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Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. 392 pp. Notes and bibliography. 79.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-3755-7; 26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-7878-9 (pb).

Review essay by Robert Aldrich, University of Sydney

Alice Conklin's *In the Museum of Man* made a very interesting book to read while I spent a couple of weeks in Vietnam, a country that held great interest for French ethnographers of the colonial period and also a place where present-day museums reflect many perspectives of French ethnological practice. The History Museum in Ho Chi Minh City devotes a room to ethnic groups. A chart with a map and *scènes et types* photographs of the fifty-four recognised groups is surmounted by a quotation from Ho Chi Minh about how no matter their origins, the different Vietnamese have lived and died together like siblings and should ever be ready to help each other. On the wall also hang old black-and-white photographs of different types of dwellings. In the middle of the display space stands a wooden pirogue, and the *vitrines*, divided by language groups (the Viet, Han, Malayo-Polynesian, Mon-Khmer and so on), contain basketry, utensils used for fishing and cooking, musical instruments, palm-leaf books, drums and clothing.

Paul Rivet, one of the most important figures in Conklin's volume, attending a conference in Dalat in 1931 and becoming "drunk on ethnography in this admirable country," suggested to Governor-General Pierre Pasquier the establishment of a museum in the city established as a French hill station near Lang Bian mountain (p. 216).^[1] The Lam Dong museum in Dalat features displays on what the French called the Montagnards, the diverse ethnic groups of the high plateaux whose customs and supposedly vanishing cultures attracted particular attention from French social scientists (and tourists). Here, as in the Ho Chi Minh City museum, display cases concentrate on the material objects of everyday traditional life, with a certain emphasis on the weaving and beautiful textiles for which the highlands people are famous, and on "the cultural characteristics of the local ethnic minorities" (to use the title of one section). There is an exhibit about "Revolutionary Struggles' Movements [*sic*] in Lam Dong." There are several old-style dioramas and also fine contemporary paintings of customary life juxtaposed with older portrait photographs. One modern photograph of a mother and infant with a motor-cycle-helmeted postman is captioned "Bringing newspaper to remote region, participating in raising cultural standards of ethnic minorities"; there is also an image of young people sitting at computers, underlining government policy, development measures and the changing nature of remote provinces.

The newest, largest and most impressive collection, however, is the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, located in the suburbs of Hanoi. Built from 1987 to 1995 and opened in 1997, the institution benefits from sponsorship by European and Asian governments and embassies, as well as philanthropic foundations and private companies. The two-story main building, according to the museum's website, is inspired by an ancient bronze drum; it holds a collection of 15,000 artefacts, 40,000 photographs and other items.^[2] Objects on display are arranged both by function and by ethnic group, with the usual attention to traditional work and leisure. They encompass weaponry, clothing, musical instruments, and items associated with ceremonial and religious life. Some *vitrines* showcase individual objects – a serving dish, bamboo lunar calendar or sickle – thus highlighting their aesthetic as well as functional aspect. There are, as well, free-standing exhibits, the most dramatic a tall spirit pole made of fibre and symbolic decorations, and a bicycle (*sans* rider, who appears in a neighbouring photograph) on which are carried dozens of intricately made rattan fish-traps. Recently added to the museum is a dramatic second exhibition building, which displays the different cultures of Southeast Asia (encompassing Yunnan, China). In the gardens are built or reconstructed numerous houses of ethnic groups – a set of Cham residences, a splendid Bahnar communal house, a Tay stilt house, and an Ede long house, among others.

The indoor and outdoor ensemble at the Hanoi museum offers an engaging and informative panorama of the ethnic diversity and arts and crafts of Vietnam, presentations similar in layout and quality to contemporary ethnographic museums in Europe. Departing from “traditional” life, a temporary exhibition in April 2014, however, focussed on sexuality and the sexual development of adolescents and included some humorous sculptures made of condoms. Explanatory panels, clearly aimed at young people, included Vietnamese, French and English text, with explicit discussions of puberty and sexual desire (“The first time I had a wet dream I thought I’d wet the bed.”).

