The Role of Estonian National Museum in the Process of Redefining the Boundaries of National Identity

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Abstract Museums are powerful actors in the making of national identity. Through selection of objects, their spatial arrangements and storyline they open a possibility of a personal engagement with the national past. This ethnographic study analyses the new permanent exhibitions at the Estonian National Museum (reopened in October 2016) as a site where the notion of the Estonian nation, its heritage, heroes and historical memory is constructed. The main argument is that the National Museum has initiated a shift towards inclusiveness in the way Estonian national identity is constructed. The initial post-Soviet nation-building was largely based on a firm rejection of the Soviet era as a valid part of national history and employed ethnocentrism which emphasised the privileged status of ethnic Estonian nation and culture while excluding Russian speakers from the core nation. The new exhibitions rely on the language of human experience rather than placing the nation as the main actor of history. Effectively, the paper demonstrates that in this new discourse the boundaries of Estonian identity have become more permeable and adaptable in comparison with the early post-independence time.

Keywords Museum · Exhibition · Nation-building · National identity · Identity shift · Identity boundaries · Estonia · Estonian National Museum

Introduction

If you were to explain someone a history, culture and heritage of a nation, where would you take him or her? One of the most obvious answers would be a national museum. National museums act as inventories of objects and stories related to the narrative about a nation, its past, heroes and myths. In most cases museums hold the status of public institutions of central importance to a country's cultural life. With this position comes the authority with which museum curators create meanings, selecting,

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interpreting and building hierarchies of objects, facts, events and judgements on them. For this reason, national museum is central to the process of nation-building.

This chapter analyses museum as a place where national identity is defined and constructed through material objects, narratives, and management of space. It investigates the new National Museum in Estonia (opened in November 2016) and the identity narratives it presents. The main argument is that there is a shift in the way Estonian national identity (defined as an inventory of ideas about what makes "Estonianness" constantly (re)created both by political elites and the state, as well as ordinary people) is constructed. In the years the followed regaining independence, the Museum was in line with the official discourse of the post-Soviet Estonian identity which was largely built on othering communism and highlighting ethnocentrism excluding Russian speakers (who had come in various waves of migration to Soviet Estonia) from the national demos unless they were naturalized (Vetik, 2012). Nowadays, the Museum relies on a more critical discourse of national identity aimed at inclusion and complex understanding of Estonia's history which downplays ethnicity and focuses on individual stories of belonging. Simultaneously, the exhibitions do not challenge the notion of national or ethnic group as objectively existing collectives which give frame to our identity. The paper demonstrates that in this new discourse the boundaries of Estonian identity have become more permeable and adaptable in comparison with the early post-independence time.

In terms of methodology, the study is informed by two ethnographic observations at the Estonian National Museum (2016–17) with one involving participation in an event dedicated to the presentation of the new permanent collection to foreign scientists residing in Estonia. Additionally, informal conversations with the Museum staff supported the analysis. Finally, a qualitative analysis of the exhibition objects and their descriptions, as well as the spatial arrangement informs this study.

The chapter is structured as follows. First we look into national identity as a concept. Then the role museum plays in nation-building on the formal and everyday levels is discussed. Next, we move to the case study of the Estonian National Museum (*Eesti Rahva Muuseum*, ERM) which builds on an analysis of the Museum's history and its entanglements with Estonian nationalism. Finally, ethnographic data and an analysis of the contemporary exhibitions is presented. The chapter ends with a discussion and conclusions.

