Of the sacred and the secular: Missionary collections in university museums

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Abstract

In 1882, Dr George Leslie Mackay (1844–1901), a Canadian Presbyterian missionary, established the earliest higher education institution in Taiwan, the Oxford College (today's Aletheia University), and the first university museum collection on the island. After years of neglect, at the end of the 20^{th} century, the collection was 'rediscovered' by Canadian and Taiwanese anthropologists from the Royal Museum of Ontario, Canada. Just as these illustrious artifacts embark on a new chapter in life, they also seem to be re-introduced with their original interpretations: items that Dr Mackay preserved to demonstrate the idol-worshipping and heathen beliefs of the 'savages' are, once again, seen from a pagan perspective. To date, they are deemed as one of the best resources available for contemporary researchers to understand the spiritual life and value system of the Taiwanese Aborigines.

Dr. Mackay's collection is extraordinary, but its history is far from unique. This paper aims to examine university museums whose holdings have strong theological ties. As user communities change and new research interests emerge, ecclesiastical collections have helped to shed new lights on secular scholarship on such topics as ethnography, folklore studies and even missionary work itself.

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A missionary is a member of a religion who works to convert those who do not yet share his or her faith. Driven by the sense of fulfillment, a missionary is constantly engaged in reaching out. A university missionary collection is here defined as either a collection in a missionary university museum (museum in a seminary or a theological college), or a missionary collection in a university museum (museum in a secular university). In light of the frequent outreach and postings in far-flung places, a missionary has vast opportunities to build a rich collection of 'all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small', and which makes 'missionary collections' an interesting sub-set in the study of university museums. This paper will examine Dr Mackay's collection, Taiwan's first university museum, and the layers of meanings it has been invested with during its eventual journey. It argues that as the user communities change and new research interests emerge, ecclesiastical collections have helped to shed light on secular scholarship such as ethnography, cultural studies and even the missionary movement itself.

Part I

George Leslie Mackay (1844–1901) was born in Oxford County, Canada. In 1866, he graduated from Knox College, and went on to receive more theological training from Princeton Seminary, New Jersey, and New College, Edinburgh (MACKAY 1991, 19). In 1871, Mackay's application to serve overseas was granted by the Canada Presbyterian Church. He arrived in Taiwan (Formosa) at the end of the year, and settled in the island's largest harbor, Tamsui, a convenient jump-off point to the cities. From Tamsui, he made repeated trips to northern and eastern Taiwan, always with his bible and medical box in hand. Often, he led a group of people – for example, Chinese immigrants, lowland-Aborigines or highland-Aborigines ('savages'), to sing a hymn together before distributing anti-malaria drugs or performing mass dental operations in the public. His fluency in the native language was a big asset. Soon, chapels and a clinical facility were erected in this previous unchristian land.

In 1882, with funds raised from his Canadian hometown, he founded the Oxford College, Tamsui, Taiwan's first higher education institution, and to facilitate teaching, he also converted a residential

room to house the first museum in Taiwan. His famous collection comprised copious quantities of geological, mineralogical, botanical and zoological specimens, and "every conceivable kind of article of use or interest" (MACKAY 1991, 288–289) to Taiwanese inhabitants. To some extent, the museum was a throwback to the Renaissance's 'cabinet of curiosity': a microcosm in itself. However, the all-inclusiveness must be considered as a result of practical necessity rather than trend revival: students in the Oxford College were asked to attend bible-studying as well as modern science classes (MACKAY 1991, 293). Venturing into uncharted territories is part of a missionary's life, and it is vital that missionaries were given comprehensive knowledge to survive, succeed and sketch the unknown world to all on the outside.

Mackay's students made good use of the museum, so did those visiting foreign scientists (MACKAY 1991, 288; 319–320). Having said that, the most eye-catching displays in the room were doubtlessly the overwhelming presence of idols, "enough to stock a temple", and four life-sized figures "representing four sides of life in Formosa":

In one corner is a Tauist priest, arrayed in his official long red robe, with a bell in hand to awaken the devils possessing any man, and a whip in the other to drive them out. In the next corner is a bare-pated Buddhist priest, robed in drab, one hand holding his sacred scroll, the other counting his string of beads. Opposite to him is a fierce-looking head-hunter from the mountains ... his spears at his side, bows and arrows strapped across his shoulders, a long knife at his girdle ... In the fourth corner is a savage woman, rudely attired (MACKAY 1991, 289).

