far as I can judge, that anybody bothered to do something about the Singapore Jewish community, which nobody has ever really bothered about as having any importance in Singapore at all. I'm speaking in an exaggerated way, but yes, it's good that a community that's very small should be honoured, in the sense that attention is paid to it (Sarah, personal interview, 28 Apr 2000).

> The truth of the matter is: it is a first in Singapore. We are not a major Jewish center like in New York, Paris or Tel Aviv. … I think there was a tremendous response to it. People in the Jewish community were very happy. It gave a lot of pride to the community. From a larger perspective, everyone was very pleased that there was something like this happening in Singapore. It’s really a first … maybe a first in Asia to have an exhibition in a museum (Malchi, personal interview, 1 Jun 2000).

While there were some issues of contention (see section on community below), Abigail similarly expressed the view that ‘I think it was nice that there was even an exhibition on the Jews’ (telephone interview, 16 May 2000).

The state, therefore, gained much capital, and at times, more than warranted, for example, when the exhibition was read as one of a series of efforts to acknowledge the minorities in Singapore:

> I think that the small communities have contributed a great deal of Singapore which until fairly recently has received very little attention … For instance I am very glad that the Eurasian community now seems to be recognised as a community in that there is now a self-help association not only for Indians and Chinese and Malays but also now for Eurasians. … And for instance there's been Eurasian dances as part of the national parade a few years ago for the first time. Now that's good. Because Eurasians are just as much Singaporeans as Chinese. And so are local Jews. Local Jewish people are just as much Singaporeans as Chinese and everyone else (Sarah, personal interview, 28 April 2000).

The over-reading of state efforts is evident in that the state-prompted self-help associations for Indians, Chinese and Malays are in fact not replicated for the Eurasians, or any other minority group.

While appreciation was evident, Jewish visitors interviewed also made the case that the state's attention and acknowledgement of the minorities was in fact overdue. Revealing latent interpretations of multiculturalism and multireligiosity as absolute equality of treatment, Frieda argued that the exhibition deserved gallery space:

> I feel it's about time the rest of Singapore knows a little more about what the Jews do. That's very important. I mean every nationality has had an exhibition and I think it's only right that the Jews are featured too (personal interview, 10 May 2000).

The potential ideological purchase of a state that is seen to recognize the presence of a minority group through an exhibition such as that at a state museum is immense. After the initial suspicion, the Jewish community 'loved it. I think they viewed it as the

state's recognition of their presence and contributions …. They were happy to be 'recognized'' (personal interview, curator, 20 Jan 2000). In fact, SHM did not only portray a multicultural 'nation' through its exhibition, it gained ideological ground in securing good faith and gaining trust, contributing to the very construction of the 'nation' and its preferred identity. In this sense, the Jewish exhibition was not only the outcome of a particular social and ideological formation (multiculturalism), it was a medium through which such a formation was re-imagined, recreated and reinforced.

Religious sensitivities and regional susceptibilities

Part of the construction of a 'nation' is about maintaining an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983), one in which there is a 'deep horizontal comradeship' even if members of that community are unlikely ever to meet one another. The maintenance of this comradeship requires that inter-group sensitivities and points of tension are managed and soothed away. In the context of race and religion in Singapore, the state has been particularly concerned to promote inter-racial and inter-religious group harmony, the most recent efforts encapsulated in the introduction of Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCC) and Harmony Circles (IRHC),[5] and the Code on Religious Harmony,[6] which reinforce the work of the 1990 Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act[7] and the Presidential Council on Religious Harmony[8].

Alert to potential inter-religious and inter-racial sensitivites, SHM's stance in managing the Jewish exhibition with respect to both intra-state as well as inter-state relations might best be described as cautious. Internally, there was concern about how the majority of Singapore's Malay population who are Muslims would respond to an exhibition on the Jews. Externally, there was concern about how neighbouring Malaysia, again dominantly Muslim, would react, especially given a history of tensions.[9] As one curator explained:

> First, we were aware that as an exhibition done by a government institution, we had to be careful that we did not say or write anything that

> is politically incorrect. There was much concern about racial and religious sensitivity, that is, possible reactions of the Malay community and the political situation in Malaysia. The museum leadership was most concerned about this. The thinking seemed to have been: 'lay off anything that might be sensitive' (personal interview, curator, 20 Jan 2000).