Nation and I

What does it mean to identify with a nation? How do we relate to and perform national belonging in the everyday life, our worldviews and ethics? These are the most recurring and topical questions asked in contemporary nationalism studies. Amongst a myriad of ways to answer them, two main approaches can be detected. The first one focuses on the perspective of an individual—to belong means to regard oneself as a national subject, to experience nationhood as one of many parts of self. The second one involves the social—to belong to a nation is to be perceived as such by others. These two aspects—self-location and being located point to the

fundamental process in identification, namely categorisation. Ascribing ourselves and others to groups ('race', 'nation', 'class' etc.) is a cognitive mechanism human beings use to process the massive amount of information we receive from the world. As argued by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), categorising helps us perceive the world as predictable, understandable and thus subjectively more meaningful. While identifying and categorising are rather instinctive, the way in-groups and out-groups are demarcated is socially constructed and culturally specific. In other words, the content of 'us' and 'them' reflects the perception, aspirations and power of those who have the power to create categories and promote them as self-evident in a particular time and space (Mole, 2012, p. 2).

Since the nineteenth century when the wave of nationalisms formed strong national consciousnesses across European societies and beyond, national belonging is one of the basic components of modern human identity. How does one become a national subject? Scholars of nationalism explain the process using the notion of nation-building (Deutsch & Foltz, 1966; Kolstø, 2014; Pye, 1962). Nation-building is simply a process of forging a sense of national belonging to a nation—an imagined community which shares certain past experiences, values and goals (Anderson, 1991). In that sense, national identity is a constructed political identity into which citizens are socialised through variety of means—from education to cultural institutions, the media, public rituals and political discourse in which the nation, the 'us' exists vis-a-vis other nations. The idea that the world is composed of different nations is enacted through national borders and institutions such as the state, army or national health care. It is also created and reproduced using symbols (think of national flags, anthems or even street naming, see e.g. Kolstø, 1999; Billig, 1995) and in more mundane setting such as popular culture (Edensor, 2002), arts, or consumer culture where products are designed to evoke a sense of national belonging in a buyer on an everyday basis (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Seliverstova, 2017a, 2017b).

To claim that all members of the society share the same interpretation of the national project mainly enacted by the elites would not be credible (Isaacs, 2014; Polese et al., 2017; Skey, 2009). Different social, ethnic, gender groups often have different ideas about national identity (Seliverstova, 2017b; Skey, 2009, 2011). Ultimately, one's national identity is experienced only through the reflexive self, embedded in a socio-cultural context, filtered by personal experiences and interwoven with other social identities. As argued by Benedict Anderson (1991), nations are primarily mental concepts—although members of a nation will never meet each other, the nation lives in the mind of each of them. This (inter)subjective consciousness and perception of the nation provides a continual background for mobilising individuals on the basis of nationhood.

Museum and the National Self

One of the places where the nationhood is at the centre of attention, where it is talked about, displayed through artifacts and stories is the national museum. National museums serve as shortcuts to familiarizing oneself with what has made

the nation what it is today, tell its story of the past, present contemporary development, be it political movements or contemporary artists. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when national museums were born, however, their development is strongly connected to the emergence of nationalist ideologies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Across Europe the demand for national museums followed the creation of national states. Typically, national exhibitions were initiated by groups of elites, aristocrats, academics, public officials or successful capitalists. Scorrano (2012, p. 345) states, 'Indeed, from its inception the modern public museum has acted as a cultural arm of the nation-state'. From their growth in the nineteenth century onwards national museums serve as an idiom of national identity, representing 'processes of institutionalized negotiations where material collections and displays make claims and are recognized as articulating and representing national values and realities' (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2011, p. 1). Together with flags, national anthems, and national days museums form a larger nexus of national symbolism necessary for mobilising loyalty of citizens to the nation and state.

Inevitably, museum is an institution of power and the process of exhibiting is embedded in and reflecting power relations (Bennett, 1998; Knell et al., 2014). What one sees in a museum is always fragmented and selected, revealing contemporary political discourses, aesthetic preferences, economic and technological dispositions. When talking about art museums but what can be applied to any museum, Carol Duncan strongly argues for the critical role museums play in establishing worldviews:

> To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community. Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual—those who are most able to respond to its various cues—are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms. It is precisely for this reason that museums and museum practices can become objects of fierce struggle and impassioned debate. What we see and do not see in art museums—and on what terms and by whose authority we do or do not see it—is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity (Duncan, 2005, pp. 8–9).

