Indigenizing the Museum

The specialized knowledge presented in history and ethnology museums is often presumed to be fixed and immutable; however, in order to remain culturally and financially viable, museums and their messages must evolve. In this process, museums that focus on contested histories face particular challenges as they attempt to balance professional standards and visitor expectations while navigating charged socio-political environments. This paper discusses the indigenization of Hawaii museums in response to increased politicization of Pacific indigenous identities. Specifically, it examines how exhibits in the Hawaiian and Pacific Halls at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Hawaii were transformed to immerse visitors in indigenous perspectives. Exhibits current in earlier eras were redesigned in collaboration with scholars and cultural practitioners to emphasize native agency and resilience rather than victimization. Ultimately, the changing historical views in the museum are reflective of evolving cultural politics.