At the intra-state level, SHM leadership expressed a preference that portrayal of racial and religious interactions should be avoided, lest it ignited sensitivities. The Holocaust was off-limits, and mention of local sensitivities was also to be avoided. While it is possible to cite anecdotal evidence of anti-Semitism and other kinds of racial and religious tensions in Singapore,[10] and then to address the issues from there, what the exhibition did was to avoid the issues altogether. While this purposeful lack of engagement with and interrogation of issues about state-minority or majority-minority relations in multicultural, multireligious Singapore seemed to go by unnoticed, one Jewish visitor to the exhibition, commented on its absence, and ruminated on some of the issues that perhaps confront Jewish youth in Singapore. She observed that much attention had been given in the exhibition to the wealthy Jews in Singapore, but

> … more could have been researched on Jewish youth (as differentiated from children - this part was well done) and the social difficulties faced by young Jewish adults in Singapore, for example, the threat of assimilation with other cultures, and its level of acceptance among the community (Marsha, personal interview, 14 May 2000).

In avoiding the issues, the museum may have relinquished an opportunity to highlight similarities among different racial and religious groups and histories of harmonious interactions between the Jews and other racial and religious groups. This account by one of the curators explicates the position taken (personal interview, 2 Feb 2000):

> Interesting accounts by Jews of how they grew up playing with their Chinese neighbours and how local Jews consider themselves to have many similar cultural practices as the Chinese were not touched on at all. I think this happened because he [the Director] did not want us to touch on anything racial. Hence, we omitted any mention of who the Jews interacted with etc. Curators exercised much self-censorship in this regard. In the end, the exhibition focused very much on what is Jewishness, but not how Jews functioned as a social group. In this sense, the presentation of Jews was very static and plain. The exhibition merely lists characteristics of Jewishness in the areas of genealogy and history (that is, in the 'Who is a Jew?' section) and religion (in the 'Growing up Jewish' and 'Life of Worship' sections).

At the inter-state level, a similar concern about the reactions, particularly of Malaysia, was evident. Museum leadership expressed concern about featuring the star of David prominently on posters and pamphlets advertising the exhibition. Given its close symbolic connection with the Zionist movement and its appearance on the Israeli state flag, questions were asked as to whether it was necessary and not too provocative. In the end, it was agreed that it was a well-known symbol of Judaism and deserved to remain. But to avoid the potentially sensitive political issues, and the dark experience of Jews in other parts of the world, the exhibition focused resolutely on Jews in Singapore, adopting a cautiously circumscribed content. Care was also taken to portray a more 'cheerful and hopeful' tone, achieved via exhibition design and display. As a curator explained:

> We used exhibition lighting, colour coordination etc. Basically we didn't want a serious front to the exhibition. This we thought would lighten the sensitive mood that some visitors might have. So the exhibition is very colourful and not too dark, with bright turquoise, bright orange and lemon green … The 'Growing up Jewish' section has a school room setting; the 'Jewish Dietary Laws' section is framed in the layout of a kitchen etc. We also wanted to end on an upbeat note, so the 'Jewish Hopes and Dreams'

section made use of loveable Jewish children and captured their aspirations (personal interview, 20 January 2000).

Religion, museums and the construction of 'nation'

Prosler (1996) argues that museums can be symbols of national identity, cohesion and unity through reinterpreting the nation. A significant aspect of Singapore's constructed national identity is premised on the ideology of multiculturalism and its related '3 Ms', including multireligiosity, and a commitment to the welfare and interests of all groups, including minority groups. In its production of the Jewish exhibition, SHM, as a state museum (and arguably, *the* state museum), exemplifies this ideological role of museums. It remembers the minority community, and in so doing, legitimizes its presence and contributions to the 'nation'. At the same time, while remembering, its selective recollection is also ideologically and politically motivated, reflecting the museum's situation in a wider socio-political and geo-political context. Its focus on the 'internal' aspects of the religion - its rites and rituals, of circumcision, food taboos, marriage ceremonies, for example – takes it away from the 'external' aspects of the religion – its relations with other religions, and its situation within a social and political geographical reality.

