# Construction of Irish identity and its representation at the nation's museums

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## Abstract

*This paper assesses the degree to which Ireland's position as a former colony may have implications for contemporary concepts of identity and identity construction in that country for both majority and minority communities. Museums are considered important locations for both identity maintenance and construction. This research was conducted with a diverse range of Irish audiences at three case-study institutions. The data from this research suggests that Irish museums have an important yet sensitive role to play within Irish society in the balancing of 'traditional' and twenty-first century definitions of Irish identities.*

## Introduction

Irish society has experienced a tumultuous transformation over the past two decades. Significant demographic change has been brought about through both recent immigration and emigration and through economic boom and bust. As with much of the rest of the world, Ireland has also been caught up in the larger context of globalisation, with all the accompanying contestations this brings to questions of identity and nation. Such changes, it would be imagined, undermine any romanticised notions of a 'fixed' version of Irish national identity. I argue in this paper that Ireland's former experiences as a colony of the British Empire and its current post-colonial status have important ramifications for ideas around Irish identity construction. I suggest that one noticeable result of the nation's current status would appear to be a continuing reinforcement of what Gilroy (2000) has termed 'collective identity', most notably from a white Irish majority position.

It should be noted that notions of 'collective identity' are problematic within most post-modernist perspectives on the theme of identity. As May (2002, p. 131) makes clear, 'it is now almost de rigeur in this postmodernist age to dismiss any articulation of group-based identity as essentialist – a totalising discourse that excludes and silences as much as it includes and empowers' (see, for example, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Bhabha 1994;

Gilroy 2000; Hall 1992). While bearing in mind Hall's premise that individual identities shift and can be re-negotiated (1992), I am also conscious of his view that processes of globalisation can lead to reinforced interpretations of culture and ethnic identification, which I suggest have significance in the Irish context. I therefore explore in this paper the degree to which a dominant Irish post-colonial identity appears to either manifest itself in, or is discussed at, the case-study museums among research participants. I also consider whether perceptions of national identity among some majority white Irish citizens pose problems of integration and acceptance for people from Ireland's minority communities.

This paper discusses research carried out between 2007 and 2010 with members of the Irish public at three case-study museums; the National Museum of Ireland (Collins Barracks), the Chester Beatty Library, and Waterford Museum of Treasures. The research explores how, if at all, Irish museums are perceived by visiting audiences as sites where notions of Irish identity are interrogated and constructed and whether, as public institutions, museums might contribute to intercultural debate in Ireland's developing multicultural contexts. The word, intercultural, is at the present time, the preferred term used by the Irish state in all matters relating to ethnic and cultural diversity.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus specifically on research findings that uncovered complex understandings of twenty first century Irish identity, and the degree to which museums as public institutions are incorporated by various audiences as resources for identity construction. My study is significant in the Irish context as it is the first large-scale analysis of both majority and minority ethnic responses to identity representation at the nation's museums and attempts to gain insights into how respondents discuss and conceive of their own personal and national identities in such institutions. In analysing majority and minority ethnicities, I follow Eriksen (1993, p. 3-7), who states that:

> *In everyday language the word ethnicity still has a ring of 'minority issues' and 'race relations', but in social anthropology it refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive. Although it is true that the discourse concerning ethnicity tends to concern itself with subnational units, or minorities of some kind or another, majorities and dominant peoples are no less 'ethnic' than minorities.*

In many instances specific museum objects or displays are the catalyst

for identity discussion (Crooke 2007). To better analyse how my research participants discussed concepts of Irish national identity within the data, I compare and contrast the post-colonial theorising of Parry (1998) with that of Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1990). I am particularly keen to explore whether minority ethnic participants within the research feel excluded, or perhaps threatened, by an ethnic and cultural construction of Irish identity that in many ways draws on the past to reinforce present notions of 'Irishness'.

In the following sections I outline the national context within which the research was carried out and the reasons why the study was undertaken. I also discuss past and present conceptions of Irish identity and explore how the findings from this research either conform or diverge from such socially constructed phenomena (Fenton 2010).