Mackay's attitude towards Chinese idolatry was far from acceptance. In his autobiography, *From Far Formosa*, Mackay gave a lengthy account detailing how resolutely he regarded it as vile and grotesque (MACKAY 1991, 128; 179; 207), and when new converts surrendered idols and ancestral tablets to profess their abiding faith in Christianity, he was obliged to make a bonfire of them (MACKAY 1991, 219; 231). Mackay held a more lenient view of the material culture of lowland-Aborigines and highland-Aborigines, even though by his own admission, the contents of his 'savage' collection were anything but civilized. "Some things are quaint enough, others suggestive of sad thoughts, others gruesome and repulsive, because indicative of ferocity and savage cruelty" (MACKAY 1991, 289). The collected ones were kept simply because of their research values.

Mackay took crates of museum exhibits back to Canada on his furlough in 1893 and donated them to his alma mater, Knox College, as a testimony to his work and an inspiration for future generations to answer the calling and join him abroad (M.E. Munsterhjelm, unpubl. data). This collection is no longer at Knox. A reasonable surmise is that when the University of Toronto partnered with the Government of Ontario to establish the Royal Ontario Museum (henceforth ROM) in 1912 (DICKSON 1986, 12), Knox College, by then federated to the university, transferred the collection to the ROM.

The ROM, the third museum that had stewardship of the collection, was a general museum with clear discipline divisions. The duties of curatorship were chiefly taken up by faculty members, and in the early days, there were five divisions in the ROM: archaeology, geology, mineralogy, paleontology, and zoology (Dickson 1986, 34–60). Neither of these professors or curators had strong links to theology, nor did they seem to be aware of the Mackay Collection stacked up high in the storage. The ROM opened with much fanfare, but as it expanded, keeping the university and the government operating in concert became increasingly difficult. On the one hand, the government felt that it was the university's liability to take care of the acquisition budget, but the university could ill-afford to appropriate more resources to the ROM. On the other hand, concerns for the university's almost unbridled power over the ROM and the ROM's ready tendency to prioritize the university needs over the public needs were constantly voiced (Dickson 1986, 112–144). At last, the ROM outgrew its status as a legal appendage to a teaching university and was formally elevated to an independent entity in 1968.

The ROM continued to have a close bond with the university but also strove to enrich the wide-ranging exhibitions through various means. Ethnographical displays were one of its stronger features, and could be seen in the re-structured 'Archaeology' and 'Near Eastern and Asian Civilization' divisions. Nonetheless, it was not until the 1990s when two Canadian researchers tracked down the Mackay Collection did the collection see the light of day again. Two Taiwanese anthropologists were invited to assess the 'discovery', and they proclaimed that it contained one of the best, if not the best, batch of Taiwanese aboriginal artifacts from pre-colonial period (before 1894). Many of the items had never been seen before except in books, and were probably the last vestige of the 'pure' aboriginal culture (M. E. Munsterhjelm, unpubl. data).

A loan exhibition request was put forward by the Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines, Taiwan, in time for the centennial anniversary of Mackay's death. Out of the 850-odd objects found, 192 were chosen to make the trip. Aside from a few boar and deer skulls, Mackay's proud "marine shells, sponges, and corals of various kinds [...] serpents, worms, insects" (MACKAY 1991, 289) were conspicuously missing in the line-up. Given that the organic exhibits might be too fragile to be moved and their presence could not help accentuate the aboriginal color of the Shung Ye Museum, the absence was justified. However, it can not be denied that the new interest in the Taiwanese Aborigine's early life rendered those once under-appreciated artifacts exceptionally important today.