Museums and the social: religious community constructions

Museums can have a totalizing and essentializing effect, because they are 'capable, through their strategies of display, of summing up and collapsing together different places into a particular 'world-view'' (Prosler, 1996). By extension, in portraying a particular community, museums can 'sum up' and 'collapse' differences, re-presenting a community as devoid of internal tensions, and one characterized by homogeneous, or at least, consensual traits, experiences and views. Yet, stresses and conflicts are realities that characterize communities, and they can afflict the ways in which exhibitions are formed, negotiated, or challenged. Such contestations can emerge between the curators ('cultural experts') and the religious community ('insiders') concerned, as to the way in which a community is re-presented. They can also surface

among different factions of the community, with divergent views of what the community represents, who its heroes are, and who constitutes insiders as against outsiders. Exhibitions, however, can also offer opportunities for an imagined community to find public visual representation, thus concretizing the entity in authoritative space. They may also make it possible for members of the community to participate in the making of the exhibition, thus reaffirming membership of the community.

Constructing community

The Jewish exhibition illustrated the ways in which members of the community were frequently at work (re)constructing and (re)affirming their membership. It also illustrated the way in which such a community saw itself as part of a larger Jewish diasporic community, and sought to reflect this situation in the exhibition. Chiefly, (re)affirmation was sought through inserting voices from the community in the preparation for the exhibition, in asserting the importance of local community contributions of Judaica, and in historicizing and 'placing' or grounding the local community, while simultaneously linking it to the international community of Jews.

The desire to participate in its public (re)presentation was explicitly articulated by one interviewee whom the curators approached for assistance:

> I suggested to them [the curators] who they should approach for background information. Mr Jacob Ballas, Mr Frank Benjamin, Mrs Felice Isaacs, people who have been all their lives involved in the affairs of the community were obviously people who had to be encouraged to co-operate, to make themselves available. You see, this was an important suggestion from the point of view of providing the community's own knowledge of its role in both past and present Singapore.

Certainly, this was a view shared by the curator, who confirmed that she had ‘worked closely with the Jewish community to decide what to feature’ (personal interview, 20 Jan 2000).

Despite the curator’s perceived involvement of the community, members did not all feel included in a process they saw to be rightfully theirs. Abigail, who works for the Jewish Welfare Board, revealed this:

> I know that the museum actually loaned quite a bit of the exhibits from Amsterdam when they could have approached the local Jews to contribute our own items. Some other members in the community actually came to me at the Board and complained about this… it’s not like they were unwilling to lend out their personal heirlooms, it’s just that they weren’t approached. And I agree with them that they should have put up more exhibits from local contributor. I mean that would add a more personal touch as compared to if you see something that says ‘on loan from Amsterdam’ (personal interview, 25 May 2000).

Echoes of this sense of exclusion from the process were also heard amongst other interviewees from the Jewish community:

> After the exhibition was finished, people started asking: ‘Oh why didn’t you ask for my help? I could have given you some things.’ So maybe if we ever do another exhibition, we could send out a circular to the community explaining what is happening and ask if they would want to contribute anything (Abigail, personal interview, 25 May 2000).

What ameliorated the sense of exclusion was the fact that the curator was willing to consider additions during the course of the five-month exhibition. Thus, Abigail disclosed the receptivity and enthusiasm of members of the community when it learnt that

> The exhibition was a growing and open one in that throughout the exhibition, when someone visited and felt that they could lend some artifacts or provide some information, that option remained possible.

Jewish interviewees also sought to historicize and ground their community in Singapore as a way of emphasizing their unique local identity. This, they felt, was not sufficiently achieved in the exhibition, and through their suggestions for future improvements (should the opportunity arise again), they expressed their desire to see the historical depth of their experience in Singapore captured. This 'depth' which they sought after revealed an inclination for details of the 'historical lives of their ancestors' (Malki, personal interview, 29 April 2000), as well as the places that were significant to them (Sarah, personal interview, 28 April 2000).