Translating this to the context of a national museum, presenting the nation within a political system of other nations, proves the nation is alive and provides meaningful narratives within which the objects on display can be situated (Datunashvili, 2017). The significance of a national museum can vary over time but the longevity of this institution through different regimes and times of political change proves its tacit power to shape identities and worldviews upon which blatant political mobilisation can rely (Jones & Merriman, 2009).

National museum is thus a peculiar act where a group of cultural experts conceptualise the nation—its heroes, experience, cultural specifics all expressed through stories and physical objects for display for the wider domestic and international audiences who interact, interpret their experience at the exhibition and confront it with their expectations, personal experiences and current socio-political context. National museums cannot be read only in the context of nationalism, they provide a variety of services from education to entertainment, from history to arts and

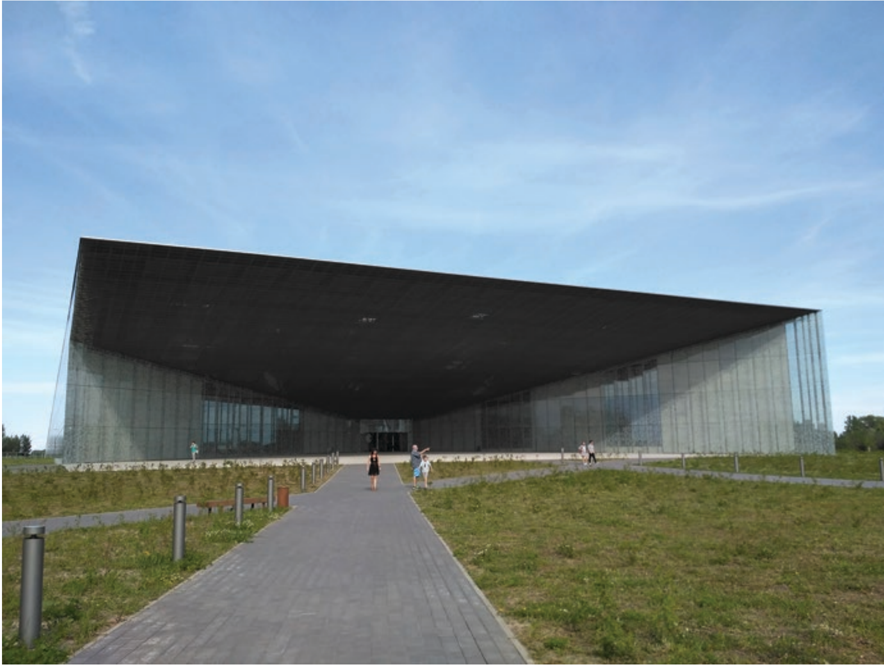
technology. Yet, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus mainly on the role the museum plays in shaping one's experience of national identity as well as hegemonic discourses of symbolic boundaries, defined as 'conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space' (Lamont, 1992, p. 9).

Estonian National Museum. Space, History, Identity

The reopening of the Estonian National Museum in late 2016 was an event of a nation-wide importance. As a resident of Tallinn at that time, I could observe the intensity with which the national media as well as local Internet portals created the message that a long-awaited national project is finally finished and available to the wider public—the nation—to visit. The new museum house completed the post-independence architectural project of the Estonian state, which was to grant new buildings to the three major educational and artistic institutions of the country, the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater in Tallinn (1999), KUMU Art Museum (2006), and the National Museum (est. *Eesti Rahva Muuseum*, abbreviated to ERM). A month after the National Museum opened its doors (1 October 2016), together with other foreign researchers I was invited on a dedicated tour and presentation of the new Museum. Undoubtedly, the reopening was not only about the new building—an impressive modern, spacious and glass structure designed by a team of international architects (Picture 1) but more importantly, about presenting the novel idea for the Museum and a range of educational and commercial services it could now provide.