## A Changing Nation

My research coincides with a dramatically shifting demographic situation in Irish ethnic and cultural identities. In 2006, census figures for people of ethnic and cultural background were assembled for the first time in the history of the Irish state. They reveal that more than 10 per cent of Ireland's population of almost 4.2 million people consists of foreign nationals. Such profound societal changes at any time, but particularly in times of recession, comes with the threat of exclusion, alienation and discrimination for ethnic and minority groups. Research over the past decade in Ireland seems to point towards significant levels of racist discrimination against those from minority ethnic backgrounds (O'Mahony et al. 2001). A report by the Irish Economic and Social Research Institute (McGinnity et al. 2006) states that 35 per cent of immigrants have been verbally harassed on the street, while 32 per cent have the same experience at work. In 2009, Ireland was ranked amongst the worst five European Union (EU) states in terms of racial abuse and discrimination by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (2009). The Irish Government launched the country's inaugural National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPR) in 2005, a response to commitments given on developing anti-racism legislation by the Irish government at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism in South Africa in 2001. One of NAPR's recommendations was that Irish arts and cultural organisations (including museums) promote interaction and understanding of cultural diversity.

It is from recommendations seen within international research that Irish museums have a role to play in processes of intercultural debate and facilitating social cohesion. For instance, British cultural institutions, which include the museum and gallery sector, are directly referenced within a report for the Runnymede Trust (2000, p. 159) that highlights the important position

such sites play in fostering a sense of identity affirmation and national belonging for minority groups. The report is also clear about the potential for negative and racist outcomes that could result from a group or community's exclusion from national consideration and representation:

> *Acts of racism, racial violence, racial prejudice and abuse do not exist in a vacuum. They are not isolated incidents or individual acts, removed from the cultural fabric of our lives. Notions of cultural value, belonging and worth are defined and fixed by the decisions we make about what is or is not our culture, and how we are represented (or not) by cultural institutions.*

> (Runnymede Trust, 2000: p. 159)

Museums can be perceived, therefore, to act as sites where society catches glimpses of itself, where it sees what is included and what is excluded, what is part of 'us' and what is 'other'. They can be integral locations of identity formation, as has been suggested by Crooke (2007, p. 14) '…collections are an expression of our identity. As we build collections they become an extension of ourselves; they reflect what we are interested in, our values and our judgements'. These values bestow on museums a very important social responsibility to consider carefully and negotiate the messages they project to the public about images and notions of identity, nation and belonging.

To date, no empirical information has been gathered within the Irish museum context to assess whether or how these specific cultural institutions have responded to the objectives of the NAPR or, more importantly, the degree to which Irish audiences might view the role played by museums in a multicultural Ireland. What is also unclear is the degree to which current narratives of Irish identity may exclude more than they include, and whether the nation's museums are complicit in propagating such a situation. It is therefore necessary in the next section to analyse past and present ideas of Irish identity.

## Concepts of Irish Identity

For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, the field of Irish Studies tended to view and discuss Irish identity as primarily constituting two communities or cultural traditions: one being nationalist and Catholic, the other unionist and Protestant (Finlay 2004). This debate was set against the intense political situation and conflict of what was termed the 'Troubles' of the 1980s and 1990s. Political and social theorists however increasingly sought

to dissolve these essentialist binary identities and attempted to bring about more expansive understandings of what Irish identity might mean or look like in the hope that such thinking would offer some common ground between both communities. Finlay (2004) has termed such past attempts at identity re-negotiation 'cultural pluralism' but stresses that it always remained predominantly bicultural in focus.

The promotion in the 1970s and 1980s of 'cultural pluralism' was a concerted effort in the first instance by Irish revisionist historians to challenge and critique traditional Irish nationalist discourses which they felt were responsible for constructing and maintaining a monolithic and monocultural Irish identity in the Irish Republic following independence from British rule in 1921. This identity was, and is, regularly defined as white, Catholic and more often than not patriarchal in nature (O'Connor 2008, MacÉinrí 2007). Its origins are often linked with the harnessing of Irish cultural nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century in a struggle against the British Empire. As Irish nationalism developed, it increasingly began to conjure ideas and images of an 'ancient' ethnic identity prior to the colonial period that was effectively carried over into the identity of the post-colonial independent state. Such a search for an 'ancient' identity or heritage led to the birth of the Celtic Revival at the end of the nineteenth century and a sense of being a 'unique' people. It is always important however to be conscious of the constructed nature of such ideas of 'uniqueness'. For instance, Smith (1998) cites Connor (1994, p. 202) in highlighting how such claims to 'unique descent' are largely social constructions:

> *The sense of unique descent, of course, need not, and in nearly all cases will not, accord with factual history. Nearly all nations are the variegated offspring's of numerous ethnic strains. It is not chronological or factual history that is the key to the nation, but sentient or felt history. All that is irreducibly required for the existence of a nation is that the members share an intuitive conviction of the group's separate origin and evolution. (emphasis added)*

Of course, this 'sentient or felt history' has an ironic outcome within Irish post-colonialism in that the legacy of the strident nationalism that overcame British rule, and the accompanying notions of 'separate origin and evolution' of the movement, tends to exclude many of those who played prominent roles (both politically and culturally) in the fight for Irish independence, such as members of the Protestant Anglo-Irish communities. Groups such as these muddy the waters of a belief in a 'unique descent', as do other minority communities such as Irish Travellers and Jews. The existence of such diverse

ethnic groups has always seriously undermined the supposed homogeneous 'white Celticised' racial image projected by the Irish state since independence.