Even while the effort to construct, reinforce and reaffirm local community was obvious, it was also the case that such a local community was acutely aware of its connections with the larger Jewish diasporic community around the world, and wanted to be recognized as connected to it, including the sufferings and privations associated with it. The absence, or at best, mutedness, of this international connection in the exhibition prompted several interviewees to express regret:

> Perhaps it should have shown something of the Holocaust. I went through the Holocaust, and it was part of my experience. But I suppose it's just one of those things (George, personal interview, 25 May 2000).

> It is important to have an emphasis either on the international religious background of Judaism, to have a focus on the Jewish community in Singapore and its relationships with the outside world, both the Jewish world in Israel and the Jewish world outside Israel. The emphasis, not everybody would agree that the emphasis in that museum was right (Sarah, personal interview, 28 April 2000).

Overseas Jewish visitors also expressed surprise at the lack of attention given to the external linkages of the local Jewish community.

Contesting community

In as much as the exhibition offered opportunities for the reaffirmation and reassertion of community identity, it also surfaced conflicts and tensions within the community, and contested conceptions of identity. Perhaps the small size of the community heightened the anxieties and sensitivities of who should be considered inside, and who outside; who deserves credit and attention, and who does not; and who actually made what contributions to the community. For members of the community, it was a source of disappointment, indeed, affront, when perceived 'trangressions' and 'misrepresentations' occurred in the exhibition. For the curators involved, it was a source of anxiety and frustration, managing the 'politics within the community' (personal interview, 20 Jan 2000).

The tensions and conflicts within the community were multifold. First, there were personal and familial rivalries, manifested in disagreements as to the contributions of different families to Jewish life, and in relation to ownership of businesses. As the curator explained:

> The Jews marry only people in their own race, and so the Jewish families in Singapore are closely related to one another. This complicates matters, for there seem to be fights about which families actually own the various businesses. There are also some Jews who don't seem to be well-liked or respected.

Thus, there were sensitivities about who was credited with what, and how individuals were portrayed. In my interviews, I encountered outbursts of anger:

> I am really very upset… I don't really wish to comment too much. My husband worked very hard for the Jewish community but he was not properly acknowledged. The minister at the opening speech did make a brief mention but that was all. I am really very upset about that. They didn't even consult my husband or myself when the exhibition was put up. … They failed to mention my husband even though he was actually given a gold medal for his services rendered to the Jewish community. I was very angry about that. Although I also got a medal myself, it's alright that they didn't mention me but my husband really deserved mention. … Honestly, I only visited the first floor and I left after that because I was really angry, you know. … I don't really wish to comment anymore. I am really upset… not with you, don't be mistaken but with the Jewish Welfare Board. I have already spoken to the President about it. I think you should just speak to the people from the Board instead (Frieda, personal interview, 10 May 2000).

Part of the difficulty that the curator faced in obtaining sufficient and accurate information was the suspicion of the community, and the unwillingness to offer information, as discussed earlier, but, critically, it also reflected the politics within the community and the unwillingness to reveal certain information. She recalled:

> We also had to deal with the politics that was going on between individuals and families within the Jewish community. That made it very difficult for us to penetrate the community and get the information we wanted.

Second, there were class-based tensions. This was evident, for example, in the experience of the mass media, as recounted to the curator:

> Previously, the Chinese variety programmes had filmed the two synagogues and talked about their religion. But I think they made a

> mistake of showing shots of the two synagogues alternatingly. Some Jews were not happy because they said it was as though they were treating both synagogues as one, which to them are two distinct synagogues. Underlying this is a class thing. The Waterloo Synagogue is for the average families and the Oxley one has many of the wealthier families there. If you visit the two synagogues and talk to people there, you will know what I mean. Back to the media, apparently they did upset the Jewish people quite a lot through their lack of awareness of the sensitivities.

