

# When art makes one: Scripting narratives in the Museum of Islamic art in Cairo

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## ABSTRACT

*When art makes one* by Luca Bruls unfolds an ethnographic case study on narratives exposing the role of nationalism in the exhibition of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt. Fieldwork among museum staff documents the way they make decisions regarding scenography and organize activities. The research lays bare the motivations of museum staff to use certain techniques and exhibit particular objects. The goal of the research is to find out about 'how' and 'what' narratives are constructed respectively indicated in the description and presentation of artefacts in the MIA.

## Keywords

Narratives, museum anthropology, artefact, nationalism, exhibition, DA, ANT, Egypt

## INTRODUCTION

In this research, ethnographic fieldwork reveals the way museum staff in the Museum of Islamic art in Cairo (MIA) (*mathaf al-fann al-islāmī fī al-qāhira*) narrates in and about the museum. In this context, Islamic art and its exhibition space become meaningful objects through which narratives are co-transmitted. Currently, the amount of studies combining museology and Islamic art are limited. This proves the necessity of studying contemporary exhibitions of Islamic art. My aim is to write an ethnographic account on museum practice that is of use to those interested in the fields of Arabic studies, anthropology, Middle-Eastern studies, and museology. The second aim of this paper is to omit common Eurocentric and canonical tendencies within museological fields. Instead, this account contributes to knowledge on local museum practice.

The MIA is an interesting example in this regard, because it is the only museum of Islamic art in Egypt and one of the few only displaying Islamic art in the region. The museum has an interesting history that is intertwined with European intervention and a governmental function that both contribute to the way artefacts are staged. That illuminates the research question: *how are narratives produced and emphasized in the description and presentation of exhibited art objects in the museum of Islamic art in Cairo?* In what follows, this issue is examined by analyzing interviews with museum staff in relation to the current exhibition at the MIA. The research shows how the staff members, who are influenced by their particular national and cultural backgrounds, strongly emphasize the relationship between Islamic art and the Egyptian nation state.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The historical setting of the Museum of Islamic art

European scholars coined the term 'Islamic art' in the late nineteenth century. The invention of this concept went

hand in hand with exhibitions in cities like Paris and Munich (Leturcq 2015:146). Imperialism and Orientalism highlighted the interest in material culture from Islam-dominated regions. The preservation of Islamic art found its way into Egypt shortly after the first exhibitions in Europe. Around the turn of the nineteenth century European powers were dominating artistic and archaeological spheres and initiating the first museums. The colonial institutions pushed exhibition styles according to European arrangements and classificants and "reframed a hybrid Egyptian identity into a progressive, evolutionary account according to the nationalist interests of France and Britain, and the Orientalist interests of European scholars and tourists" (Doyon 2008:2). In this context, the MIA was inaugurated in 1881. Consequently, the museum was arranged under influence of European perspectives for decades. The museum was renovated from 2003-2010. A French team carried out the re-organization with an Egyptian team headed by Dr. Zahī Hawass who, as the secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, hired the French team. After a severe damage of the building and artefacts, due to a car bomb explosion outside the museum in 2014, the Egyptian team decided to re-organize the exhibition according to their wishes. Their current goal is to demonstrate Egypt's history to the society. The analysis demonstrates in more detail how this is done.

### Nationalist narratives

Museums are distinct institutions because they focus on material knowledge instead of text-based knowledge. Fundamental questions that museums engage in, concern classification, display, aesthetics and narration mediated through objects. A narrative is a way to recollect people's experiences or object's meanings by chronologizing, evaluating and explaining them (Ochs & Capps 2001:2). Narratives are intertextual, meaning that they are influenced by and related to former narratives and depend on what is culturally available (Holstein & Gubrium 2009:187). Narratives in museums exist through the order of display and the signage. An example of this is the way artefacts become meaningful in their position towards other artefacts.

Museums contribute to the creation of collective identities, because of the narratives they stage and the activities people can engage in. In anthropology, identity is considered a social and cultural phenomenon, which is formed in interaction with other people. Claiming identity, collective and individual, colludes with the inclusion and exclusion of others. Accordingly, identities and also communities are not fixed, but constructed in different ways depending on the situation and cultural group. Museums explicitly or implicitly function to represent racial, national and/or gendered communities by exhibiting

art. These representations are symbolic and imaginative, because they invent a common sociality and surpass the complexity of how human beings complement, co-exist and contradict each other (Anderson 1983:6).

Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that nationalism is an emotionally powerful ideology that shapes the lives of millions of people around the world. Nationalism focuses on identity, pride, and unity of the nation. The nation is a social construction, that its members imagine because they believe in comradeship even though they can never know all its fellow-members (ibid.:6). Identity markers of nationalism are fed with myths and heroism and distinguish strictly between insiders and outsiders. Most of all, national identities encompass a heterogeneous population, that ignores differences in gender, citizenship, class, and ethnicity. Nationalism is based on discourses that consist of certain perspectives of culture, history and ideology. These discourses are constructed and negotiated through a narrating process. This process that is two-fold because the power structures of society (the institutions, the government) fashion it and millions of individuals uphold it. In the regard of nationalism, museums are scientifically relevant, because they have the function to preserve and explain objects of its societies and because they are public spaces that provide and refine knowledge, value, and taste (Karp 1992:5). Museologist Ivan Karp explains the relationship between museums and communities. Museums are important places for the representation of signs and symbols that are considered to be representative of a nation and they are unique social and entertaining settings where the audience interprets, challenges, and participates in cultures and different identities (ibid.:3). Visitors negotiate and engage with the identities played out in the exhibition by looking at art collectively. As soon becomes clear, museums can contribute to nation building and fashioning national identities when they mediate narratives that construct history and identities in ways that legitimize the rule of a particular power.

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cairo (April 2018 – June 2018). I analyzed the data by taking an approach of Discourse Analysis (DA) and Actor Network Theory (ANT). ANT is an approach that acknowledges the relationship between objects and concepts when tackling material and social processes. It especially focuses on the networks between materiality and human beings and the way they influence one another (Byrne et al. 2011:10). DA is a qualitative and descriptive approach that engages both methodology and theory within the domain of linguistics and narratives (Gee 1999:5). This approach is valuable because of the empirical and theoretical focus and because it stays close to the constructions and motives that derive from the data. To understand ‘what’ and ‘how’ people create narratives, this analysis consists of an interpretation of eight interviews with six museum employees. Simultaneously, I reflect on the extent to which these narratives appear in the exhibition. This reflection is achieved by six visits to and a theoretical discourse analysis of the exhibition.

## ANALYSIS

The occasional visitors that are in the museum during this Ramadan, in June 2018, navigate past the marked route. This route starts at a spacious hall, called “the roots of Islamic civilization”, which functions as an introduction to the exhibition. Curator ‘Abd Al-raḥīm Hanafī explains me that the here exhibited objects represent the essential meanings of the exhibition. A Quran is exhibited in a glass box with bright lighting, “because it represents the base of Islamic sharia and it has all the information Muslims need,” explains Hanafī. A little further a wooden, silver engraved door from the Sayyida Zaynab mosque in Cairo is displayed. This object is made during the reign of Mohammed Ali (nineteenth century). The inscription shows the maker of this door was Jewish. “There was tolerance, religious tolerance, in that what? In that time and still,” says Hanafī about the door. Here, Hanafī grants moral righteousness to current Egypt and Egypt during the periods of Islamic rule. The word ‘tolerance’ reflects this. Hanafī cultivates tolerance and constructs a narrative of religious inclusivity. The values, Islam and tolerance, are constantly emphasized in the exhibition through the tours and descriptions of objects. Objects demonstrate a narrative of national unity, wherein religious values are rooted in a period of Islamic domination. Just like other exhibited artifacts, the door has to show the long coexistence of monotheistic religions and the noble character of Islam.

In the middle of interviews staff members frequently remark their perspectives and attitudes towards religion and society. Conservator Hamdī ‘Abd Al-Mon‘am Moḥamed also demonstrates the importance of the coexistence between different religions, after I ask him what Islamic art is about. Prior to this part he talks about Jews and an old Jewish neighbourhood in Cairo: “[The Jews] eat the same food [as us], they drink the same water and it is the same for Christians. I mean that the daily life is one. And this is what antiquities is about. Not only religion. That religion, I mean to each his own religion. Free. But the daily life, we share it.” ‘Abd Al-Mon‘am emphasizes the similarity and comradeship in the daily life of people with different religious backgrounds in Egypt. Instead of emphasizing the religious differences he focuses on the examples that all people share. ‘Abd Al-Mon‘am surpasses the fact that religion also connects to social habits in daily life. He connects his perspective to the function of antiquities, about which he argues that it reflects daily life. ‘Abd Al-Mon‘am’s perspective on the function of Islamic art resembles the narratives that are present in the exhibition, because they both promote an image of an Egyptian identity that is based on tolerance, national unity, and a minimization of social and religious differences. Nonetheless there is friction, because the exhibition preeminently exists of objects that function to emphasize the superiority of and tolerance within Islam and the majoritarian Muslim groups.