ERM is located like no other European national museum I have been to. It is not in the city centre, surrounded by other public institutions but on the outskirts of town on an empty area with no other building and little pedestrian traffic. My first impression was that the Museum is in the middle of a field. After a closer look it turned out there is a grain of truth in this as the Museum stands on a former airfield with an easily identifiable runway. Upon arrival my fellow travellers and I were welcomed by two Museum staff and a guide who quickly satisfied our curiosity by giving us a presentation about the location and history of the Museum and its meaning to Estonians.

The unexpected and somewhat desolate location of ERM suggests that the reason behind situating the Museum was identity politics rather than convenience and proximity to other major historical sites and tourist attractions frequented by locals and tourists. First of all, the Museum is not placed in the capital but in Tartu, the second largest city and traditionally, the centre of academic and cultural activity of the country. Tartu is considered the cradle of the nineteenth century Estonian national movement and the place where the initiative to collect artifacts which would serve as the basis for a national collection was taken up by local intelligentsia associations. Interestingly, the Estonian National Museum had been established in 1909 that is before the country achieved its first independent statehood (1918). Its



Picture 1 The Estonian National Museum. (Picture taken by me in June 2017)

main activity was to collect and exhibit material objects of Estonian culture mainly relating to the peasant life as historically Estonians were governed by German or Russian speaking elites. In the interwar time the Museum was a cultural repository for a growing national consciousness, an idiom of nation and state-building (Kuutma, 2011, p. 242). Simultaneously, in the spirit of romanticism its task was to preserve traditional culture which was rapidly changing under the conditions of intensifying urbanisation and industrialisation.

In their presentation, the Museum staff explained that ERM was first housed in a manor that once had a Baltic German owner in a part of Tartu called *Raadi*. Back then such a location would mean a symbolic victory of Estonians over a long domination of foreign elites. The first exhibitions, much like traditional ethnographic museums still do today, displayed objects associated with rural life, agricultural work, rituals, religion, folk costumes, and folklore typical of Estonia. What is interesting, the owner of the Raadi manor had been an avid aviation enthusiast and had built a small airfield around the house. This structure was later used by the Soviets who dismantled the Museum and established an air force base there which was closed to visitors. The manor itself was destroyed during the war but the collections were secured in various parts of town until the perestroika time when the public demanded the removal of the military from Raadi and reopening of the National Museum (Runnel et al., 2014). When the Soviets left, the area was unfit for museum use. As a result, the Museum in independent Estonia reopened in a different house

in 1994 in the centre of Tartu. Soon after a competition for a new building was initiated. It was won by a team of international architects Dan Dorell, Lina Ghotmeh and Tsuyoshi Tane. On the Museum website the project is described in the following way,

> The authors of the project "Memory Field" based their idea upon Estonia's dramatic past—by denying signs from this era the Soviet occupation cannot, nor must not be erased from the nation's memory: they should instead be given a new and hopeful meaning. The former runway included in the project area—the sign of occupation—takes the role of a dramatic space. It is not only a runway, but a historic space scarred by military use. In order to give the space a more powerful 'voice', the empty space is extended by the new open building which expands along the runway. Its slightly inclined roof symbolizes rising to the sky, moving towards the future (ENM, www.erm.ee).