The question of how class distinctions should be handled in the exhibition draws out multiple perspectives from Jewish interviewees, illustrating the divergent attitudes, cross-cutting identities and opposing constructions of community. On the one hand, one perspective suggests that any stratification should not be acknowledged, for it would be seen as 'offensive' and 'insulting' to 'put people under the microscope', as Sarah's husband reminded her. On the other hand, there was Sarah's own desire to ensure that it was not 'just the big names' and 'the rich people' who got represented as the Jews. Commenting on the exhibition, she said:

> There wasn't very much on the fact that while there were rich people in the community, there were also poor people in the community. And that exhibition… there is in the public mind internationally very often the idea that all Jews are rich. And this is most certainly not true. And in Singapore in the early part of the century, it was most certainly not true either. The big names are the names you see in the exhibition. Like the Meyers, the Frankels, but then there are the middle class people. People like the Sankers. Some of the Nathans who were, what you would call in their origins, middle class. And then there were a lot of people who were not wealthy at all. And there just isn't much portrayed of this kind of thing (personal interview, 28 April 2000).

As Sally pointed out, foregrounding the history of the middle class would perhaps have reached the middle ground of the community more:

> There was over-representation of the wealthy, well-to-do successful families. Meanwhile, you still have some families that are successful as well, not as well known, but definitely have a past of their own here. They deserved attention as part of the community (personal interview, 12 May 2000).

For Hertzel, the real heritage of the community was

> not the big man's mansion, beautiful though it may be, but the majority of the people, the 90% who lived in hovels. It would have been important to have photographs if it had been possible, to understand how they lived, what kind of society, the cooking facilities, things like that, you know. The small items of daily lives that would have been very real (personal interview, 30 May 2000).

The multiple and divergent considerations about whether class distinctions within the community should have had a presence in the exhibition suggest that, even within the very small Jewish community in Singapore, personal and familial rivalries cross-cut with class disparities, which are treated with snobbery at times, curiosity, and even ownership and sense of heritage, at others.

Besides surfacing the personal/familial conflicts and the class divergences, the exhibition also showed up a third and fourth set of tensions. Singapore's small Jewish community was further divided in terms of who it considered an insider and who an outsider, based on the length of time that the individuals and families had spent in Singapore, and whether they had 'cast roots' and a local family tradition. Thus, even the rabbi was, in one sense, cast as an outsider, despite his central role in religious life. At the point of this study, he had been in Singapore six years, having come to Singapore

from France via New York and other parts of the US. This meant that he did not share the same Baghdadi origins and Indian routing as many of the early settlers. His 'outsider' status became an issue in the discussion of whether the exhibition had adequately portrayed religious practices and approaches that were particular to the Baghdadian tradition. Sarah volunteered:

> The rabbi is not a Singaporean and came from outside. When he came to Singapore, I think he had very little appreciation of the actual history and pattern of the local Jewish group who came from Baghdad or Basra or some from India and whose point of view and practices were and are particular to them. So, even if the museum consulted him, the outcome is that there is not much discussion of the Baghdadian traditions (personal interview, 28 April 2000).

Finally, the question of whether all Jews in Singapore are religious emerged as a point of contentious response to the exhibition. While many were content to accept the assertion in one of the exhibition panels that religion was an integral part of all aspects of Jewish life, others proffered a divergent view, arguing that self-identity was not unproblematically anchored in religion:

> She [the curator] probably gathered many Jews who are aware and proud of their Jewish identity may in fact not be proud. They may be conflicted; they are like everybody else about their identity. Many Jews who regard themselves as Jews are not necessarily very much a part of the religious life of Judaism. You find Jews who are agnostics but they are very much Jews. Because the word Jewish applies not only to the form of religious belief. The Jewish world includes by identity both those who are religious and practise Jewish religious practices and those who are secular. Many of the Jewish people who live in Singapore do not take part very much in the religious life of the two synagogues. There are probably many of them who observe the day of atonement. They may go and observe some

> festivals you call the high holidays. I think there could have been a little more awareness about the fact that rhere are non-religious Jews who still regard themselves as Jews. That would have been a difficult problem for the rabbi probably (Sarah, personal interview, 28 April 2000).

Museums and the cultural: recreating and transforming religious meaning

In focusing on the 'internal' religious rituals and practices rather than 'external' social relations, the Jewish exhibition sought to obviate potentially explosive interpretations of the religious community in the local, regional and global context. However, in so doing, it lent itself to other transformations of meaning, in particular, a transformation of meanings of those items of Judaica that were put on display, such as the *Nerot Sabbath* (Sabbath candles), *Kiddush* (goblet of wine), *Keli* (washing receptacle), the *Shofar Horn* (musical instrument), and the *Megillah* (Esther scrolls).