The representation of the Egyptian community in the museum is in line with the sort of nationalism that is propagandized by the current Egyptian state. This nationalist discourse partially originates in the 20th century and as political scientist Tamim Al-Barghouti (2008) explains, presidents and movements like the Muslim

Brotherhood have used and applied this discourse differently. The way 'Egyptianness' is experienced and constructed has changed, but there are also resemblances in the propagation of nationalism of former leaders and those of the current state, led by president 'Abd Al-Fattāh Al-Sīsī. For example, dominant nationalism in Egypt assumes an Egyptian identity that has its roots in Islamic history and Arabic heritage. Al-Sīsī differs from other presidents because he legitimizes his power by using a *war on terror*-rhetoric, blaming Moḥamed Morsī and the Muslim brotherhood as the threat for the Egyptian civilization. His narrative emphasizes the nation's need for stability and protection from Islamist terrorism (Sobhy 2015:805). Simultaneously, the state propagates an Islamic frame, wherein good Egyptian citizenship is defined along lines of Islam and Islamic heritage, which Al-Sīsī prioritizes as the source for moral, intellectual and nationalist inspiration (ibid.:815). In spite of the centralization of religious tolerance, individual responsibility and national unity, there is a lack of perspectives of religious minorities and a lack of acknowledgement of the diversity and heterogeneity of the Egyptian society. This applies both to the state's narrative and the narrative carried out by the museum.

A study on museums in Egypt by Wendy Doyon (2008) tells us that three quarters of the Egyptian museums are governmental in 2008, with again two-thirds of all museums governed by the Ministry of Culture. This also goes for the MIA, which has close ties with the Egyptian government. In 2017 its doors were reopened by Al-Sīsī. The nationalistic themes that he puts forward are emphasized in the museum through an art historical perspective. The exhibition offers history in a way that highlights the power and superiority of the Islamic, Arabic and Egyptian society. These three social frameworks are strongly interwoven and constantly complement one another. At the same time unequal power relations, differences in gender, citizenship, class and ethnicity and unwanted political and social misery like slavery and repression are ignored.

In agreement with the official discourse, the museum portrays a history that shows the distinctiveness of the Egyptian identity. The characteristics of the imagined community are rooted in among other things the Abbasid, Fatimid and Ottoman period. The staff reconciles these periods through a dynastic approach of Islamic art. Art historian Wendy Shaw argues that the dynastic approach of Islamic art is mainly focused on internal change, geographic influence and local political expression in the understanding of the meaning of objects, instead of focusing on local cultural meanings (Shaw 2012:9). This also appears from the exhibition in MIA, that besides its emphasis on faith and religious narratives presents Islam as a fixed entity that has been similar in all ages except for the Fatimid period, a period of Shia domination. The panels about the Fatimids point out that there was religious difference, but it does not explain how it influenced meanings in art practices. The reified notion of religion makes it easier to promote a continuing relevancy of the past to the present, because it goes beyond the fact that religion is dependent on cultural and temporal processes.

Past the first hall the visitor walks through the

chronologically arranged objects of the dynastic periods. The exhibited pots, vases, and toys give a sensational experience of what daily life in those ages must have looked like. Visitors can gain information about objects by a tour or the signs (in Arabic and English). Curators decided to limit the text-based information so instead the audience will be triggered by the aesthetics and quantity of objects. The few informative panels focus on heroism, solidarity and greatness. Hereby, the museum teaches the audience an ideological narrative, wherein the Islamic world is memorialized with an emphasis on victory. The texts have authority in the museum, because of the limited alternatives for information. The simplification of history also appears in the signage. An example is the display of war artilleries in the hall with coins and weapons. Here, visitors read about the advanced weaponry and triumphant struggle of Muslims against enemies in the Ottoman period. Although wars play an undeniable role in Islamic histories, the halls provoke nationalist narratives that portray Muslims as victors and Islam as a premise for improvement and justice.