These Vietnamese museums illustrate, in varying ways, many of the continuities and changes chronicled in Conklin’s excellent study of the evolution of French ethnography/ethnology and the transformation of the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro opened in 1878 into the Musée de l’Homme in the 1930s. They evidence the persistence of a scholarly passion, dating back to the Enlightenment, for investigating distant and different peoples in systematic fashion, identifying, classifying and categorizing them according to language and ethnicity, collecting and displaying the objects that they produce, recording their beliefs and practices, and theorizing about connections and variations between “races,” ethnies or national groups.

In their present form, the Vietnamese museums, like most of their European counterparts—though with notable exceptions—try to leave behind nineteenth- and early twentieth-century styles of display, such as cluttered cabinets of miscellaneous curios, weapons artistically arranged as trophies of conquest, or supposedly realistic dioramas. Words such as “magician” and “shaman” are banished in the Hanoi museum, replaced in the English version of labels with the clunky term “ritual specialist.” “Primitive” is taboo, even if there is a manifest intimation that modern urban culture, with newspapers and computers, is more sophisticated than rural life. The institutions, most significantly, show the abandonment of the idea of “race,” which Conklin legitimately says provided the central organizing principle of much ethnographical and anthropological work for over a century.

Now, “ethnic groups” or “language groups” or “people” are substituted, or displays are divided simply by geographical zone. There are no human remains in the Vietnamese ethnographic displays, though they may well have figured in earlier iterations of the exhibitions. As Conklin shows, human bones provided one of the key objects for early physical anthropologists. The institutions show, too, the increasingly multiple techniques of exhibition: assemblages of objects in *vitrines* according to functions or origin, complemented by cases with single objects, reconstructions, explanatory panels, photographs old and new, and videos. The influence of the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires—sister institutions in Paris, whose disappearance many greatly lament—is particularly evident in the *mise en scène* and the precepts of the Hanoi institution. The Vietnamese museums, like the Paris ones, generally underline the traditional nature of the groups they cover, with less sense of the remarkable changes brought about by urbanization, modern capitalism and political upheavals, though the display on puberty and sexuality in Hanoi is a somewhat unexpected testimony to the way that ethnological museums are expanding their briefs. In the Vietnamese exhibitions, as in the now dismantled Paris ones (and to some extent even those of the Musée du Quai Branly), there is nevertheless a lingering idealization and a rather static image of peasant life. The political orthodoxy of the Vietnamese institutions (a large statue of Ho Chi Minh stands in the lobby of the Dalat museum) not only is common in Vietnam, but more broadly suggestive of the various uses to which the *sciences de l’homme* have always been marshalled.

The museums in Vietnam also illustrate the theoretical and curatorial issues that Conklin’s book comprehensively addresses. Are the sciences of anthropology, ethnology and ethnography primarily about humans’ physical traits, material culture, or beliefs and ideologies? How do scholars find out about lives of unfamiliar peoples, and what are the political and moral boundaries for their investigations and collections? What are the links between social scientists, the state and political movements? How are the artifacts to be acquired, displayed and contextualised, and to what purpose? Such intractable questions were posed to colonial curators and museum policy-makers and continue to face their successors, as I discussed in several chapters of a book on colonial sites of memory in contemporary France.[3]

Displaying colonial achievements, and the lives and cultures of those whom the French conquered, formed an important part of French imperialist ideology, propaganda that broadcast the idea of a “before” of exotic and primitive or degenerate native cultures with an “after” when countries enjoyed the benefits of French governance, capitalist commerce and Christianity. In the post-colonial world, museum directors and their staff, as well as those who fund them and patronize them, have wrestled with what to do with colonial-era collections. A few museums have simply left things in place, becoming exhibitions of a particular moment of museographical practice, ideology and politics. Others have removed some objects, such as human skulls, relabeled displays and tried to contextualize collections. In still other cases, there has been an effort, successful or not, to remodel museums completely, as seen in the recent revamping of several natural history museums throughout France and, most notably, the creation of the Musée du Quai Branly.