It is safe to conclude that for Mackay, the purposes of his collection were twofold: helping missionaries grasp the native culture and providing a before/after contrast of the encounter with God. In short, the religious curios, the 'indecent' clothes, and the primitive weapons were material proof why the Aborigines were in dire need of Christian enlightenment. The thought that one day these slighted objects would command absolute attention in his memorial exhibition, 'Treasures from Abroad: the Dr. Mackay Collection of Formosan Aboriginal Artifacts', probably never crossed his mind. Yet for contemporary anthropologists and Aborigines, the 'evangelization-aid' collection not only fills a void in scholarship, but also gives impetus to the ethnic resurgence movement (M. E. Munsterhjelm, unpubl. data). Written history is a notion elusive to Taiwanese Aborigines, as their languages are limited to verbal forms only. Moreover, the intervening years of suppression and acculturation policy inflicted by the governments have quickened the disappearance of customs and the extinction of languages. To some, Mackay's collection is a pale version of those made by God-fearing, 'civilized' people, but to others, it is a powerful collaboration of the interview findings and oral stories. Take the wild boar and deer skulls as an example: they were, in fact, worshipped by certain highland-Aborigines for their supernatural power in honing hunting skills, and for the first time in many decades, what could only be envisioned comes to life through the blood-stained exhibits. Pagan or not? We are indebted to Dr Mackay and the university museums for the chance to re-situate the artifacts in a historical framework, and for the gazing and interpretation-giving to play out infinitely.

Part II

Although all university missionary collections have theological ties, in essence, they are not different from any other university collection: its aim is to, first and foremost, create a nourishing research environment for university members and perhaps for the public, too (Coleman 1942, 5); it has a specific collection display policy framed around the curriculum (KING & MARSTINE 2006, 282); and its management and finances rely heavily on students, faculties, board of trustees, alumni and the general public (DYSON 1990, 68).

However, the connection between missionary collections and universities is significant in both depth and breadth. Some of the earliest university museums we know of include the Ashmolean Museum, bequeathed to the Oxford University by Elias Ashmole in 1682 (MACGREGOR 2001); the 'Amerbach cabinet', purchased by the Basle city council in 1661 and made it accessible to the public as university

property (ACKERMANN 2001, 84); and the Museum of the Collegio Romano in the Jesuit Roman College in 1651 (FINDLEN 1994, 126). But while both the Ashmolean collection and the Amerbach cabinet had come to fame long before being incorporated into the universities, the Museum of the Collegio Romano, entrusted to Athanasius Kircher's curatorship, was firmly attached to the college since its formative years. Under the aegis of the college, the museum grew steadily to be the depository center of Kircher's inventions and the college's propaganda front. The museum was, as Kircher himself boasted, 'the centerpiece of a visit to the Eternal City' (FINDLEN 1994,130). Kircher is not alone. Missionaries are the spearheads and enforcers of religion disseminations, which include, but are not limited to, Catholic and Protestant ones. They fan out through the world, and almost all of them have the time, knowledge, disposition and opportunity to be zealous collectors. Some of these collections may go to seminaries, and some to secular places such as universities or public museums.

The theological tie is what defines a missionary collection, but since a myriad of collections have been amassed over the course of time, and any of them can at some point be placed in a spatial-temporal context in which the users do not always conform to the dogma, there is inherently a 'sacred vs. secular' tension lurking. Especially in social science area, the frictions seem sometimes to be palpable. As missionaries need to immerse themselves in local culture to gain a foothold, they are likely to gather strategic ethnographic collections with relative ease. But for anthropologists or such, whose disciplines benefit from missionaries' groundwork and enjoy a historical vantage point (COOMBES 1985; KEESING & STRATHERN 1997; RUBEL & ROSMAN 1996), the methodology of the collection formation could hardly be flawless. Missionaries do not turn up on the cusp of changes coincidentally; as they are present to inculcate new sets of ideas, their presences presage, or are, the changes. The quality and quantity of their collections are built on the harsh reality that missionaries are often the only ones who can 'save' or 'salvage' what they will sooner or later eradicate or destroy (LAWSON 1994, 143). The irony was certainly lost on Mackay when he severely criticized the Chinese for forcing their idolatry on nature-worshipping lowland-Aborigines. "Whenever a tribe submits, the first thing is to shave the head in token of allegiance, and then temples, idols, and tablets are introduced" (MACKAY 1991, 208). How, one may ask, could Western cultural importers see themselves superior to the Chinese cultural importers? The ROM, once a university museum and at no time subordinate to any religious institution, was conscious of the different perceptions and careful enough to skirt around the differences. Lest Mackay's deeds should be obscured by the 'Western-biased' accusation, a "hero-rescues-Aborigines" (M. E. Munsterhjelm, unpubl. data) exhibition narrative was concocted to appease all organizations involved. One more stinging issue pertinent to collections formed by 'agents of cultural change' (STIPE 1980, 165) is, when the geo-social-political condition of the culture changes again, repatriation demands may haunt the current owners. Again, the ROM took all precautions to neutralize the subject and insisted on having the 'Immunity from Seizure' treaty signed before shipping out the collection to Taiwan (M.E. Munsterhjelm, unpubl. data).