## Post-colonial Irish identity

The revisionist agenda of the 1960s onwards to promote cultural pluralism has largely failed as it encountered a backlash from an Irish population who felt revisionist historians were, in attempting to win over the Protestant population of Northern Ireland, re-writing the struggles of the colonial and post-colonial period (now an important marker of Irish identity) (Finlay 2007). More successful in their attempts at re-formulating concepts of Irish pluralism and identity are postcolonial theorists such as Kiberd (1995, 2001) and Gibbons (1996). Irish postcolonial theory of the 1980s and 1990s, unlike revisionism, does not seek to overthrow the sacred cow of Irish nationalism in the quest of opening up debate on identity, instead it advocates a more nuanced position that on the one hand heavily critiques the restrictive and exclusionary nature of national identity that emerged in post-colonial Ireland, and on the other argues for a revising of national identity in ways that might be truly representative of all citizens. This re-visioning of identity calls for an openness as to what could be incorporated into notions of 'Irishness' rather than closing down such options.

At the same time, however, Irish post-colonial thought does not make recourse to theories of hybridity or 'interstitial space' as advanced by Bhabha (1994) or Spivak (1990). Rather Irish post-colonial thinking has tended to follow Parry's (2004, p. 65) conviction that 'if it is conceded that the structure of colonial power was ordered on difference as a legitimating strategy in the exercise of domination, then it could be argued that the construct of binary oppositions retains its power as a political category'. Parry's arguments against hybridity theories in post-colonial contexts are to a large extent connected to her scepticism of Bhabha's use of post-structuralism and literary criticism in these debates, which for Parry denudes the historical voice and role of resistance offered by the colonised/oppressed.

Adding support to Parry's theories in the Irish context are Ashcroft, Griffin and Tiffin's (1995) definition of how Ireland functioned as a colony. Ireland was historically a non-settler colony administered by a small but militarily effective colonial presence in Dublin. In many ways, Irish identity has for centuries used 'Englishness' to define what it is not. Within post-colonial Ireland this historical process has tended to undermine classical adaptations of hybridity theory as a useful means of exploring Irish 'shared identities'. While specific post-colonial calls to revitalise an Irish identity,

albeit distorted by colonial experience, has had its critics (in particular Howe 2000) it could be argued that it has at least provided a theoretical frame to re-assess concepts of Irish identity within an increasingly multicultural nation.

## Study Design: Case-study Museums

As outlined in previous paragraphs there has always been a close relationship between conceptions of Irish national identity, rooted in a difficult colonial past, and the country's present post-colonial position. It could even be argued that in some respects experiences have been internalised by successive generations since independence as being symbolic of national character (Flannery 2009). That the nation's museums are entangled within these concerns has already been noted by Reid (2005, p. 213-18) who claims that:

> *much of the displays at both Kildare Street and Collins Barracks (sites of the National Museum of Ireland) continue to support nationalist interpretations of history. The cultural identity and heritage constructed to underpin Irish sovereignty retains its iconographic power, despite an increasing irrelevance to contemporary society.*

Reid (2005, p. 207) goes on to cite O'Mahoney and Delanty (1998) who argue from a similar perspective that 'the continuing legitimacy of an exclusive cultural model that sprang from the nationalist politics of the nineteenth century inhibits the creation of a post-national identity relevant to the needs of both the Republic and Northern Ireland'. In neither case do the writers define what they envisage a 'post-national identity' might look like or what elements would give it substance or indeed how it should be displayed at the national museum.

My study analyses the ways in which research participants discuss national identity at the National Museum of Ireland and the other case-study museums. The study therefore seeks to offer insights into whether the public view such institutions as limiting or opening up space for explorations of identity discourse in the minds of majority and minority visitors. Before examining examples of specific participant feedback at the case-study museums however, it is necessary to sketch out the nature of these institutions and their roles in contemporary Ireland.