The Musée du Quai Branly has divided opinion among critics and scholars, while attracting some of the largest numbers of visitors of any museum in France. The collections are remarkable, but the style of presentation more controversial, and a historian of the colonial period is likely to regret the lack of more attention to the provenance of the objects, the circumstances of collection and their changing meaning for European audiences.

The restructuring of museums continues; the Africa Museum in Tervuren, outside Brussels—founded by King Leopold II after a colonial exhibition in 1897, and opened in grandiose premises in 1910—closed in December 2013 for two years of wholesale renovation. The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, another colonial institution, has meanwhile continually struggled to re-do exhibits to try to “decolonize” itself. In Paris, the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie was closed, its collections shipped to the Quai Branly, and the grand Palais de la Porte Dorée transformed, ironically and not very successfully, into a *centre de documentation* on migration to France. The problem with these museums, just as with the ethnographic museums at the Trocadéro and the Palais Chaillot, was that they were built in part to show off and glorify the colonies and the colonial mission, their exhibitions and very buildings (at least in the case of the Porte Dorée) often intentionally inscribed with the colonialist message.

For most of the curators and the social scientists linked to these institutions of research and exhibition, as Conklin convincingly argues, race lay at the centre of inquiry. As her subtitle states, the themes of “race, anthropology, and empire”—to which could be added “exhibitions” about non-European peoples—were inextricably conjoined. The social scientists benefitted from French expansion to find terrains of study, and they solicited subsidies and carried out expeditions under the aegis of colonial authorities; their ideas about race, culture and modern development often served to justify, uphold and promote colonial efforts. Conklin speaks therefore of “ethnology’s imbrication in the empire.” (p. 200). Like many other academic disciplines—medicine, geography, the hard sciences, history—anthropology, ethnology and ethnography were inevitably partners to France’s colonialism and self-appointed *mission civilisatrice*. For some, indeed, they were proudly part of that endeavor.

Conklin’s book provides not only a thorough study of these relationships, but also a history of French ethnography/ethnology as science and as museum practice. Hers is the most comprehensive work on the evolution of the Musée de l’Homme, and she pays due tribute to the foresight and energy of the fascinating Georges-Henri Rivière. (I had not realized, for instance, the extent to which his museum, with its café, bookshop and range of auxiliary activities, foreshadowed present-day museums.) There is stimulating material about the intellectual development of the social scientists and the circles they frequented. One is reminded again of the tightly knit, though quarrelsome and fractious, intellectual circles in Paris (our “little ethnographic family,” as Rivet put it (quoted in Conklin, p. 294): a group divided by the political disputes of the 1930s and suffering much during the Vichy years. There is a sense of their excitement and of their self-positioning as pioneers in new disciplines and the investigation of still obscure corners of the globe. Conklin details well their intellectual itineraries, their methods of work and the theories they expounded.

Occasionally one wishes for a bit more on the social scientists as men and women; romance and sexuality, for instance, both their own and any interest they had in the *vies sentimentales* and

sexuality of the people whom they studied, seem largely absent topics. The influences of their experiences abroad (or lack of them), their religious beliefs and their aesthetic interests also might deserve somewhat more attention. Did they amass personal collections of artifacts from the regions they studied, and perhaps decorate their homes—as did such colonial celebrities as Marshal Lyautey and Pierre Loti—with *objets d'art* from abroad? Did they take personal pleasure in the music, the cuisine or craftwork of Africa or Asia, or did they consciously distance themselves from too close an association with foreign cultures, secure in their Parisian and European surroundings?

I would also have liked slightly more extended discussion, too, on how the ethnographers and ethnologists viewed France and Europe, the relations between the new study of “primitive” people and that of peripheral populations in France (such as Corsicans or Bretons?) and elsewhere, the parallel development of ethnographical and folklore societies and museums, the plans for a Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires (conceived in the 1930s, though it did not move into its own building until 1969) alongside the Musée de l'Homme. One could also think further about the connections between the scholarly culture represented by the thinkers and their institutions so sensitively studied by Conklin and popular culture—documentary and feature films, novels and songs, even food and fashion. There have been many publications on images of empire, but Conklin's work provides the basis for a far more nuanced discussion about the to-and-fro movement of ideas between the intelligentsia and the *grand public*.

As well as documenting those scholars working in France, Conklin looks at those in the field overseas, tracing a lineage from amateur to professional observers of foreign societies. She points out, however, that the boundaries between those two groups remained porous as researchers in ethnography/ethnology struggled for recognition inside the French academic world, and colonial officials and private travelers with the wherewithal and interest continued to be the source for artifacts and information. That kinship between public and private, and amateur and professional, can be seen in many works of the colonial period.

My other literary companion during my Vietnam trip was a travelogue by the peripatetic British essayist, novelist and self-styled non-scientific ethnological observer, Norman Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent*, published in 1951.[4] The previous year, Lewis travelled around Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the midst of the increasing warfare between French colonialists and Vietnamese nationalists—he sometimes travelled in an armed convoy—and he showed a particular interest for each *région inconnue* (as one chapter title puts it, using the French) and the “vanishing tribes” (another chapter title) whom he encountered.

Lewis writes about a “Doctor Jouin,” who, in central Vietnam, “had lived among the tribes for many years.” Jouin, he added, was an army officer and head of the French medical services in Darlac, “and the author of several weighty anthropological works, published under the dignified auspices of the Musée de L'Homme.”[5] Bernard-Yves Jouin, who is not mentioned in Conklin's book, was born in 1907, and when Lewis met him had recently published a study of burial rituals among the highland people in the Darlac region. Jouin went on to publish several works on the Ede (then called Rhadés), a tribe of the Moïs—the Vietnamese word, meaning “savage,” is no longer in common currency.[6] The “white-haired and gentle” doctor-scholar told Lewis that the Moïs were doomed to disappear within a few years and that “he had therefore set to work to learn what he could of their attractive if primitive civilization before it was too late.”[7] He gave Lewis copies of monographs and manuscripts, and with these Lewis went forth to visit local villages. In his peregrinations, he heard about another scholar, an unnamed “well-known French anthropologist” who, according to Lewis, “had been determined to live as a M'ngong [Hmong], eschewing all the aids of Western civilization.”[8] He had, in short, gone native, but had fallen victim to crippling diseases, including beri-beri. The villagers among whom he lived were fond of him but, fearing the burdensome expense of the elaborate burial customs that his death would demand, had French officials in Ban Me Thuot evacuate the dying anthropologist. Lewis found his hut intact, his desk “still littered with the papers he had been working on, with his fountain pen lying among them. There was an uncorked bottle of French gin, a miniature camera and several films. Ribo [the French administrator] said that he would exchange legends with the M'ngongs and that their favorite was the story of Ulysses

and the Sirens which much resembled one of their own, dating from the days when their ancestors, contemporaries perhaps of the Homeric Greeks, had been a seafaring people.”[9]

The anecdotes profile different sorts of ethnologists in the field, the *médecin-commandant* sending his research back to the Institut d’Ethnologie in Paris and a colleague burrowed into village life but struck down by illness, leaving behind the tools of his trade. The cases provide personalized insights into the ethnological urge to collect, study and preserve, the intrusive if well-meaning presence of these scholars (with attitudes, for Lewis, “both sentimental and predatory”[10]), their supportive or critical alliance with the agents of colonialism, and their consuming interest in what was curious. As with many of Conklin’s anthropologists, they reveal a deep-seated fascination with what was different in the world beyond Europe. Many feared, rightly, that cultures they encountered were doomed to disappear or to be changed beyond recognition, and that little time remained to record customs and beliefs. But they also betray a rather touching sentiment, exemplified by the sharing of stories about ancient Greeks with Montagnards in Indochina, about bedrocks of common humanity underneath the foreign and often strange practices. Lewis’ book is exemplary of the wide popular appeal of ethnologically-inflected travelogues; the volume became a best-seller, his elegant literary style, on-the-spot reportage, and critical facilities translating his observations, as well as the heavy-duty monographs he borrowed, into accessible prose for a wider public.

While French specialists and others were speculating about “primitive” peoples in their Paris workrooms or in the field, it would be interesting to know more about how their views compared with those of the people they studied. Conklin’s volume—though, to be fair, this is not its theme—says little about how indigenous peoples thought about race, how they divided one group in their midst from another, how they considered the material and intangible artifacts of their cultures. Only occasionally do we see a “native” social scientist trained in Western modes of thought (even though such people were very rare) reflecting on local societies and cultures, and there is a question of customary indigenous knowledge and attitudes as well. Lewis recounts the disdain of many of the ethnic Viets for the highland peoples. Lewis’ Viet driver, he notes, thought of the tribal people as disgusting savages and was fearful of spending a night in a “Moi” hut. Westerners were not alone in having reductive, stereotyped, and either romantic or denigrating views about minority ethnic groups, but people outside Europe also had their own categories, hierarchies and understanding of the life cycles, belief systems and material culture of their neighbors. What other ways of thinking about the “family of man” existed in that wider world reconnoitered by the Europeans, and to what extent did those ideas influence European views?

The colonial-era study of anthropology and ethnology both inspired and took advantage of public interest, and in the Anglophone world, Malinowski and Mead became celebrities known far beyond lecture theatres and tutorial rooms. This is one of the reasons why the confluence of the theory (as elaborated by such scholars as Paul Broca, Paul Rivet and Marcel Mauss) and the practice (as institutionalized in the Musée de l’Homme) was so important—a historical linkage that Conklin deftly explores.

Museums were and are a crucial interface between scholarly work and popular perceptions. They were supplemented by *expositions coloniales* and *expositions universelles*, illustrated magazines, travelers’ accounts, and increasingly by ethnographic films.[11] Nowadays, travel is much easier than before, of course, and the internet has brought the world to the computer screen. There is a well-worn tourist trail to Sapa, a site of highland culture in northwestern Vietnam, a trip to an ethnic village is *de rigueur* for a visitor to Dalat, and countless shops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City sell ethnic wares. The arm-chair traveler who types in “Hmong” to Google gets 13.7 million results. Tales of faraway places and exotic peoples still attract tourists, readers and television-viewers, as well as scholars, perhaps even more so with the perceived death (foretold generations ago, though much exaggerated) of indigenous cultures and also with interest in ecology and the supposedly beneficent practices of “traditional societies,” as exemplified in the works of Jared Diamond.[12] Those who visit Vietnam are both educated and entertained—and, one hopes, edified—by their tours of such institutions as Hanoi’s Museum of Ethnology, though perhaps they cannot not always put into context the exhibitions they view, and are little concerned about the finer aspects of museography or

the thick anthropological theory underlying exhibition practices. In these and other Vietnamese museums, European visitors are confronted with versions of history that do not accord with what they have been told at home or may be struck with a certain party-line in presentations about Vietnam's colonial and post-colonial past.[13] But returning to their own countries, they may perhaps then be inspired to reflect more on the way museums at home show off works of art or artifacts or record history.

The role of ethnography and ethnographical museums in reflecting and forming public opinion remains vital in post-colonial societies. In contemporary Vietnam, according to Philip Taylor, ethnic diversity "is showcased in museums, documentaries, cultural festivals, and tourist attractions, indicating the positive value attached to the project of Vietnam as a multiethnic nation." He adds, "This great wealth of minority cultures is represented, contradictorily, as a national resource, a vanishing reality, a development obstacle, or a security problem," and he notes that government policies have been greeted with "ethnonationalist movements, religious conversions, and political demonstrations that exemplify the discontent that many groups feel with the direction of these policies." [14] For both the local people as well as foreigners, colonial and post-colonial, in Europe and beyond, the scholarly view of others and its transposition into museums and other forums contribute to an articulation of national identity and public policy.

Ethnology and its affiliated disciplines have remained *engagé* in French public life, just as the state and politicians have promoted new museums and themes, from Chirac's mandate for the Quai Branly museum to Sarkozy's aborted museum of French history. In the debates about the decolonization of New Caledonia, for example, there was renewed interest in Kanak culture; indeed, a Kanak culture festival in the 1970s was crucial to the emergence of a newly contestatory Kanak political movement. Anthropologists such as Jean Guiart (a student and biographer of Maurice Leenhardt, one of the mid-twentieth-century figures whom Conklin discusses) and Alban Bensa (a student of Guiart) became *métropolitain* protagonists in the struggle for independence.[15] Bensa also served as an advisor to Renzo Piano, architect of the cultural center and museum opened in 1998 and named in memory of the assassinated independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, himself the author of several articles about Melanesian ethnology. The center's architecture, exhibition spaces and activities were meant to embody both best museographical practice and the most contemporary anthropological and ethnological perspectives on the indigenous peoples of the Pacific islands. The center was also intended as a belated recognition of Melanesian and Oceanic culture in a territory conquered by colonizers in the 1850s and subject to a decade of violence between pro- and anti-independence forces in the 1980s. Such developments show the continued pertinence of ethnology in the public sphere, as well as in the academy.

Conklin's important book provides unparalleled insight into the development of French study of mankind from 1850 to 1950, a century roughly coinciding with the conquest, rule and then large-scale loss of a new French overseas empire. Her book advances our understanding of the colonizers, how they elucidated their knowledge of the people over whom they ruled, and how they displayed foreign cultures in Europe. It suggests the manifold ways in which the *sciences de l'homme* continue to evolve, and to influence public policy, museum experiences and popular perception about those outside their own social ambit.

Notes

[1] See also Eric T. Jennings, *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[2] http://www.vme.org.vn/aboutus_history.asp (accessed 26 April 2014).

[3] Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France: Monuments, Museums and Colonial Memories* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), esp. Chs 6-7. See also my 'The Difficult Art of Exhibiting the Colonies', in *Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution*, eds. Pascal Blanchard *et al*

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 438-454 (a substantially updated version of a chapter that originally appeared in French).

[4] Norman Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam* (London: Eland Books, 2003 [1951]).

[5] Lewis, 92.

[6] Bernard-Yves Jouin, *La mort et la tombe: l'abandon de la tombe, les cérémonies, prières et sacrifices se rapportant à ces très importantes manifestations de la vie des autochtones du Darlac* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1949).

[7] Lewis, 92.

[8] Lewis, 117.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Lewis, 100.

[11] See Alexander C.T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan 2010, 2013).

[12] Jared Diamond, *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (London: Viking, 2013).

[13] See Claire Sutherland, "Repression and Resistance? French Colonialism as seen through Vietnamese Museums," *Museum and Society* 3:3 (2005): 153-166.

[14] Philip Taylor, "Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 3:3 (2008): pp. 3-43. See also Jean Michaud, "French Military Ethnography in Colonial Upper Tonkin (Northern Vietnam), 1897-1904," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 8:4 (2013): 1-46 for a case study of one military-ethnographical expedition.

[15] Since the 1950s, Jean Guiart has written prolifically on almost every aspect of Pacific islands culture--cargo cults, kinship, legend, religion, land, chieftainship, art and indigenous resistance. For his reflections on the *sciences de l'homme* and ethnography, see in particular, *Maurice Leenhardt: Le Lien d'un homme avec un peuple qui ne voulait pas mourir* (Nouméa: Le Rocher-à-la-Voile, 1997), and *Mon Dieu, là-haut, la tête en bas! Essai sur les fondements anthropologiques de la connaissance des cultures océaniques* (Nouméa: Le Rocher-à-la-Voile, 2002). Among the works of Alban Bensa, see especially *Chroniques Kanak: L'Ethnologie en marche* (Paris: Peuples autochtones et développement/Survival International, 1995), and *Ethnologie et architecture: Le Centre culturel Tjibaou, Nouméa, Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris: A. Biro, 2000).

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