

Visitor Experiences at St Fagans National History Museum, and their Role in the Politics of Welsh Identities

Catrin Greaves*

Abstract: *Museums are becoming increasingly orientated towards the visitor experience. There has been an increase in the ways in which the visitor can engage with the exhibits on display and add their voice to the story that the museum aims to tell. I examine the case of St Fagans National History Museum near Cardiff, Wales, which comprises of historic buildings from various locations across the country. I propose that visitor experiences are one way in which to engage with debate regarding the meaning of contemporary Welsh identity.*

Key Words: *National Identity; Open-air Museum; Visitor Experiences; Memory; Craft-making.*

Introduction

'In order for groups to know themselves... they must 'announce their identities' (Goffman 1959 in Hermanowicz *et al* 1999:198). I propose that visitor experiences at St Fagans National History Museum are one way in which Welsh people 'announce' their multiple 'Welsh' identities since 'Wales is a singular noun but a plural experience' (Dai Smith, 1999:36, in Mason 2011:23). I will examine how visitors express and reaffirm identities at St Fagans by participating in cultural activities, attending ritualistic events and through engaging with 'traditional' craft-making practices, whether through the making or purchase of goods that are seen to be 'traditional' to Wales.

My fieldwork took place over a six-week period in 2012. I interviewed museum staff, with a focus on changes that have occurred at the museum in response to contemporary identity politics in Wales, and the difficulties that have arisen in the attempt to present a democratic representation of the country's national identities (whether these are practical difficulties or conflicts arising between people being represented). I interviewed craftspeople regarding the role of craft-making (as a key visitor experience) at the museum, and its relation to national identities. Visitors were interviewed about their experiences at the museum and their own ideas regarding how Wales is represented by St Fagans.

The Interactive Experience model of Falk and Dierking (1992) takes into account the personal, physical and social contexts of visitors, noting how these aspects affect experience. In this model, physical contexts include the 'feel' of the building where the experience takes place; the personal context includes visitor interests in, and familiarity with, the experience; and the social context (in this case) includes whether the visitor is Welsh, who they visit the museum with, and

how they interact with staff. Through the application of this model, I will shed light on the relation between the visitor's contemporary experience and his/her Welsh identities.

Expressions of Welsh identity

The Rural Landscape

Visitors were able to engage with the rural landscape as a form of identity. The landscape has been connected to a sense of national identity by Moore and Whelan (2007:88), who cite Olwig's (1984) linking of the heath of Western Jutland to Danish consciousness. Similarly, the rural landscape is associated with Welsh identity at St Fagans in that it is seen to be the setting of a nationalistic sense of folk culture. Where occupations were once specialised and diverse, migration to cities to work in industry meant that a larger number of people worked within the same occupations (ironworker, miner for example). Nationalist discourse thus idealises folk culture as a part of trying to find the primordial 'givens' of a culture in an increasingly standardised world, and this idea manages to persist in industrialised societies (Geertz 1973:259-60 quoted by Smith 2001:53). 'Rural' and 'urban' were conceived as opposites by visitors.

I found that visitors were attracted to the rural as an antidote to busy, modern living, and enjoyed the variety of housing at the museum, which they felt had been 'customised' as if still occupied. For example, in one house a jacket had been left on the back of a chair as if the occupants were only momentarily away. This shows a connection to the people of the past. Miller has linked modernisation and urbanisation to a standardisation in housing (Miller 2010:85), so it can be seen that a preference for diversity in housing and the rural are related in that they are both viewed as an antidote to standardised modern living. This demonstrates visitors' idealisation of the past, which includes a preference for authenticity. I found this idealisation to also exist in the visitor experiences of pottery and craft-making.

Pottery-Making

The Ewenny Pottery was the most popular site at the museum relating to traditional crafts. The connection between pottery and tradition is clearly displayed through the artefacts shown. These include a wassail bowl. Wassailing¹ was a pre-Christian New Year tradition, described as a means through which to 'induce wellbeing' (for the New Year) (Peate 1935:81). The display of pottery as a part of Welsh folk culture

*Correspondence: cgreaves@qub.ac.uk

at the museum demonstrates that objects invoke social memory of the past (such as New Year celebrations) as a basis for identity. Social memory has been theorised as a 'desire to reclaim the past as an indispensable part of the present' (Tilmans and Winter 2010:39). The Pottery provides the opportunity for visitors to make their own pot on a potter's wheel. 'The performative construction of ethnic identities may be observed in a host of cultural activities' (Tilmans and Winter 2010:16). Participation in the 'traditional' activity of pottery making is a way in which visitors can construct their Welsh identities. Iorwerth Peate, founder of St Fagans, emphasised the craftsman as a 'prominent individual' in Welsh society (Peate 1933:176), demonstrating the compatibility between craft-making and one conception of Welsh identity. This is supported by Gell 1998 (quoted by Svasek 2011:61) 'People use objects to construct social selves'.