While the National Museum of Ireland and Chester Beatty Library are designated national institutions in Dublin and are in receipt of government funding, the Waterford Museum of Treasures is a local authority funded regional site. The modern day National Museum of Ireland emerged under

colonial rule as the Dublin Museum of Science and Arts in 1877. It was not officially designated a 'national' museum until 1908 (Wallace and O Floinn 2002). Leading up to, and following on from, Irish independence in 1921 an important reorientation of the National Museum took place. The gold and bronze prehistoric collections associated with Ireland's Celtic past that had previously been displayed in anonymous side galleries now took centre stage in the museum's main exhibition space. Thus began the National Museum's role in constructing the new Irish state as the direct descendent of an ancient Celtic culture (albeit with an interlude of several centuries). The newly re-orientated National Museum of Ireland and its re-evaluated prehistoric antiquities came to be instrumentally tied up with a re-fashioning of Irish ethnic identity following independence (Crooke 2000). Today, the National Museum of Ireland is a federation of four individual buildings at four different geographic locations. Three are located in Dublin with one in County Mayo in the West of Ireland. 'Archaeology' (including the Celtic related objects) is to be found in Kildare Street, Dublin, 'Natural History' is located in Merrion Square, Dublin and 'Country Life' is located at a site in the West of Ireland.

The first museum I selected as a case-study is 'Collins Barracks' (opened in 1988), one of the four within the National Museum of Ireland. Also in Dublin, Collins Barracks is charged with the care and display of 'Decorative Arts and History'. The primary factor for choosing it as a case-study museum is based on its remit to interpret modern Irish history. The museum occupies a building that had formerly been the colonial headquarters of the British army in Ireland.

The second case-study museum, the Chester Beatty Library, again in Dublin, 'contains some of the finest treasures of the great cultures and religions of the world, bequeathed to the Irish people by American mining magnate and collector, Sir Alfred Chester Beatty, who chose Ireland as his place of retirement' (Ryan et al. frontispiece, 2001). The museum exhibits significant historical artefacts, many of a religious nature from Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. The non-Irish nature of the collections made the Chester Beatty Library an interesting case-study, particularly from the point of view of Ireland's developing multiculturalism, and offers the opportunity to explore visitor opinions around themes of diverse cultural identit(ies). The Chester Beatty Library is housed within Dublin Castle, the former administrative centre of British rule in Ireland.

The Waterford Museum of Treasures is the only case-study museum located outside of Dublin. This is important to my research design as it allows regional voices and opinions to be incorporated into the findings. It also opens up space to assess the degree to which identity might be perceived

and thought of differently, or not, outside the capital. Maintained by Waterford City Council, the museum is housed in a nineteenth century granary building and interprets the history of Waterford from pre-historic times to the present day. Unlike Collins Barracks and the Chester Beatty Library which have free admission, the Waterford Museum of Treasures charges admission.

## Research Methodology

During October 2009, I conducted in-depth interviews with 40 visitors to Collins Barracks, National Museum of Ireland and 13 visitors to the Waterford Museum of Treasures. In addition to the on-site museum interviews at Waterford, I also held two off-site group interviews with ten users of the Waterford Women's Centre who had made previous use of the Waterford Museum of Treasures for various educational and community projects. The off-site group interviews in Waterford were held to ensure minority ethnic views were included in relation to that particular museum. I decided, in consultation with the education staff at the museum, that the regional nature of the museum warranted additional attention in terms of securing minority input to the research sample. The museum education officer therefore facilitated contact with one of the programme co-ordinators at the Women's Centre. This individual's assistance was vital in assembling those women that had been involved in projects at the museum and explaining to these participants the nature of my research in advance of my visit. The two interview groups that were assembled were ethnically diverse with a wide range of ages represented. In February 2010 I conducted in-depth interviews at the Chester Beatty Library with 27 visitors.

## Sampling and Methods

The interviewees were composed of family groups, couples and some independent visitors with participants self-identifying as being from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Due to such public visiting patterns, the gender distribution within my sample was relatively even with slightly more females interviewed than males. I included some non-Irish nationals such as visiting tourists within my sample in order to compare and contrast their opinions of Irish identity against that of majority and minority Irish responses. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper. Participant demographic data is available in the Appendix.

At all three case-study museums I utilised open-ended interviewing techniques. This approach allowed participants the opportunity to discuss in as much detail as they wished their personal experiences and opinions of the case-study museums. The research instrument was designed in such a way

that core research topics such as identity and interculturalism were not introduced at the outset but rather probed for relevance as the interviews proceeded. Participants were approached at the end of their visit and interviewed in a private room supplied by the museum. The average duration of interviews was twenty minutes with the longest running to seventy-two minutes. All interviews were tape recorded.

