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The ambivalence of gender:

The collector, ethnographer and colonial women's movement activist, Antonie Brandeis

Several museums in Germany and the USA hold collections of material culture and photography from Micronesia, gathered by Antonie Thawka Brandeis née Ruete (1868–1945) during her stay on the Marshall Islands in the years 1898–1904.[1] She accompanied her husband, Eugen Brandeis, who served as imperial governor of the Marshall Islands for two terms from 1898–1906. Antonie Brandeis is an interesting case in point to explore the implications of gendered collecting during colonialism. While her role as a public proponent of the German colonial women's movement has received a considerable amount of academic attention, knowledge of her diverse activities as a collector and ethnographer is still limited to a small circle of museum experts. This contribution is based on preliminary findings from my ongoing research on her biography and the provenance of her collection at the Museum Natur und Mensch in Freiburg.[2] For the sake of brevity, I will focus on three aspects with regards to gender and ethnographic collecting: her role as a woman within a male-dominated institutional field, the gendered characteristics of her collection, and her own ideas of colonial womanhood.

The gender of the collector

Given the male-dominated institutional environment in the early 20th century, few women were able to make a mark as ethnographic collectors.[3] Among these, Antonie Brandeis stands out for her high demand for professional habitus. We do not know at what point she discovered her interest in collecting and whether it was triggered by a request by the Freiburg museum at the end of 1898.[4] But already in

January 1899, just five months after her arrival in Jaluit, she mentioned the existence of a growing collection of particularly “precious” objects.[5]

In order to meet the academic requirements of ethnographic collecting at the time, she corresponded with experts such as museum anthropologist Felix von Luschan, whose lectures she attended during a furlough in Berlin in 1901 and also after her return in 1906; at the time, still an exceptional thing for a woman to do.[6] She produced a considerable body of ethnography, which she used to supplement her collection with cultural and historical context in the form of extensive commentary and which she also published as articles in colonial and ethnographic journals.[7] Furthermore, beginning with her arrival on Jaluit she taught herself photography, which she actively used as a medium to document her ethnographic work. Today, this documentary legacy provides invaluable resources for researching the collection’s provenance.

Historic photograph taken by Antonie Brandeis on Jaluit ca. 1898/1899, showing two women weaving Pandanus leaves. Collection Museum Natur und Mensch, Freiburg.

She established and maintained professional contacts with scholars and museum practitioners, which often led to different forms of cooperation, centred on her collection. Ultimately, however, it was men who used her work for their own academic projects and who reaped its benefits; just like it was Eugen Brandeis, who received the honour and accolades for his donation to the city of Freiburg, instead of Antonie (Brüll 1995: 133).[8] Her status as a collector and ethnographer within early 20th century German anthropology therefore still needs to be assessed.

The gendered collection

Her collection stands out for its rich documentation of the material culture of everyday life and especially the sphere of production. This includes the gendered domains of work and craft, with a particular focus on the materiality and techniques of weaving, jewellery making, tattooing and body-art, fishing, boat-building and seafaring. As Salmond (2018: 159) has noted, her collection is not characterised by an exclusively male or female bias, but rather presents a balanced gendered representation of Marshallese society at the time. Together with her ethnographic notes and photographs, her collection thus provides tangible impressions of typically female crafts like e.g. the weaving of Pandanus leafs for sails and roofs (see picture).

While she did not record the names of previous owners, she notes that she built her collection mainly through barter with local women (Brandeis 1908: 37) and an abundance of presents, she received from the wives of local chiefs.[9] She also asked older people to reproduce specific objects, which had become rare or out of use (Brandeis 1908: 37). Today, her collection is rediscovered and potentially re-appropriated by Marshallese women, who find inspiration in old patterns and techniques for weaving mats (*jaki-ed*).

The collector and gender

Antonie Brandeis unwaveringly identified with the ideology of colonialism as a civilising mission, as many of her publications demonstrate. For more than 25 years (1907–1933), she was an active proponent of the German colonial women's movement, which propagated a conservative ideal of imperial womanhood (Walgenbach 2005; Reagin 2001; Wildenthal 2001). At the same time, she perceptively noted the cultural change and destructive impact, colonialism wrought on

Marshallese society (Brandeis 1902: 192).

In how far her gendered colonial mind-set but also her own "complex position as a woman of colour" (Salmond 2018: 160) influenced her perception of Marshallese gender relations, is one aspect which I intend to explore further. Gender as a category of analysis is therefore particularly fruitful to approach the ambivalent legacy of Antonie Brandeis and her collection.

* I wish to extend my gratitude to the von Brand family (Maryland) for granting me access to an extensive private collection of personal documents and letters of their great-grandmother, Antonie Brandeis.

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About the DCNtR Debate #1: It has long been accepted that colonialism had a distinctive epistemic dimension, which was upheld by disciplines such as social anthropology and other knowledge-making projects. Under this colonial episteme, people and human experiences were hierarchically classified according to racial categories and ethnography and ethnographic collecting were key components in these processes. However, the colonial regime did not only rely on race as an organising category, but also on gender. The first debate in the DCNtR Debates series tackles this question with seven contributions from around the world which

explore the relationship between the gender of the collector, the gender of those collected from and consequences of these gendered practices of collecting for the epistemic practices of display in today's museums.

Footnotes

[1] She is the daughter of Emily Sayyida Salme Ruete née bint Sa`id Al-Sa`id (1844–1924), which makes Antonie Brandeis the granddaughter of the Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar, Sa`id ibn Sultan Al Bu-Sa`id (1791–1856). The tragic life of her mother is a complex and fascinating story of gender and imperialism in itself.

[2] See https://www.freiburg.de/pb/,Len/1576576.html. The project is funded by the German Lost Art Foundation.

[3] See Brüll (1995: 131-133) on Lotharia Müller, Salmond (2018) on Elizabeth Krämer-Bannow, Gosden /Knowles (2020: 139-166) on Beatrice Blackwood, just to give some examples with a regional connection.

[4] As of ca. November 1898, the magistrate of the city of Freiburg began contacting high ranking officers in the German colonies with requests for collections. On 6 April 1899, Eugen Brandeis replied in a letter to the Freiburg museum that he was willing to contribute, noting that his wife was already busy collecting.

[5] Letter from Jaluit, dated 23 January 1899. In another letter dated 9 April 1899, Antonie Brandeis confirmed that she was collecting for Freiburg (both letters courtesy von Brand family).

[6] She had to ask von Luschan for his permission; see correspondence with Antonie Brandeis, Teilnachlass Felix von Luschan, Staatsbibliothek Berlin.

[7] Such as Globus, Ethnologisches Notizblatt, Deutsche Kolonialzeitung, Koloniale

Zeitschrift, Kolonie und Heimat. As an expert, she also contributed to two important monographs on the ethnography of Nauru (Hambruch, 1915) and the Marshall Islands (Krämer /Nevermann 1938).

[8] See also the entry on the Brandeis donation in the Honour Roll documentation project of the Museum Natur und Mensch: https://www.freiburg.de/pb/,Len/1582690.html.

[9] Letter from Jaluit, dated 2 March 1900 (courtesy von Brand family).

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