Craft-making

It is not just the techniques and tools involved in craft production that are significant, but also the objects in themselves. Clay and the potter's wheel do not have an innate meaning but through use visitors understand the 'object's meaning [to be] the effect it has on the world' (Pearce 1994:12). Pottery is meaningful because it creates a link between the visitor, the past and a sense of folk national identity. The past and history as a basis for identity has been theorised by Winter - 'a shared past tells a group of people who they are and from whence they have come' (Winter 2010:15).

Once objects are given meaning, there is interaction not just between visitor and object but also vice versa. 'Social actors do not just produce artefacts, but are also impressed, captivated and manipulated by them' (Svasek 2007:67). Svasek (2007:67) also states that objects can 'evoke emotional responses'. I found that pottery made by visitors invoked an emotional response linked to nostalgia both for personal experiences such as childhood or nostalgia in a wider context for an age where more objects were 'home-made' and not mass-produced. 'Nostalgia... can depart from reality in that some elements of the former world are mourned despite the fact that they were never there in the first place' (Boym 2000 in Tilmans and Winter 2010:21). This emotional link suggests that visitor perceptions of the past, and a world where traditional crafts were practiced more, may be idealised and inauthentic but they are still eager to engage with objects within this sphere because of its connection to a nationalistic conception of Welsh identity that stems from the notion of 'folk culture'.

Craft Skills

Dance and craft skills were both seen as examples of Welsh heritage, and a basis of people's identity. Connerton (1989) has discussed how enactment of bodily practices such as dance, evoke social memory. Craft practices were thus seen as 'traditional' along with the products of workmanship. In Wales there is a clog-

dancing tradition ('Clocio'), a feature of the annual *Eisteddfod* festival which has persisted as clog makers have continued to pass on tradition through craft practices. While, clog dancing constitutes non-tangible heritage it is still recognised for its 'aesthetic, historic... social values' (Vecco 2010:321).

Welsh Identity and Memory through Food

Another popular way in which visitors engaged with traditional industries was through purchasing bread at Derwen Bake House. This Bake House draws upon the theme of traditional village life. One (Welsh) parent told me that she bought gingerbread for her children at the bakery emphasising that her mother and grandmother would bake often. Thus, she linked the consumption of hand-baked produce with family memories. The connection between food and memory has been theorised by Sutton in his ethnography of the Kalymnos, Greece in which he argues that food is a way in which memory of place can be evoked, reminding that person of their identity which is based on that place - 'Eat in order to remember the Kalymnos' (Sutton 2001:2). Much earlier, Locke 1690 (quoted by Noonan 1980:164) had proposed food as a memory-criterion for identity evoking how memory was linked to place and therefore identity.

An additional example in which identity is grounded in place is through the notion of identity based on descent. This is based on the myth of genealogical descent that the Welsh people are descendants of the Celts. St Fagans features a Celtic Village where people can engage with crafts using traditional 'Celtic' methods. Re-enacting history in this way 'shapes audiences' understanding of the past' (Magelssen 2011:2). However, the type of housing used in the Celtic village was also found in England, demonstrating that there was no singular 'Welsh' identity even as far back historically as the Iron age. Eriksen (2007:5) supports the idea that globalisation is not recent and that there has been a mixing of cultures for many centuries. This means that identity is based on a common yet constructed history. The Museum 'operates as a space in which it is possible to identify competing definitions of 'Welshness'... close examination reveals evidence of the on-going process of remembering and the remaking of cultural memory in response to the demands of the present' Mason (2011:254). Memory plays an on-going role in visitor constructions of national identity.