Along with in-depth interviews, observation of visitors within the exhibition spaces of all three case-study museums was also carried out. Observation was useful in terms of getting a sense of how visitors physically used the museum spaces, which objects or displays caught their attention, and which they devoted more or less time to. Written comments in visitor books were also examined in relation to the specific concerns of my research agenda.

## Locating 'Irishness' at the Nation's Museums

This section highlights some of the diverse participant feedback around perceptions of Irish identity that emerged at the case-study museums. While the National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks has a wide array of exhibition galleries covering themes as diverse as Irish costume, period furniture, silver and the work of important Irish designers such as Eileen Gray (1878-1976), it is the exhibition, 'Soldiers and Chiefs: The Irish at War at Home and Abroad 1550-2001' that was referred to by most participants within my sample when discussing perceptions of Irish identity. This is perhaps unsurprising as the exhibition dominates a full wing of the barracks complex and is one of the first exhibition spaces that visitors encounter on entering the museum.

Observation of visitor interaction with front-of-house staff at the museum reception also revealed that the 'Soldiers and Chiefs' exhibition was regularly suggested by museum staff as the first (and in some instances) 'the best' exhibition to see while visiting the museum. Opened in 2006 as a permanent exhibition, visitors get to discover not only the role of the British army in Ireland but also the experiences of those Irish who fought in the service of the Empire. The exhibition covers a chronological time-span beginning with the Elizabethan Wars to Ireland's current peace-keeping missions with the United Nations. For some visitors, direct links were drawn between these exhibits and their perceptions of Irish identity. This could be seen in a discussion between Matt, a thirty-four year old accountant visiting with his friend Ben, an administrator also in his early thirties who both self-identified as white Irish:

> *Matt: Well, every country has some kind of identity and I*

*think that their museum, their national museum reflects their identity.*

*Ben: They (museums) tell you where you came from.*

*Interviewer: What kind of identity or sense of 'Irishness' do you think people take away from here?*

*Matt: That it's a very militant kind of a background, that there was a lot of trouble, especially against the English.*

For these visitors notions of what it might mean to be Irish was integrally connected to the country's colonial struggle against Britain. Both spoke passionately about their sense of awe in coming face-to-face with items connected to Irish nationalist heroes such as revolutionary leader Michael Collins.

Matt and Ben were not alone in creating links between Irish identity and conflict, as historical imagery was also conjured up by other participants in relation to more contemporary political 'struggles' in Ireland. For instance, the country's initial rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 was celebrated by Irish Euro-sceptic parties, such as Libertas, as a defence of Irish freedom and national identity against an oppressive, homogenising EU project (Marquand 2011). Connections to these debates were made by white Irish couple Noel, a fifty-two year old social worker and his wife Marie, a retired nurse visiting the museum with their two children. As they noted:

*Noel: It's (military history) hugely important in Irish politics at the moment, most of the main government parties trace some of their credibility to the 1916 Rising.*

*Marie: And Libertas, in the recent referendum, they had images of the assassinated leaders of the 1916 Rising and there was things like 'they died for your freedom, don't throw it away', things like that. It is still very vivid, very strong.*

For many white Irish participants within the research sample there appeared to be a strong connection between concepts of Irish identity and an independent nation, feelings that were heightened through interactions with museum objects and displays about the colonial past.

Amongst some minority ethnic visitors resident in Ireland however, the colonial narratives at the National Museum were just one of many perspectives being sought in understandings of Irish identity. For instance Adrian and Anne, a married Filipino couple in their twenties who are both

nurses in a Dublin hospital and have been residents in Ireland for over a year, were visiting the National Museum in order to learn more about Irish life and culture. It was the colonial exhibition that left a lasting impression on them in relation to reflections on 'Irishness'.  As Adrian explained:

> *We were thinking about how this museum reflects the Irish but it's more on the military history, the buildings that were destroyed during the war. So we were trying to compare it in an Asian way and with musical culture or dancing or dressing and something that would speak about native Irish. We were trying to look for it but it was more about British people coming over here, train people here and how people here cared for their armies and how they fought for other colonies. What's coming in mind, it's more on that. Although, maybe that's the history of Ireland?*

This couple had not been aware that the National Museum of Ireland is a federation of different sites. Their interest in discovering Irish cultural identity through music, dance and folk life may well have been served better through a visit to the National Museum site in County Mayo in the West of Ireland.  It is, however, arguable that most citizens and foreign visitors, unaware of the organisational structure of the museum, will perceive the National Museum, Collins Barracks as the definitive location which tells and defines the national story. It does after all hold the remit to interpret Irish modern history.