The new Museum, according to its staff, is meant to be a return to the classic idea of a museum as a place of debate and critical thinking. The Museum staff highlighted the contrast between the new permanent exhibition and the previous one. The first ERM permanent exhibition entitled 'Estonia. Land, People, Cultures' was open to the public from 1994 to 2015. Its curators concentrated predominantly on Estonian ethnography collection, inviting the visitor to a world of pre-modern community life on the Baltic coast (Karm & Leete, 2015). One of the workers explained to me that the exhibition created in 1994 should be understood primarily in the spirit of its times. *It was nationalist in a romantic way. We couldn't have done it otherwise. Back then everybody had to support the nation. There was a lot of enthusiasm*, she added. Ethnologist Kristin Kuutma also explains this ethno-romantic logic of the exhibition as a response to the public expectations of the time when it was compiled in the early 1990s. In the 1990s the Estonian state employed a range of policies and projects leading to strengthening ethnic Estonian identity as the basis for the nation-state. These included the recreation of pre-war cultural institutions, language policies favouring the use of the Estonian language as the main language of communication in the country (Seljamaa, 2012). In this landscape of intensive "Estonisation" of culture, the mission of the National Museum was rather straightforward. It was meant to foster national pride and confidence which suffered in the years of the Soviet occupation as well as provide the nostalgic experience of 'authentic' Estonianness connected to rural community life. It was clear in how the Museum curators talked about the new Museum, many of them researchers themselves, that their intention behind the new permanent exhibition was to depart from this romantic traditional narrative focused on the nation across time and space and introduce a new storyline that is embedded in personal experience and inviting dialogue and pluralisms of interpretations of the objects and stories around them.

'Encounters'. Boundaries Revisited

To analyse an exhibition, even if seen several times, is a challenging and inevitably subjective task. Exhibitions are experienced on many levels, from an intellectual interpretation to emotional and corporeal responses to the content. A lot about how

we engage with the object can be learnt from studies which investigated the interaction between an art object and a viewer (Best, 2002). Such studies have recognised the affective and personal aspect of this interaction pointing out that an art piece induces interest and sensory engagement leading to a variety of affective responses. Literary scholars remind how narratives displayed at the museum are always a confrontation of memory, social knowledge, personal experiences. All these combined, spatial arrangement of objects, lights, atmosphere and physical look of the space, sensory experiences enhanced with the current advanced multimedia technologies, finally the objects themselves and the narrative they are all linked within (or its absence) build a museum experience and open a possibility of a critical engagement with the past.

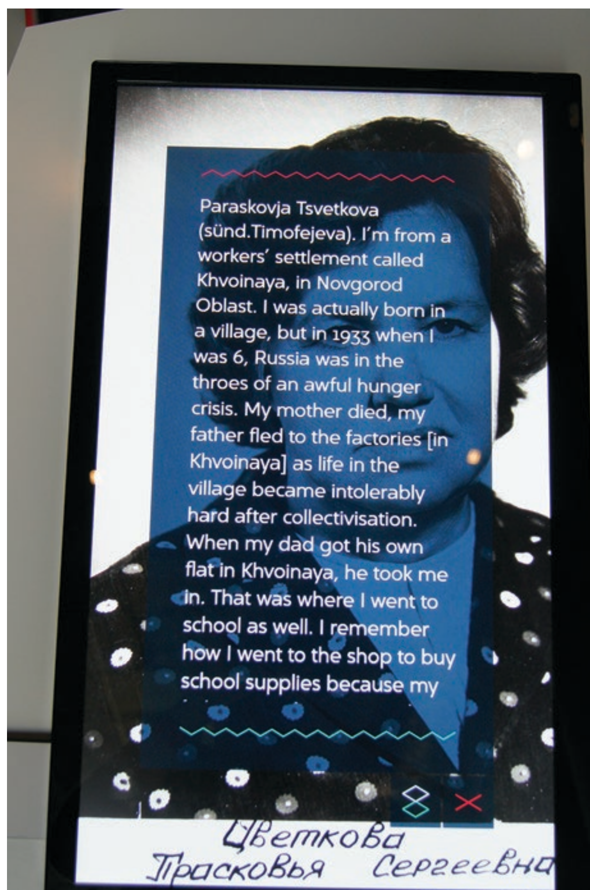
ERM permanent exhibitions are based on collections. The main permanent exhibition entitled 'Encounters' guides us through the cultural, political and social history of what today is Estonia, focusing on the lives of people who inhabited the Estonian territory or shaped the country through ages. The guide who led my group started her talk with a statement that this Museum wants to present not a nation but nations, cultures and peoples who happened to have lived in and left a mark on Estonia. The point of the exhibition is to relate to history and culture through human experiences, not necessarily national, she added, making it clear that plurality of voices and the perspective of an individual are the angles the creators of the exhibition wanted to achieve. Such an approach has important consequences to how the exhibition is organised.