Special Events

The ritualistic marking of passing seasons is another way in which the museum reaffirms Welsh identity. Such customary activities are linked to identity affirmation (Hermanowicz et al 1999:197). The celebration of *Belshane*, at the museum, an Irish and Manx festival for May Day is an example. This event is held in recognition of Wales as a Celtic nation through its connection with other Celtic nations. 'Celtic' is an ethnic identity. 'Ethnic boundaries are better understood as social

mediums through which association transpires rather than territorial demarcations' (Sanders 2002:327). Through participation in cultural events, visitors can feel part of the Welsh national story, even if they are not originally from that country. Participation also 'reinforces in-group members' self-identification' (Sanders 2002:327). Performance as identity affirmation has been supported by Trosset (1988) in the Welsh context, as it creates a sense of 'communitas' (Turner 1969), a sense of belonging.

Through the provision of diverse experiences, St Fagans gives visitors an opportunity to reaffirm their senses of Welsh identities. Throop and Murphy (2002:188) link Bourdieu's concept of 'body hexis' which includes culturally-influenced ways of moving, to identity assertion. However, I also found the more conscious movement involved in creating traditional crafts to be a mode of identity affirmation. Visitors engage with objects as well as intangible forms of heritage at the museum in order to express their identity and reiterate their sense of belonging to the nation. This is often achieved through invocation of memory and the past through sensory experiences, as a shared past has been demonstrated to be one basis for identity. However this 'past' is often romanticised, idealised and inauthentic. It has been shown that invoking an idealised 'socially engineered' (Hobsbawm 1994:76) past in this way is related to a sense of nationhood. This past is created by the crafts people and the 'feel' (Falk and Dierking 1992:3) and conditions of the places where the crafts take place (i.e. the museum setting).

Contextualising Identities

The contexts in which the museum operates must be considered when examining issues of national identity. 'Objects are given meaning in socio-historical contexts' (Fabian 1979 in Svasek 2011:88). Relevant contexts include the politics of contemporary Wales and also museum practice and power relations within this sphere. At the museum, the Welsh as a group are 'defined from within' (Barth paraphrased by Eriksen 1993:37). By this I mean that visitors interact with what is on display at the museum, ultimately using what they find in order to reflect on national identity. However, the visitor does not have totally free agency as what they see at the museum is determined by wider contexts. These contexts are financial, historical, cultural, social and circumstantial. 'There is discrepancy between national ideology and social practice' (Eriksen 1993:99). This demonstrates how there is a difference between nationalist and ideological representations and reality. I will consider Welsh nationalist discourse and how the museum interacts both with this and other identities in order to create an impression of how people view the Welsh nationality. 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist' (Gellner 1964:169 in Anderson

1983:6). A singular 'Welsh' identity does not exist, so representations are contested.

Interaction between groups: Ethnicity and Belonging

The fact that there are multiple cultural identities displayed at St Fagans supports the assertion that when studying a group, (in this case 'The Welsh'), it is 'social interaction and social organisation that are important, and not just cultural content' (Eriksen 1993:2), seeing it as simplistic to equate cultural content directly with membership of a national group. At St Fagans, interaction between groups is facilitated in the 'Belonging' display, where there was collaboration between curators and members of communities from which artefacts originated. This was especially evident in displays concerning religious diversity. Common religion has been implicated as a pre-condition for the emergence of a nation (Gellner 1986:xxv). Religion is important to the idea of Wales as a nation because of the significance of the publication of the Bible in the Welsh language by William Morgan in 1588. The emergence of print commodity has been noted as being significant in the development of 'national consciousness' (Anderson 1983:37). The role of the Bible in the preservation of the Welsh language demonstrates that religion was important in the emergence of consciousness of national belonging in Wales but a common religion is not necessarily vital for feeling part of that nation, as many religions are represented in the depiction of one nation.

St Fagans takes into account not only the presence of those from other nations in Wales but also the presence of Wales globally. Wales is not an isolated unit and has a presence and links at a global level. 'Wales, Land of the Red Dragon' is an exhibition organised by National Museums Wales at the Three Gorges Museum in Chongqing, China. This exhibition is intended as an introduction to Wales, with an emphasis upon Wales' links to the wider world, notably through industrial trade. Industrial development is another factor that has been theorised as being a precursor to nationalist thinking in that it leads to 'conceptual convergence' (Gellner 1983:113). Nationalist thinking involves the consciousness of self/other. 'Humanity is divided into nations, each with its own character, history and destiny' (Smith 2009:61) and this convergence allows a nation to see itself as distinct from other nations. This leads to an increase in sense of identity through contrast with different nations. For example, Pitchford, (2001) has examined how Welsh nationalist representation is deliberately constructed in opposition to 'English' identity. This dichotomy is shown at the museum in rural/industrial contrasts and language differences.