Connections between colonial struggle and Irish identity were also evident within respondent feedback at the Waterford Museum of Treasures. In this instance, however, museum display practices and use of interpretative text focused more on the colonial story from a local or regional perspective rather than the over-arching national picture. In a similar fashion to the National Museum in Dublin some respondents were attempting to uncover wider definitions and understandings of symbols often (and at times stereotypically) connected to Irish identity. For instance, Emma, a refugee from Malawi living in Waterford for five years, had attempted to find out at the museum the origins and meanings behind the use of the harp, commonly seen as a symbol in Irish society:

> *Emma: ...then one of the artefacts I saw there, the thing that they put on most of the Irish stuff, whether it's a passport, what do you call that? ......the harp!*
>
> *Interviewer: Did they explain why the harp is used?*
>
> *Emma: No, this guy I asked him when he was showing us around. He didn't tell me the foundation of that. Because I*

*just see it on a lot of things like. When you see Ireland, you*
*see the harp somewhere.*

Emma's particular interest in finding out about the significance of the harp as a symbol of Irish identity had been triggered by her personal experiences as a refugee to the country. It was prominent on all legal documentation she had had to deal with and of course it is the primary image on the Irish passport. Within the group interview that Emma participated in, it was interesting that none of the white Irish participants were able to offer her an answer as to the origins or importance of the harp symbolism.

Notable within participant feedback in Waterford was the degree to which many minority ethnic and refugee respondents had utilised the museum to both assist their integration into the local area and consider the local museum an information resource that could give them an insight into the 'identity' of Waterford itself.

Attempts at locating, or defining, 'Irishness' in a wider cultural context, outside specific narratives of colonialism or 'collective identities', emerged in discussions at the Chester Beatty Library. In some respects, the non-Irish nature of the collections at the Chester Beatty Library could be said to focus participants' attention on what Irish identity might be, or mean, at this location. For instance James, a Singaporean urban planner in his fifties now working in Ireland, considered Irish identity to reside in a cultural rather than specifically ethnic framework:

> *...the USA and Ireland to a lesser extent and my own*
> *country, Singapore, where being Irish or being American is*
> *not dependent on being a particular ethnicity, it's a culture.*
> *And by defining your culture as not being ethnic you're*
> *making it easier for people from different ethnicities to*
> *blend in. So a sense of being Irish is based on tolerance, it*
> *makes it easier but they (migrants) must know about the*
> *culture, the history before they can assimilate. We are a*
> *young nation in Singapore, so we are struggling with nation*
> *building and shared symbols because it's about translating*
> *shared ideals that people must buy into.*

Some Irish social commentators suggest, however, that future ideals of more open interpretations of Irish identity, as described by James, may be under threat following the passing into law of the Citizenship Referendum and Immigration Act 2004. By a majority of almost four to one, the Irish electorate voted to amend the country's Constitution, removing the right to citizenship from future generations of Irish-born children who could not demonstrate

generations of belonging to the State (Mullally 2007, p. 28):

> *The Twenty-seventh Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2004 proposed that a new section be added to Article 9 of the Constitution to read as follows:*
>
> *9.2.1. Notwithstanding any other provision of this Constitution, a person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and its seas, who does not have, at the time of his or her birth, at least one parent who is an Irish citizen or entitled to be an Irish citizen is not entitled to Irish citizenship or nationality, unless otherwise provided for by law.*

(Mullally 2007, p. 34)

Lentin and McVeigh (2006, p. 4) have argued that for the first time in Irish history, notions of Irish nationality, citizenship and identity are now tied specifically to ethnicity:

> *The state was changed utterly by the June 2004 Citizenship Referendum, in which almost 80 per cent of the Republic's electorate voted to link citizenship and blood by constitutionally differentiating, for the first time in Ireland's history, between citizen and non-citizen.*

While it is still uncertain as to what future impacts the constitutional change will have on Irish identities, there is evidence within my research sample of complex and diverse twenty-first century constructions of Irish identity underway. Significantly museums and their collections are actively being used by some participants as resources for such identity work as will be described in the next section.