First, the exhibition plays with chronology disrupting the familiar historical narrative (the nation from prehistory till now). Contrary to my expectations and experience from other historical exhibitions in Estonia, it starts with contemporary objects such as a chair of the Skype programmer who is an Estonian, or a 1990s ATM machine and other technological innovations typical of the 1990s but no longer in use now. Then it continues 'back in time' to the late 1980s, the independence movement and life under the Soviet regime shown through a gallery of objects considered luxurious in that time. An eye-catching example is a pair of jeans, which serves as a departure point to explain the influence of Western culture on Estonian youth in the Soviet times and the subsequent role growing consumerism and desire for Western goods played in anti-Soviet resistance. This part of the exhibition provides a good illustration of how the grand historical narrative is reworked: it becomes interwoven with ordinary people's life stories, resulting in a non-linear, yet complete picture of the past which is easy to relate to. The visitor gets familiar with the political history through personal items, stories of individuals, descriptions of objects based on someone's memory or a family story. Contrary to how the Soviet times are understood in popular perception, that is as a dark moment of Estonian history which should be forgotten (Pawłusz, 2016; Pfoser, 2015). The ERM exhibition brings to attention the everyday life during the Soviet times, showing that it was not just a backdrop to political events but a major site where subjectivities are constructed (Martinez, 2016). The language of an individual memory rather than a national one

points to an important shift. While the official restorationist narrative alienated and othered the Soviet times, ERM exhibition makes a point that people still had their lives, created families, had dreams and desires. As argued in many in-depth ethnographic studies on the subject of memory politics in Estonia (Martinez, 2016; Pfoser, 2015), for many, the Soviet times, are still present through individual and family memories, objects at their apartments, as well as se in the landscape of the city they live and its surroundings. For this reason they cannot be simply abruptly removed and alienated as it has been done in the hegemonic narrative (Pettai, 2007). In that sense the exhibition problematizes Estonian memory politics and allows for a wider spectrum of interpretations of the Soviet past.

Second, the exhibition redefines the notion of ownership of the state. 'Foreigners', namely those who would not be considered Estonian are given voice and authority to talk and their place is the national history is made legitimate. This is achieved not through introducing Estonia's minorities or any other group-based concept but by bringing to our attention micro universes of individuals who had lived or still live in Estonia. In Picture 2 we get to know the story of a Russian woman who settled in Estonia during the Soviet times.[1] It is told in first person and the photograph of the woman's face encourages empathy and understanding from the viewer. We feel as if she was talking herself. The ERM exhibition makes a significant move to open up the topic of Russian speakers as legitimate members of the society and their story as part of the national story. Thanks to the one-to-one meeting with a personal story, an emotional response arises which in turn opens up possibilities of reinterpretation with regards to the politics of representation and national identity formation (Gregory & Witcomb, 2007). The exhibition invites also a reflection to rethink the relationship between the Russian speaking people and the Soviet state, allowing them to claim victimhood of the regime, instead of equaling them with perpetrators. As a result, the exhibition reads more inclusive, reflexive and independent from the national didactics. The exhibition 'Encounters' certainly aims at de-centralising the nation and putting forth people, their cultural practices and complex relationship with local and international politics. The Estonian ethnic nation disappears from the main stage, leaving space for experiences and histories of different communities into the one historical experience of the nation as a single community.

[1] As a result of its geographical proximity to Russia, Estonia has always had a significant presence of the Russian speaking population. During the Soviet times, a considerable number of Russian-speakers settled in Estonia. By the end of the occupation, Russian-speakers made up about 40% of the population and most of them did not speak Estonian (Ehala & Niglas, 2006, p. 210). The rapid change of the demographic situation as well as the restorationist discourse resulted in a situation where the Soviet immigrants were deemed illegal and Estonia did not want to bear any legal responsibility for the newcomers. The Russian speakers were not seen so much in terms of ethnicity but rather as a potential political and demographic threat to the continuance of the state (cf. Pettai, 2007).