At first sight the emphasis of the exhibition is not so much on the Egyptians, but rather on the relationship between Muslims and Arabs. For instance, in the hall of science and medicines, the visitor learns about the distinctive role Muslim Arabs played in the spreading of knowledge. From the analysis appears that through tours, workshops, curational motivations and the selection and presentation of objects, museum staff prioritises these 'typical' Arabic and Islamic characteristics as primary elements of the Egyptian identity. This appears for example from a conversation with Samī Abbas. Abbas works in the department of information. This department is responsible for the information about objects, its database and social media. Abbas tells me that the Egyptian society will be powerful if its members know their history. When I ask him about the strength of history he answers: "Who was the first person that thought of the camera? Al-Ḥasan Ibn Al-Haytham (965-1040), an Arab scientist. It was him who thought of optics, of visual movement. This is where the camera originates. So that is history. That is strength." Icons like Al-Haytham are vivified through the exhibited objects and descriptive panels. They demonstrate the proud and imagination of a collectively shared past and heritage. By telling Al-Haytham is Arab Abbas creates a sense of belonging of mutual 'Arabness', but at the same time of 'Egyptianness', because the history he talks about here is that of Egyptian society. The narrative is nationalist because it enhances shared cultural roots and a sense of belonging that is distinguishable from others. Icons like Al-Haytham thus centralize Arab and Islamic descent and heritage to demonstrate the success of the Arabs until now and simultaneously contribute to the imagination of an interlinked community of Egyptians.

Another way the museum staff demonstrates the shared cultural heritage of Egyptians is through workshops. The head of the department, Heba Abd Al-'azīz, organizes workshops where she does tours and makes pottery and mini rugs 'according to authentic Islamic ways'. The workshops underscore the sensual experience of the museum, because it's goal is to connect people with history

by letting them work with their hands. Through these activities with objects people bridge the gap between the past and present and both personally and collectively experience an imagined heritage. The staff organizes the workshops for Egyptians and mostly for children. Abd Al-'azīz explains why: "The kid is the most important. When you raise him when he is young you will teach him the value of what he sees, the value of his country's civilization and the value of the whole Islamic civilization and you also let him become as any craftsman, who crafted an object abroad. He will grow up and safeguard this civilization." The notion of safeguarding resembles Anderson's definition of nationalism, because it requires a community that has imagined boundaries and is willing to guard these imaginations when necessary. The good citizen is disciplined in the sense that she knows her values, religion, and role. It is clear that Abd Al-'azīz presents the MIA as a productive space that contributes to the reconstruction of socialized subjects with a particular cultural and ideological knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that in the MIA, the methods of display, tours and workshops construct narratives that make a connection between Islamic art and the Egyptian nation. As an educative institute the museum is an important place for the socialization of a Muslim-oriented audience, hereby strengthening solidarity with this particular group of the Egyptian community and endorsing a particular construction of the nation. In line with current state policies of president Al-Sisi, narratives in the museum are focused on the inclusivity of religious minorities. In this context, diverse groups are reunited in the majoritarian cultural context of Islam by emphasizing past and present-day tolerance and by incorporating them in activities. As Anderson already pointed out: museums are political places, which play key roles in nationalist projects. On first thought, this paper tells that the ways employees display art have powerful characteristics, which include the formation of identity and the claim of nation, history and culture. On second thought, it has become clear that through social processes of curating these dynamics are existent in the artefacts of the museum.

The museum thus suggests a master narrative that is nationalist. The narrative washes away heterogeneity of the Egyptian community and instead focuses on similarity and comradeship. This narrative is similar to hegemonic nationalism and exists of values and ideas that create a feeling of belonging to the nation. Secondly, the museum suggests a historical narrative. This narrative rewrites history in a way that centralizes the Islamic and Arab past and heritage as the paramount roots of the Egyptian community. The promotion of a continuous, disguised, and sensational interpretation of Islamic and Arab history bridges the gap between the past and the present. Hereby, the museum demonstrates the history's present-day importance to the imagined community. Although the research suggests that the MIA functions to represent and construct religious and national communities by exhibiting art, the museum is no national standard. Narratives, whether national, historical or religious, are highly

dependent on specific local contexts of production.

Limitations of the research are that there was no comparison made with other Egyptian museums. On top of that, there was no attention paid to the role of the audience in creating narratives. Narratives cannot be generalized, continuing research may thus contribute by studying how visitors experience the narratives throughout the museum or it can take an interactionist perspective, focusing on the relationship between staff and visitors.

## ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Luca Bruls is an undergraduate student who finished a BA in Cultural Anthropology. This thesis is written as a final result of her BA in Arabic Language and Culture in July 2018. First of all, she chose the topic, being inspired by her former background in anthropology and an internship in museum Volkenkunde. Secondly, she carried out the qualitative research individually, this included amongst others, getting access to the field and the translation of interviews from colloquial Arabic to Dutch.

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