## Museums and the Construction of Diverse Irish Identities

Within the museological literature significant international work has already been carried out in relation to museums both representing and constructing identities in national contexts (Knell et al. 2010; Watson 2007; Macdonald 2003; Hallam and Street 2000; Karp et al. 1992, Karp and Lavine 1991). The word identity in itself is of course an extremely complex term and covers not only ethnic diversity but also gender, class, age, religion, and sexual orientation (Fenton 2010). Museums are often key sites of interrogation for such concepts with audiences bringing their own personal stories and backgrounds to such institutions. I encountered such interrogations taking place at all museum sites, and by minority ethnic visitors

in particular. Unlike many of the Irish majority visitors who describe Irish diversity by utilising historic examples in a third person perspective, migrant participants are actually experiencing current change and spoke about identity issues from a first person scenario. This is particularly noticeable in minority ethnic discussions around the possibilities for their future generations' integration in Ireland and how their plural identities might be conceived. For instance, Sarah, an accountant in her late twenties from Malaysia but now living in Dublin, noted at the Chester Beatty Library:

We are culturally Chinese, you identify with your culture, with your practices at home, but you call yourself Malaysian. I assume that my children will probably say the same – they are Irish, national, and will be proud to be Irish, but as well as that they will be proud to be Chinese because that is my heritage and I hope, I think it would be nice for the new generation of us, it will be nice for them to see not just the Irish culture but also have access to this library to see their parents culture.

Museums are places that store cultural and national identities and are viewed as resources that could enrich and nourish the constitute elements of a 'new' Irish identity.  Such processes were highlighted by Jessica, an engineer originally from Hong Kong visiting the Chester Beatty Library:

*I have two Irish friends, they are a couple and they adopted a Chinese girl and the Chester Beatty Library is actually a very popular place for the parents who have adopted Chinese kids, because the last time I came here to see a show, we saw a lot of them with their adopted kids. The parents like to bring them here, so they can see Chinese culture. Adoption is becoming very popular in Ireland now and a lot of them are from China so the parents bring them here to get them to know their own culture. Also, my two friends Tom and Rachel, they actually started to learn Mandarin because they want to teach the kids Chinese.*

At the National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks, a Filipino husband and wife mentioned how it was their belief that their children should somehow be able to access and be proud of their Filipino-Irish identity at the National Museum. They were uncertain, however, as to whether and how an Irish national museum could achieve this:

*I think it's important that they know about Asian things, because a child with an Irish and Filipino, they would know of a homeland culture. This is how they lived, this is how*

> *they show respect to their parents and the elderly, that's important. I don't know if this museum can do that.....they would make that child feel that they are from the Philippines?*

This couple's uncertainty was based on solid grounds: Could Irish museums, so steeped in a post-colonial mindset, incorporate other identities within a larger national frame?

## Discussion: Post-colonial Experiences – A Bridge between Diverse Irish Identities?

As has been outlined within this paper, Irish majority participants within my sample strongly self-identified with a particular ethnic and cultural background that can be seen to have origins in the colonial history of the nation. This identity often emerged over the course of interviews at the case-study museums in relation to specific objects, displays or even on the basis of the architectural style or geographic location of the museums. At the Chester Beatty Library the specifically non-Irish nature of the collections seemed to further accentuate Irish racial and cultural identity in the minds of visitors from both majority and minority backgrounds. As my research progressed, and it became increasingly apparent that a strong sense of a 'collective identity' was emerging amongst majority Irish respondents, it raised questions as to how Irish minority ethnic residents relate to this majority identity and whether, as citizens, they potentially feel that their identities are being excluded from the national story? Could Irish identity even be a threatening force to minority groups? This does not appear to be the case from feedback at the case-study museums.

The data suggests that many minority ethnic respondents have belief in their own 'collective identities' that are just as strong as majority respondents. Significantly, many minority ethnic respondents themselves are originally from other post-colonial states. In a similar fashion to the Irish majority respondents, minority participants demonstrated that they were acutely aware of the former colonial history and post-colonial present of their 'home' countries. In many cases minority ethnic respondents showed a desire to make connections between the colonial experiences of the Irish and their own backgrounds.

At the National Museum, Collins Barracks minority visitors readily made connections to the colonial exhibitions and displays and explained how this element of Irish history reminded them of how such struggles equally forged national identities in their origin countries including South Korea, India, and

the Philippines. The strong 'collective identities' that emerged from within my data are, therefore, in many cases partly due to such identities forcefully constructing themselves at various points in time to overcome a colonising force. Irish post-colonial national identity, which might initially seem exclusive from racial, ethnic and religious perspectives, appears, in the context of the case-study museums, to actually open up links of communication, mutual interest and shared experiences between extremely differing identity groupings.