Picture 2 Personal stories at ERM. (Picture taken by me in June 2017)

The Finno-Ugric Mindset. Boundaries Maintained

The second and smaller permanent exhibition entitled 'Echo of the Urals' is an ethnographic display of artifacts related to traditional living of Finno-Ugric peoples. It is object based—exhibiting only a small part of ERM exceptional collection of items such as work tools, handicraft, folk art and ritual objects, parts of home interiors and countless folk costumes and accessories, gathered during research and amateur expeditions to Finno-Ugric communities in Russia.

Finno-Ugrism has been an influential theme in Estonian nationalism from its beginning leading to extensive ethnographic research into the daily lives, work and religion of Finno-Ugric tribes as kindred ethnic groups to the Estonians (Karm & Leete, 2015; Kuutma, 2011). The National Museum has collected objects and accounts from these expeditions since the early twentieth century. Interest in the Finno-Ugric peoples was initiated in the 1920s but in the 1960s to 1980 it grew exponentially (although within a Soviet ideological frame) leading to Estonian

folklorists and ethnographers as well as students making regular expeditions to various Finno-Ugric people dispersed around Russia. Tallinn became the centre of Finno-Ugric research and exhibitions for the whole of the Soviet Union (Karm & Leete, 2015, pp. 105–107). As Kuutma (2011, p. 245) describes it 'For Estonians, research in the field of Finno-Ugric affinities provided certain cultural agency outside the official Soviet framework as well as versatile ethnographic material.' It is notable that Lennart Meri, the first Estonian president after 1991 and a film director made several documentaries about the Finno-Ugric peoples and their customs, including shamanistic rituals and heritage.

The current exhibition "Echo of the Urals" continues the theme of an ethnographic display of a 'times gone by'. As it says on the Museum website, 'The central points of the display are Finno-Ugric settlements on one hand—a Komi hut, an Udmurtian shed, a Karelian sauna, a Sámi house, a Khanty forest camp—and several rituals on the other: the coming of age, weddings, honouring the forbears.' The exhibition features audio recordings, film footage, photographs and an impressive amount of physical objects related to agriculture, craftsmanship, rituals and belief, textile, footwear and jewellery (Picture 3).

At the entrance the exhibition informs that it covers Finno-Ugric peoples without the Estonians, Finns and Hungarians because their cultures do not need preservation as they have their independent states. The ideological construct behind the exhibition is what Kuutma (2011) calls 'salvage ethnography', a notion of preservation of valuable representations of the past before they are destroyed, lost or forgotten. It dates back to the nineteenth century romantic initiatives to "collect" artefacts of a

Picture 3 The Finno-Ugric exhibition. (Photo: author)

culture as repository of a true spirit of a nation. A few ontological assumptions about culture can also be read from the exhibition. First, that nations and ethnic groups exist as communities of certain distinct cultural qualities, they are ordered into hierarchies and taxonomies of similarity and difference. Next, national or ethnic cultures should be preserved centrally, by the state. It suggests the nation-state as a *natural* entity to safeguard culture and heritage of the titular nation, as well as points out to the responsibility bigger nations play in supporting ethnic groups ('not yet nations'). This is not only a romantic postulate but also a continuation of the Soviet view on culture as a collective attribute of an ethnic group supervised by the state (Adams, 1999; Slezkine, 1994).

The exhibition does not have an easy to follow storyline. It builds on isolated objects and an extensive use of multimedia technology which turns it into a fully fledged sensory experience. Imagine the roaring sound of a bear whose lightened outline suddenly appears in the dark corner of a room. I can still see it when I close my eyes. 'Echo of the Urals' is a full-in experience of a timeless pre-industrial, simple and close to nature life. It is a world long gone which we get to visit, literally stepping through the threshold of a reconstructed wooden hut with a straw roof. It is constructed as an opposition to visitors' everyday urban living. The exhibition world is like a Herder's paradise, available through multiple sensory experiences delivered by contemporary technology.