Many and various missionary collections have been assembled, disbanded or re-grouped around the world. The fact that they are highly desirable and constantly moved is due in no small part to the peculiarly itinerant missionary life, and many of them do, at some time, find themselves behind glass cases in a university museum. For instance, we can easily find Mackay Collection's parallels in the Redpath Museum, McGill University, Canada, a secular university museum that houses a 19th century Presbyterian missionary collection (LAWSON 1994), or in the Tenri Sankokan Museum, Tenri University, Japan, a missionary university museum that collects Taiwanese aboriginal artifacts, to name just two. The nature of missionary work is all about interfacing: interfacing within the same group but of different times, interfacing between different groups; and in the above-mentioned and, in effect, all cases, when putting university missionary collections to work in research and teaching, the interface between the sacred and the secular, between different disciplines within the universities, between communities

inside and outside the universities. The results may be expected to produce many strata of meanings, some conflicting, some complementary, for us to reflect and contemplate.

Part III

There was an almost fossilized impression that early missionaries were mostly ethno-centrists riding on the crest of imperialism, and the template of their collections was underlined by an unerring sense of justice: objects of heathenism, barbarianism, indecency and exoticism (Coleman 1985; Thomas 1991, 153–157). But this impression only tells part of the story (Coombes 1985, 453; Hasinoff 2006, 147). Thanks to the intricacy of missionary networks, missionary collections are scattered in universities worldwide for researchers to continue cross-examining the impression and mining for fresh ideas.

One afterthought is, is a university collection easily overlooked or dispersed? The George Brown Oceanic collection, gathered by the Methodist missionary, was sold three times to museums on three different continents, including the Hancock Museum, University of Newcastle, England (Geismar 2001, 32–33). The Mackay Collection has been registered in three university museums, too, and its current staying place, the ROM, was in such a management and financial quandary that it had to be split from the University of Toronto.

It is true that these two are separate incidents and no conclusion should be extrapolated from them. However, missionary collection or not, a university museum is only one of many units under the parental organization: the university (WALLACE 2006, 161). Unless the museum can justify its existence in research or teaching, it is unlikely to receive any preferential treatment from the board of trustees, and the same rule applies when the museum directs its supplication to outside patrons. But how can a university museum justify its existence? As we said earlier, the motto of missionary, reaching out, may have pointed us a good place to start.

The word 'university' implies 'universality', and it falls onto the responsibility of museum curators to exploit joint research or teaching opportunities among the broad spectrum of disciplines encompassed in a university. Take missionary collections as an example again. In addition to the 'usual suspects' such as anthropology or cultural studies (Sturtevant 1969, 637), there are many candidates which can develop symbiotic relations with the collections: How about chemistry? Could it learn from preserving old things and how much could it do to slow down their deteriorations? How about pharmacology? Are the herbs or sachets in Mackay's match-box containers just another form of superstition or alternative 'food for thought' for new medicine? How about economics? Could the students appreciate that it is not the intrinsic value, but the face value, of the beads that counts in a currency system? Could we all agree that an object has no meaning until been given one (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT 1998)? Sometimes it may be necessary to amalgamate a team with many specialties to effectively tackle a research problem. But if reaching out and communicating have kept missionaries going, maybe they will do the same for university museums, too.

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