Religious items on display are turned from the mystical into something that may be broken down and understood. As Wolterstroff (1996) highlighted in the context of ecclesiastical art on display in museums, religious artifacts are placed in a context that are divorced from their religious function. They are separated by time and space from the context in which they are ordinarily used. Further, O'Neill (1996:189) argues:

> For museums, religion scarcely exists as a category. The vast majority of religious objects are either aestheticised as art icons or treated by curators as evidence of exotic beliefs of peoples remote in time, place and culture, or as local history objects like any others.

The Jewish exhibition sought to *locate* Judaica within the everyday lives of Singapore Jews, including their religious lives, and indeed, the Rabbi was consulted as to the 'proper placements of the items and exhibits'. In that sense, while it did not seek to replicate 'religious place', there was a respect for spatial relations and the meaning of place in the construction of the display. Yet, what was evident was the relative

‘irrelevance’ of Judaica as religious items to Jewish visitors to the exhibition, and the converse, perhaps ironical, response of non-Jewish visitors to these items as invested with religious meaning, but also educational artifacts.

To the Jewish visitors, Judaica were well familiar items in their own lives. In the context of the museum, they became symbols of personal and community identity, rather than religious items. As indicated earlier, members of the community reacted to the items by expressing disappointment, if not unhappiness, that SHM had sought to borrow some of them from overseas museums (especially the Joods Historisch Museum in Amsterdam) rather than seeking their help. In this sense, the spaces that these items inhabit alter, perhaps even determine, their meaning as well as viewers’ comprehension of that meaning.

To the non-Jewish visitors, the artifacts are presented and understood as religious artifacts. For example, the *shofar* is explained as ‘a ram’s horn which is used as a musical instrument on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* … blown during these ceremonies to pay respect to the animal that saved Isaac’s life’, and the *Megillah* (a scroll) ‘is hand-written with a reed or goose quill on parchment paper and kept in a box. It is read twice during *Purim* celebrations, once in the evening of Adar 13, and another time the next morning when the people celebrate at a fancy dress party’ (exhibition panels). In this sense, information is provided about their religious meaning, even though they are devoid of sacrality for the non-Jewish. As Grimes (1992:423) argued,

> In the museum, the curator provides information about the myths. In the sanctuary, devotees already know, and are merely reminded. Museumising objects also removes it from its ritual use, and this strips it of its sacredness, because sacredness is also ‘a function of ritual use, not just of form or of reference.

In this sense, to the non-Jewish, Judaica are items of ‘educational’ value (Christopher, personal interview), and ‘aesthetic’ appreciation (Eric, personal interview). This echoes

Grimes' (1992:421-33) example of how the Hindu goddess Lakshmi in a museum is 'a performance of aesthetic values, an educational and political ceremony', which differs entirely from the meaning of Lakshmi, the sacred deity, in a temple. In the museum, the statue is 'said to refer to a myth' while in a sanctuary, it 'embodies' the myth (Grimes, 1992:423). Through museumisation, religious objects undergo a transformation of meanings.

Conclusions

To understand religious life, identity and community in contemporary urban society, it is perhaps insufficient to focus only on a study of 'officially sacred' places. Ordinarily secular places also play important roles in contributing to the construction and contestation of religious identity and community. This paper on museums contributes to a growing range of secular spaces that I am studying with a view to understanding how the secular is constitutive of the sacred.

In the context of this particular secular space (museums) and case study (exhibition on the Jewish population in Singapore), my observations and analyses may be summarized as follows. In showcasing a minority religious group, the Singapore History Museum acknowledged and legitimized the Jewish population -- its presence and contributions -- thus encouraging a sense of pride and identity, though also heightening minority suspicion. In focusing on 'internal' religious traits and practices and eschewing 'external' inter-religious relations, SHM contributed to a selective remembering and partial construction of group identity, spurred by political concerns to uphold ideologies of multiculturalism and to anticipate neighbouring reactions. At the same time, the exhibition provided a way of (re)constructing and (re)affirming identity and community membership by inserting local voices as legitimate voices in the construction of the exhibition; incorporating local Judaica and memorabilia and rejecting borrowed items to assert the material presence of the local community; and by historicizing identity through the preference for details of local historical lives and places. On the other hand, the exhibition also surfaced contested identities and sense of community, including

personal/familial rivalries, class-based tensions, insider-outsider divides, and religious/non-religious distinctions. In as much as the political was a consideration in the making of the exhibition about the religious, the social and religious were also shown to be mutually constitutive through museum activity. Finally, in cultural terms, the exhibition contributed to the transformation of meaning of religious items, from sacred items of/in worship to symbols of personal and community identity, items of educational value and items of aesthetic value.

In sum, the ordinarily secular space of the museum has, through political, social and cultural transformations of meaning, contributed to the (re)construction, strengthening and contestation of Jewish identity and community in a secular state and multireligious society. In understanding urban contemporary society and space, sacred and secular spaces must be examined in tandem in order to understand the constitution of modern religious identity and community.

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Notes

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2 This paper is based on research that was done in late 1999 and the first half of 2000. An exhibition of Jews in the Singapore History Museum formed the basis of the study. Interviews with the curators, members of the Jewish community who were involved in the exhibition, and Jewish and non-Jewish visitors to the museum were conducted. Participant observation also formed part of the methodology, as I visited the exhibits and observed the visitors. As the Jewish community in Singapore is small, and the exhibition generated a great deal of interest among them, the decision to interview visitors to the museum is justified on the basis that this covered a broad spectrum of the Jewish population in Singapore. Another possible approach would have been to use synagogue lists to generate names though this was not used due to issues of confidentiality.

3 The exhibition changed hands three times in the course of preparation and organization. This material is based on information offered by two of the three curators. The initial curator involved had left the institution and, indeed, Singapore, before the exhibition opened, and by the time I embarked on this study.

4 Several weeks before the exhibition opened, two television programmes on the Jews had been aired: one on Jews in Singapore, and one on Judaism.

5 On 28 January 2002, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the formation of these Circles. Each electoral constituency, he revealed, would have an IRCC comprising leaders of the various religious and community groups operating in the constituency. The task of the IRCC was to bring the various communities closer through activities organised by the HCs (Singapore Government Press Release, 17 March 2002).

6 The Code on Religious Harmony was proposed by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in September 2002, not as a law, but as a code and an ethos to guide Singaporeans on how they should practise their religion, and accommodate the beliefs of others without imposing one's own practice on others, thus preventing religion from being a source of conflict.

7 The Act was prompted by perceived threats to religious harmony, including aggressive and insensitive proselytizing and the mixing of religion and politics. It gives the Government power to restrain religious leaders and followers from carrying out political activities under the guise of religious activity, creating ill-will and discord between religious groups or carrying out subversive activities.

8 The Council reports to the Ministry of Home Affairs on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony that are referred to it by the Minister or by Parliament. The Council also considers and makes recommendations to the Minister on restraining orders referred to the Council by the Minister. Such orders are directed at individuals to restrain them from causing feelings of enmity, hatred, ill-will, or hostility among religious groups, putting them on notice that they should not repeat the act of conduct, and advising that failure to do so would result in prosecution in a court of law.

9 In 1986, relations between Malaysia and Singapore had been strained by the visit to Singapore of Israeli president Chaim Herzog. Malaysia accused Singapore of insensitivity towards a neighbour, given its predominantly Muslim culture. The visit coincided with the disclosure that Malays were not serving in 'sensitive key positions' in Singapore's armed forces because the authorities did not want soldiers to be put in a position where their loyalties to the nation might conflict with their emotions and religion.

10 Former Jewish Chief Minister David Marshall once shared a recollection of a child's taunt: 'Jaudi Jew, brush my shoe, bring it back at half-past two!' which he described as his 'first encounter with anti-Semitism' (Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus School Magazine, 1980, p.**x**). There are, however, no studies which address the theme in a systematic manner.