There is a tension between nationalistic representations and those representations which acknowledge a plurality of people who feel they are Welsh in spite of not being originally Welsh but having incorporated this identity into their own over a period of time. Nationalism can be defined as an ideological

movement to attain and maintain...identity (Smith 2009:61). Thus it is inaccurate to portray one national identity as a polar opposite to another, as many people feel that they are represented by more than one national identity. There is no singular 'Welsh identity'. The museum has recently attempted to rectify this situation through incorporating additional identities into its representation of Wales, such as that of Welsh speakers who are not originally from Wales.

What visitors view to be authentic depictions of Welsh identity is determined by people in authority - 'Authenticity is not about factuality. It is about authority'. (Crew and Sims 1991:163 in Svasek 2011:133). Museum display 'reproduces the agency of commissioners' (Svasek 2011:85). I have however demonstrated that visitors still have a voice within this authority framework.

Acquisition of Objects

Museum staff often acquire objects through opportunism. The donation to museums of personal objects raises questions about the value of objects. In many cases, objects are seen as having increased value if they are placed in a museum (Svasek 2011:74) and a curator explained this increased value as being a potential motivation for donating to the museum collection, although one assistant whose father donated some marbles to the museum said that he did so in order to leave his mark at the museum, so that he could feel part of it. This relates to Mauss's (1967) principle of the 'spirit of the gift'. The gift possesses the essence of the giver. The principle of gifting is relevant to buildings. Buildings are only acquired when they are donated, often by the family of the building's deceased owner. The movement of traditional industries from their original context to the museum setting ('museumification') has been discussed by Debarry (2004:122). Comparisons can be drawn between Debarry's study of Le Creuset, a French town centred on a family industry and the creation of a museum with the passing of the owner of this industry as is the case for many buildings at St Fagans

Conclusion

In conclusion, through experiences, visitors add their voice to the museum's conversation regarding the nature of the 'Welsh nation'. Museum users are also its critics (Hein 2000:50). Social constructivist approaches have conceived of identity "as an idea or discourse rather than as an empirically observable social 'unit' defined by features such as dress, language, or customs" (Tilley, 1997:511 in Davis 1999:25). The notion that it is social interaction that should be emphasised shows that identities are constructed through discourse and debate by social actors (in this case, people who engage with the museum, from staff and visitors to higher authorities such as the state and funding bodies). 'The nation cannot be reduced to a single unitary definition'

(Fenton 2003:179 in Skey 2011:11) and these people define the Welsh nation differently.

I have illustrated how different forms of tangible and intangible heritage are used to build a multi-faceted version of Welsh identity at St Fagans. Visitors engage with artefacts and material culture through making 'traditional' crafts. Visitor manipulations of objects evoke memories, which function to reiterate their sense of identities. The museum space is intended to recreate 'Wales in miniature', with buildings from each county being represented. St Fagans has changed from explicitly being a 'folk' museum, exhibiting articles of an idealised folk culture meant to be an 'authentic' version of Welsh culture, to representing both those who feel culturally Welsh and also people who live in Wales today. The rural, folk version of Welsh identity is still present, but this is not static. Rather, the past is used as a resource through which to base identity in the modern world.

Clifford (1988:244) has pointed to the exhibition as a means of preserving minority cultures 'in an increasingly globalised world'. In this article, I have shown that there has also been a greater emphasis placed upon the relationship of Wales to the wider world. Equally, the museum has incorporated multi-religious identities into its portrayal of modern Wales. Wales is thus not represented as an isolated unit but rather one that is interacting with other cultures and identities.

Rousseau (2005:686) has shown how the presence of leaders (in this context, those with authority in the museum framework) results in a decline in a sense of shared identity. Conversely, I have shown how a more democratic approach, where all visitors can participate in activities, has led to an increase in a sense of shared identity. By feeling included in museum representations through engaging with visitor experiences available, people are more likely to share a sense of Welsh identity. 'Heritage sites are 'cathedrals of identity' (Adams 2005). Thus we can see that to an extent, the museum reifies identities so it can classify them (industrial, refugee, Welsh-speaker and so on) in an attempt to accommodate multiple meanings of one national identity as it evolves in contemporary society.

References

- Adams, K. 2005. 'Public Interest Anthropology in Heritage Sites: Writing Culture and Righting Wrongs'. *The International Journal of Heritage Studies*. 11(5), 433-439.
- Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso: London, and New York.
- Clifford, J. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture' Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts.