

Imagined Communities on Display: Country Pavilions at the 2005 Aichi Expo

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Introduction

In 2005, an International Exposition was held in Aichi, Japan. Running from March to September, the Expo's official theme was "Nature's Wisdom." As is true of most modern Expos, the Aichi Expo was roughly split into two sections—corporate pavilions and national pavilions. More than a hundred different countries had a presence at the Aichi Expo, many in individual pavilions and some in shared regional pavilions (for example, Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador shared pavilion space).

International Expositions provide countries with an ideal chance to do some concentrated identity-building. As Benedict Anderson reminds us in his *Imagined Communities*, modern nations are far more than geographical entities. Modern national identity, rhetorically "imagined" into reality by poets and politicians, has to some extent replaced religion and bloodlines as the thing "giving certain meaning to the everyday fatalities of existence (above all death, loss, and servitude) and offering... redemption from them" (36). Anderson's book roams about nearly all of the nineteenth and twentieth-century, encompassing (among many others) Scotland and Switzerland's struggles with language, Korea's response to being a Japanese colony, and the creation of "Indonesia" from a disparate collection of ethnicities. From this sprawling collection of anecdotes come a few clear conclusions. One is that nation-building is never simple or easy; Anderson references large numbers of passionate poems, speeches, and other symbolic actions that have worked to build national identity around the world. Another is that national identity, when established, inspires powerful commitment and sacrifice.

The great wars of [the twentieth] century are extraordinary not so much in the unprecedented scale on which they permitted people to kill, as in the colossal numbers persuaded to lay down their lives. Is it not certain that the numbers of those killed vastly exceeded those who killed? The idea of the ultimate sacrifice comes only with an idea of purity. (Anderson 144)

The creation of this "idea of purity," this nation that gives us an identity, is a perpetual work in progress, and in many ways more difficult and germane than ever in today's globalized and connected world: what, in the end, does it mean to be Japanese, American, Mexican, Ethiopian? The answer is always fluid, always contested, and events like the Aichi Expo provide valuable evidence of such negotiations for the rhetorical scholar.

This paper provides, first, an overview and history of International Expositions and World's Fairs, with a focus on various examples of rhetorical nation-building. Then it turns to the

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2005 Expo, describing different themes that appeared at national pavilions and detailing the rhetorical impact of these themes.

Historical Background

What people call a “World’s Fair,” “International Exposition,” or “Expo” has a rather complicated background reaching back to 1851, when the “Grand Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations” was held in London. This first international exposition set the tone for all future ones in its mingling of commercial and philosophical motives. Erik Mattie describes it as being “born out of the hope that all peoples of the world might live in harmony, and, more prosaically, out of a desire to tap new potential markets for British products” (12).

Until 1928, expositions remained uncoordinated, and various countries and regions held expositions to showcase their identities and products. The Bureau of International Expositions (BIE) was founded in 1928, and from then on only BIE-approved events qualified to be called “World’s Fairs,” or later, “Expositions.” The one exception was the 1964/65 “World’s Fair” in New York; New York was denied its bid to host the World’s Fair by the BIE, but went ahead and organized one anyway (Cotter&Young 73). The resulting event, despite being boycotted by the major BIE members like England and France, and by the Soviet Union due to Cold War politics, was still so successful in the United States that it is commonly referred to as a “World’s Fair.”

International Expositions have served various functions over the century and a half they have occurred. At the most general level, they have mainly served to showcase national identity and promote international understanding while simultaneously stressing industry and commercial interests. However, the specific way in which these goals have been implemented has changed over time.

The major Expositions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries mainly boiled down to celebrations of empire – both imperial identity and imperial commerce. Largely switching back and forth between England and France, the main Expositions served to show off and promote the image of the colonial power. In 1906, for example, the Colonial Exposition held in Marseilles, France, was “dominated by a towering model of Angkor Wat and multicolored pavilions representing North Africa,” along with thousands of “living exhibits” of the colonial subjects of France (Rydell 1993, 64). The British responded in 1924 with an even larger colonial exposition at Wembley. Robert Rydell (1993) quotes from the 1924 guidebook:

The grounds at Wembley will reproduce in miniature the entire resources of the British Empire. There the visitor will be able to inspect the empire from end to end. From Canada it is but a stone’s throw to Australia, from Australia a short step to India and the Far East, from Hong Kong a few minutes’ walk to New Zealand or Malaya.... It is a stock-taking of the whole resources of Empire. (65)

The United States had its own take on the creation of a superpower national identity during the Pan-American Exposition of 1901. This Exposition had been postponed by the Spanish-American War breaking out in 1898, and proved to be an interesting rhetorical exercise. Sarah Vowell sums up the tense political situation:

Because of the Cuban combat, the United States was suddenly a world power almost

overnight. In fact, during one twenty-four hour period in August, we conquered Manila Bay in the Philippines and seized control of Puerto Rico. McKinley also annexed Hawaii and Guam. So what better way to calm the nerves of our hemispheric neighbors... than ask the Latin American and Canadian governments to join up in putting on a show? The exposition's secret theme? We're Not Going to Shoot You (Especially if You Buy Our Stuff). (196)

The Pan-American Exhibition had various "living exhibits" which showcased the lives of people all over the Western Hemisphere, helpfully arranged and labeled from "savage" to "civilized" (Leary & Sholes 95). The "civilized" pinnacle of the Exposition was the Electric Tower, covered with the latest in lighting technology, which symbolized the United States' bright hopes and plans for the future. The sight of the blazing white Tower had a strong effect on many Exhibition-goers; Leary and Sholes cite a viewer's diary entry on the topic:

No exhibition has ever had anything so beautiful as the pan-American Electric Tower. Never again will Buffalonians see on this earth such an inspiring and heavenly sight – the band playing "Nearer My God to Thee" as it gradually unfolded against the darkness of the sky to throw its beaming light to the world. It was as if God spoke. (57)

As a complement to the Electric Tower, visitors could also visit the "Old Plantation," a tribute to the happy life of African-Americans in the Old South, and see the shack of "Old Laughing Ben" and other cheerful "Negroes" (Vowell 202). In such ways the creators of the Exposition reflected and created images of the United States – both its self-identity and its relations with the more "savage" people in its hemisphere.

As the 20th century progressed and empires started to give way to the massive conflicts of the century, so too did exhibitions shift in tone, reflecting the tensions between world powers. One striking example is the 1937 exposition in Paris, in which the massive, glowering pavilions of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union faced off against each other in front of the Eiffel Tower. (a good photograph of this can be found at www.expomuseum.com/1937). On the other hand, the 1939/40 World's Fair in New York, with its theme of the "The World of Tomorrow," comes across as almost blindly hopeful and idealistic in light of what the next few years would bring to the world (Germany invaded Poland in the middle of the Fair). In his film about the 39/40 World's Fair, author John Crowley muses, "I think that there are moments where you can see the world turning from what it is into what it will be. For me, the New York World's Fair is such a moment. It is a compass rose pointing in all directions, toward imaginary future and real past, false future and immutable present, a world of tomorrow contained in a lost American yesterday" (cited in "Iconography of Hope"). The most striking images from 1939/40 include the General Motors "Futurama" exhibit, which trumpeted the glorious consumer visions of the future, and the "Democracy" exhibit, with its rather foreboding-in-retrospect theme song, "We're the rising tide coming from far and wide / Marching side by side on our way/ For a brave new world/ Tomorrow's world/ That we shall build today" (Rydell, 1993, 132).

There were no official exhibitions between 1940 and 1958, as the world convulsed in World War II and then the Cold War. The first exhibition of the Cold War was held in 1958 in Brussels, Belgium, and was the site of a great deal of rhetorical consideration from the major

players in the Cold War. American pavilion designers struggled with which vision of America to put forward to the world, and “it became increasingly clear that the American Pavilion was not only a cold war battleground between the Soviet Union and the United States, but a contested terrain over the transforming effects of the cold war on American domestic policy” (Rydell, 1993, 201). Specifically, opinions clashed on the issues of diversity and segregation in American life. When the design of the American pavilion was revealed to stress the diversity and equality of Americans as a great American strength, racists from around the country protested vociferously. The rhetorical construction of the United States as proudly diverse did generally prevail in Brussels, however. The 1964/65 World’s Fair in New York, unattended by the Soviet Union and many other major countries, provoked less anxiety over the United States’ national image, but did serve to bring “fairgoers face to face with the space age” (Cotter 29). Held midway through the race to the moon, the Fair focused a great deal on the dazzling and wonderful images of the future of space exploration.

As television reaches out to more and more people and the Cold War blocs disintegrate into smaller countries, the Expos have become perhaps less a source of overarching international themes than a showcase for many nations’ identity-building exercises. The 2005 Expo was no exception. In the next section of this paper, I examine three major themes that appeared in national pavilions: Industry/Products, Nature/Tourism, and People/History. Pavilions for larger and wealthier countries tended to mix these themes, but most pavilions had a fairly clear focus on one of them. Just as the first Exposition in 1851 existed to serve the dual rhetorical purpose of promoting both international peace and international trade, most national pavilions at Expo 2005 had a distinct tendency to be “selling” their country in some way. The first two options (Industry/Products and Nature/Tourism) are the clearest examples of such salesmanship. With a few exceptions (all in the People/History category), national pavilions largely tended to be selling either products or tourism.

Industry/Products

Many national pavilions focused either on the specific products one could purchase from the country, or more generally on the theme of industry and technology from the country. Almost all pavilions featured a small store or area where one could buy products from the country.*² However, some pavilions focused much more on touting the products from the country. Bulgaria, for example, had a beautiful façade covered with photographs of pink roses; within the pavilion almost all of the exhibits focused on the rose-related products of Bulgaria. Cambodia combined an impressive reconstruction of Angkor Wat with a large selection of silver, woodwork, and weaving from Cambodia. India bifurcated its presentation by having a lower level focus on the religion, history, and peoples of India, and a second level made entirely of shops. Indonesia cannily played to its Japanese audience by showing videos that featured the shining shopping malls of Indonesia, filled with Prada and Hermes bags. Vietnam was one of the most extreme: every item in the pavilion was for sale, except the

*² The exceptions tended to be relatively wealthy nations like New Zealand, the United States, Canada, and Brunei.

chairs to sit and eat ice cream in, the stage for musical performances, and the tourism video.

The Africa Pavilion deserves special note in this category. Almost all of the participating African countries shared one large pavilion space (Egypt, Libya, and South Africa³ were some of the few nations with a more personalized space), and most of the pavilion space was taken up with a large central market, making the products of Africa the clear main focus. Most African countries continued this focus in their individual areas, displaying various weavings, woodcarvings, and foodstuffs from their countries. Information about culture or history was generally lacking. Guinea and Mali, for example, were showing videos of traditional dance, but the focus remained on the woodworking and other consumable items. Ghana was one of the only exceptions; its area prominently featured a video that explored the history of Ghana. Most African countries spent all or almost all of their available space displaying products. This situation had the unfortunate effect of creating a rather homogenous image of Africa – all the countries blurred together like stalls in a market. Robert Rydell (1984) might complain about the 1873 Centennial Exhibit in Philadelphia that “African cultures were largely ignored by the colonial powers that controlled the African exhibits. The colonizers emphasized the natural resources of the African continent,” (31) but the African Pavilion in 2005 hints that the forces of capitalism may have been more key than the forces of colonialism.

At a more abstract level, many pavilions focused not so much on the specific products (be they honey, silver, or coffee) as on the technology and industry of the country. For example, The Russian Federation's large pavilion was filled with various technological products being developed, especially those that could help the environment (fitting the theme of the Expo). Displays showed high-tech ways of dealing with nuclear waste, of finding alternative sources of fuel, and of improving eco-friendly mass transportation. Italy's pavilion stressed Italy's automotive technology and chocolate-making, among other industries. The United States pavilion, after a homily about human progress narrated by an animated Ben Franklin, walked visitors through a display of recent space exploration, automotive, and heating/cooling technology.

At least in the case of the United States, the emphasis on industry is explained by a look at the guidebook: the pavilion was funded without any funds from the government, using money instead from private corporations and organizations (“US Pavilion”). This lack of government funding had previously resulted in the United States' being absent from the Hanover Expo in 2000; in 2005 the pavilion was made possible by (to name the largest donors) the National Association of Manufacturers, the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, General Motors, Saatchi & Saatchi, the Audubon Society, and the State of Texas (motto: “Wide Open for Business”). The large amount of money donated by businesses and business-friendly organizations inevitably encourages an industry-focused tone in the display.

※ 3 South Africa also deserves notice for being the only African country – indeed, the only country I saw – that addressed AIDS in its presentation. Its pavilion had a computer display showing projects made by HIV-positive children.

Tourism/Nature

The flip side of products and industry is a focus on nature and tourism – that is, on the country itself as product. Nearly all of the African countries that did not focus on the commercial products focused instead on the country as a tourist spot. Madagascar's presentation, for example, focused on nature to the extent that my notes include the question, "Are there any *people* in Madagascar?" As far as the country's presentation at the Expo indicated, it is an unspoiled wilderness, entirely free of human beings; indeed, its area was titled "Nature's Promised Sanctuary." Kenya's prominently displayed motto was "Experience a Different Safari Every Day," with nature videos and a butterfly display. Tanzania's area featured Kilimanjaro and the Serengeti, and Gabon's area was designed to evoke the rain forest. In all these cases, the focus was less on the exported products and industry of the country, and more on the country as a place to come for tourists.

African countries were certainly not the only ones that focused on nature and tourism. Malaysia presented itself as a tourist paradise – throughout its entire pavilion, only a brief glimpse of Kuala Lumpur in a video indicated that Malaysia even has cities. Visitors first walked through detailed reproductions of various natural attractions in Malaysia: a rainforest, a cave, and a reef. Later, visitors could watch a video showing tourists frolicking on Malaysia's beaches. The scantily clad female tourists in the video clashed oddly with the female assistants in relatively conservative Islamic head wraps; indeed, pictures and images of actual Malaysians were almost entirely lacking in the pavilion. Brunei also had very little of daily life, focusing instead on its rich natural gas industry and its wildlife--sometimes also to jarring effect, as when a display referred to the "white bellied eagles [that] are frequent visitors to our loading jetty." In these cases, the focus on tourism tended to obscure the everyday life of the citizens of the countries.

The sparse pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina points to another major reason that a country might focus on scenery and nature. Bosnia and Herzegovina's walls were covered with large pictures of mountains and a large video screen showed skiers and hikers. The still-scarred streets of Sarajevo never intruded to remind visitors of the recent painful history of the region. Bosnia and Herzegovina's rhetorical choices remind us that in many cases dwelling on the natural beauty of a region is preferable to focusing on harsh realities like war, poverty, or disease. A rhetorical critic would be interested to see what the Iraq and Afghanistan pavilions would look like at the next Expo – both were absent from the 2005 Expo, for obvious financial and rhetorical reasons.

People/History

The last category is the loosest and most nebulous, in part because it is the most anti-commercial of the three. Countries that focused on people or history were most clearly selling the *idea* of a country rather than a product or a tourist spot. For example, Canada's presentation showed the lives of six Canadians from all over the country. Representing a diverse cross-section of Canadian demographics, the six Canadians showed different slices of life from coast to coast. Although each slice revealed different aspects of Canadian culture, geography, and daily life, the focus was on the people as symbols of the country. Similarly,

New Zealand's simply designed pavilion featured a large green stone considered sacred to the Maori, with water running over it and a simulated cloud filling the center of the pavilion. Meanwhile, huge screens filled with faces of smiling New Zealanders of all backgrounds, interspersed with scenery shots. Alongside the African countries, Ethiopia also featured a wide variety of pictures of Ethiopians in various styles of clothing representing different ethnic groups of Ethiopia. At the center of the Ethiopian section was a replica of "Lucy," the first humanoid fossil ever found. The implied message was that human life started in Ethiopia and those origins tie even diverse groups together.

In these cases, each country has chosen to focus on people as a symbol of the country, rather than on products or scenery. Of course "our people are friendly" can be read as a different kind of invitation to tourism, but it is certainly a less overt selling of the country as a product. All of the countries that chose to focus on the people are countries that have a fairly diverse population, and their presentation is largely focused on creating an image of the country as proudly and harmoniously diverse.

One aspect of national identity that generally was lacking in pavilions was any sense of history. On the whole, pavilions were unmoored in history, showing the country as if it existed outside the currents of time – a snapshot of the country in 2005, without any past. Countries that even touched on historical topics – South Africa's brief discussion of apartheid, Ghana's references to slavery, Greece's reproduction of the ancient Olympics and Athenian theater – were rare enough to be notable. The United States, for example, purportedly had a very strong historical focus: Benjamin Franklin arriving to extol the achievements of the last 200 years. However, those achievements were left so vague that they could refer to any (or no) actual historical event.

The one pavilion that focused a great deal – almost exclusively – on history was Egypt's, which was basically a walk through the great relics of the Age of the Pharaohs. Other than a very brief mention of modern industry, the Egyptian pavilion was entirely a paean to the past; a visitor would come away with nearly no image of Egypt more recent than 3000 years ago. Although such an intense focus on history was extremely rare at the 2005 Expo, it is one additional choice available to a country presenting itself publicly. Although a focus on people or history is not overtly an appeal to tourism, pavilions with this focus are also creating an image of the country for consumption.

Conclusion

In today's "flattened world" of globalization (Friedman), with increasing access to the Internet, international media, and light-speed communications, it may be that world's fairs and expositions are much less important in shaping public perceptions. The last expo in the United States was in 1984, in New Orleans, and "had the unique distinction of declaring bankruptcy while still in operation" (Heller). According to the Expomuseum web site, there are currently no plans to host another Expo in the United States. Clearly the United States has decided that such events are not the most effective way to promote understanding and trade in today's age.

Today's expositions may well not shape the zeitgeist in the ways the Brussels, New York,

or London World's Fairs did. People seem unlikely to remember an Expo as ushering in a new age in the way people remember, for example, the 1964 New York's World Fair as signaling the beginning of the Space Age. However, at the more micro level, Expos continue to reflect the times and the self-images of the countries involved. As artifacts for understanding a nation's desired image, Expo pavilions stand as concrete and discrete rhetorical acts that can serve as complex rhetorical texts worthy of analysis. In the case of Expo 2005, the three general categories of products, tourism, and people reflected three different rhetorical visions of the country created for consumption by the visitors to the Expo. In these three-dimensional commercials for a nation, one can see the intersections – sometimes rough, sometimes smooth – between the country as it currently is and the nation that it wishes to be: prosperous, peaceful, beautiful, and harmonious.

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