Contrary to 'Encounters', the Finno-Ugric exhibition does not challenge the nineteenth century approaches to ethnicity, nor does it seek to contextualise the vast collection of Finno-Ugric artefacts in the political and social context of the twenty-first century. While the Estonian peasant culture is somewhat put into perspective on the bigger exhibition, 'Echo of the Urals' echoes primordialism and nationalism. As visitors we do not meet individual but 'cultures', 'ethnic groups' presented as real existing groups of certain characteristics which make them clearly different from others. The guide followed this narrative to a point when she hesitated. While showing us yet another Finno-Ugric ethnic group's set of work tools, clothes and jewellery (supposedly different from the previous one), she remarked "oh well, these ornaments you see are similar to those found in other countries, these work tools too, like in any culture using primitive agricultural techniques." This sudden reflection of the guide is a perfect illustration to Barth and his collaborators' famous thesis on group boundaries (Barth, 1969) which they see as socially constructed and permeable. They observed that the boundaries between two ethnic groups are all but stable. They are maintained, even though their cultures might be indistinguishable and even though individuals and groups might switch from one side of the boundary to the other. The guide's remark illustrates also that museum staff has agency in governing political and cultural identities, selecting their content, and authorising it as legitimate with its power as a public institution and the guide as an expert on the exhibition content.

Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter analysed national museum as an identity making place where national boundaries and conceptualisations of a nation's past, heritage and culture are created and transformed. This is where visitors engage with the concept of a nation on several levels, from discourse to sensory and affective experiences. Because of that museum is a powerful actor with an authority to create discourses and alter them (McLean, 2005). The study of the Estonian National Museum new permanent exhibitions, described by their curators as debate-oriented and aiming at diminishing the prevalent ethnic representations shows an interesting paradox. The bigger exhibition entitled 'Encounters' attempts at dismantling the ethnic-based definition of Estonian nation and Estonia as a rightful property of ethnic Estonians. It operates with a language of human experiences, rather than placing the ethnic Estonian nation at the centre of its narrative. The exhibition highlights similarity of life experiences (such as war hardships or everyday life) as more significant than any cultural diversity within a nation. In contrast, the second exhibition devoted to the extensive collection of Finno-Ugric artefacts adopts a language of collectives and group classifications. It presents a synchronic view of the world as composed of national, ethnic and linguistic groups and sets strong cultural boundaries between them. Unlike the first one which engages the spectator through assuming a commonality of experiences between us—museum visitors in 2018 and the people who lived in Estonia across times, the Finno-Ugric exhibition is decontextualised from the current political situation and appeals to the visitor mostly through sensory experiences. While both exhibitions are object-based, 'Echo of the Urals' places more emphasis on artifacts and their arrangement than the storyline and interpretation. From 'Encounters' clear efforts to construct a reflexive, decentralised narrative where the viewer is seen as an active meaning maker can be read.

It can be concluded that to a certain extent ERM reiterates the key components of national identity is Estonia (such as nation's continuity through time, national symbolism and myths) but introduces also a few novel dimensions, offering a more complex and sophisticated understanding of Estonia's history and contemporary diversity. It can be said that the two exhibitions create and deconstruct cultural boundaries in different ways, reflecting an ongoing negotiation of the notions of nation, national heritage, 'us' and 'others'. Museums traditionally narrated the one big collective that is the nation. Multiculturalism makes the task of the museum more challenging, they are still to represent the nation but now with a focus on its diversity (McLean, 2005). The ERM curatorial team seem to be aware and vocal of this new critical paradigm museology has taken. As they are strongly oriented towards debate and dialogue rather than unification of values and moral didactics, the National Museum can become a vehicle of civic education and change.

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