It would appear that Ireland's colonial past and the post-colonial identity that it has created could provide the nation's museums with a rich source of material with which to explore future concepts of Irish identity and intercultural understanding. As Smith states (1996, p. 205):

> *we should not underestimate the continuing hold of a sense of national identity among the majority of the population in Western states, nor the desire of many members of immigrant communities to become part of a reshaped nation, while retaining their ethnic and religious cultures, perhaps increasingly in the form of a 'symbolic ethnicity'.*

Ireland's post-colonial position offers possible foundations on which to apply Smith's notion of a 'reshaped nation', one that can be truly inclusive of minority peoples. Myriad identities are increasingly important contributing components of what it might mean to be an Irish citizen. The shared experiences of post-colonialism may offer a platform in which such identities are recognised as contributing to new and dynamic formulations of Irish identity rather than be side-lined or relegated to tired debates around assimilation.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Ireland's colonial and post-colonial experiences continue to significantly influence contemporary constructions and perceptions of Irish identity. Museums, as places that purport to tell the story of the nation are important locations in which Irish identity can be said to be represented, projected and created. My research with visitors to three case-study museums found that majority white Irish respondents overwhelmingly identify with, and spoke of having, a strong ethnic and cultural 'collective identity'. Such perceptions of identity were often reinforced through the case-study museums, their collections or even the buildings they occupied. The colonial past was regularly cited by participants as being an element critical to their ideas around their own and wider Irish identity.

However, it also became apparent that minority ethnic visitors within my sample were involved in a process of interrogating definitions of Irish identity - past, present and future. Their questioning of Irish identity as represented by the case-study museums was in many ways connected to minority participants assessing how they and their future generations could be part of an Irish nation.

Significantly, my research suggests that institutions such as museums are actively being utilised by the country's minority ethnic citizens as resources in the creation of new forms of Irish identity. The post-colonial context that gave rise to what might be seen as a narrow Irish nationalism following independence is now, over ninety years later, opening up the possibilities of a diverse, intercultural contemporary Ireland. This is largely because elements of Ireland's colonial story as told within its museums, and still present in the fabric of Irish society, would appear to have the ability to act as a bridge around intercultural debate and understanding amongst the country's diverse ethnic groupings. The implications for the nation's museums are numerous, exciting and challenging. An acknowledgement by Irish museums that the country's colonial experience is not unique would be an important first step. It is, after all, the shared experiences of colonialism and empire by peoples worldwide that suggests Irish identity is not seen as an exclusionary force by many minority participants within my research. Many of these individuals themselves identified as originating from former colonial nations in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Ireland is still in the process of defining its approach to multiculturalism and is unsure of how interculturalism will work in practice. My research suggests that there are encouraging signs that such debates are already taking place within the nation's cultural institutions where new forms of Irish identity have the potential to be celebrated.

# Appendix

*Minority ethnic participant information across case studies (resident in Ireland)*

| Country of origin | No. Interviewed | Country of origin | No. Interviewed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Japan | 5 | Thailand | 1 |
| Korea | 5 | Iraq | 1 |
| India | 12 | Somalia | 1 |
| Brazil | 2 | Pakistan | 1 |
| Australia | 1 | Malawi | 1 |
| Singapore | 1 | Nigeria | 1 |
| China | 4 | Philippines | 3 |
| Malaysia | 3 | | |

| Gender | |
|---|---|
| Male | 23 |
| Female | 17 |
| Total | 40 |

| Majority participant age profile | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 20-30 | 30-40 | 40-50 | 50+ |
| 8 | 4 | 15 | 13 |

| Minority ethnic occupations | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Professional/Technical/Health | Service Workers | Sales/Commerce | Others |
| 12 | 8 | 3 | 19 |
| Clerical/Management | Building/Construction | | |
| 0 | 0 | | |

Note: Occupation categories taken from Irish National Census 2006. The category 'Others' denote engaged in home duties or school/college.

*White Irish participant information across case studies*

| Gender | |
|---|---|
| Male | 23 |
| Female | 17 |
| Total | 40 |

| Majority participant age profile | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 20-30 | 30-40 | 40-50 | 50+ |
| 8 | 4 | 15 | 13 |

| Minority ethnic occupations | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Professional/Technical/Health | Service Workers | Sales/Commerce | Others |
| 8 | 6 | 5 | 11 |
| Clerical/Management | Building/Construction | | |
| 6 | 4 | | |

*Foreign tourist participant information across case studies*

| Gender | |
|---|---|
| Male | 3 |
| Female | 5 |
| Total | 8 |

| Majority participant age profile | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 20-30 | 30-40 | 40-50 | 50+ |
| 1 | 4 | 3 | 0 |

| Countries of origin | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| USA | UK | France | Belgium |
| 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 |

| Tourist ethnic occupations | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Professional/Technical/Health | Service Workers | Sales/Commerce | Others |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Clerical/Management | Building/Construction | | |
| 2 | 0 | | |

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