Fritz W. Kramer

Anthropological Collections

Not an apology but an amendment

Sometimes it needs a sensation to draw public and media attention to a problem that otherwise only experts are concerned with. Emmanuel Macron succeeded in doing so when on November 27th 2017 in Ouagadoudou he declared his intention to create "the conditions for a temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage to Africa within the next five years". The German Foreign Office, apparently under pressure to follow suit, more cautiously suggested it wanted "to strengthen cultural cooperation with Africa, especially by reappraising colonialism", and the Minister for Culture and Media announced she would support "reappraising the provenance of cultural artefacts of colonial heritage in museums and collections (...) by establishing a new research focus" (*Die Zeit*, 26 April 2018). These statements instantly pulled anthropological museums out of their marginality – especially so in Berlin where moving the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art from the suburban district of Dahlem into the reconstructed Stadtschloss in the city centre had been in the making for some time, but under completely different premises. While the Humboldt Forum originally had been intended to demonstrate cosmopolitanism by featuring those "world cultures" that had inspired modern artists from Brücke to Beuys, now, against the backdrop of global migration, interest had shifted to the biography of objects, the ways in which artefacts of everyday and cult use had been stolen or otherwise acquired for the metropolises and there turned into ethnographic objects and works of art.

Anthropologists have long known that numerous museum objects have been looted, mostly in the course of punitive raids during which the colonial powers – in Nigeria, Dahomey, Abyssinia or German East Africa – seized weapons and insignia of royal power; cult objects that in Europe were regarded as works of art were often simply

stolen at night as Michel Leiris has graphically recounted in *Phantom Africa*. In former settler colonies like Australia, Canada and the US these findings for decades have resulted in far reaching consequences regarding cultural politics; in Germany, however, anthropologist for the last fifty years have been denouncing the colonial character of ethnological museums in vain. From their point of view the present debate about art looted in colonial contexts has been long overdue. And yet there is an amendment to be made. For in public the societies from which these objects came from never figure as active subjects but are always degraded to passive victims.

By denouncing ethnographic collections in general and suggesting that robbery and betrayal have been the paramount principles of colonial collecting we may not be entirely misjudging the honesty of ethnographers, colonial officials and traders, we do, however, fail to appreciate the traditional passion of non-capitalist societies for exchange. For them, as we have at least known since Marcel Mauss' essay on the gift, the acquisition and accumulation of goods from an alien world has been an elementary desire that went way beyond any regard for practical and economic benefits. For them the capacity to enter exchange relations has been a universal characteristic of human existence. Apart from cases of robbery and theft that call for judicial elucidation, the practice of collecting thus offered both, ethnographers and their counterparts, the opportunity to bring into their possession mysterious objects of value and by doing so to enter into social relations with strangers. In order to visualize this reciprocity in all its tensions I will not only look at the exchange of objects from the point of view of collectors but also and primarily from the point of view of their societies of origin inasmuch as they conceived of themselves as actors in gift transactions.

In the central highlands of New Guinea – a well-documented case – first contact with Europeans was a shock for highlanders and the exchange of valuables served as a means whereby the shock was overcome. People at first took the white-skinned foreigner for one of the pale-skinned cannibals of mythology; but then, we are told,

"he gave us shell valuables in return for pigs, and we decided he was human".[1] Shells, objects without any practical value, in the highlands figured as semiophores,[2] meaningful signs of an unknown world they came from and strongly desired because they played a crucial role in the competition for status and influence called Moka; by entering into exchange the stranger proved not to be a cannibal but a human being. Four decades later, in the 1970s, the Huli in a still remote valley of the highlands by their myths confronted me too with the question of whether I was human or cannibal, i.e. ready for exchange or not. But they no longer offered me pigs but shells, cowries and sickle-shaped mother-of-pearl shells; in exchange they asked for one dollar bills, which they didn't value for their purchasing power but, just as before, as signs of an alien outside world and a crucial element in the game for prestige. Societies that traditionally produced visual art had a much better hand in negotiations than Papuan highlanders – most of all (to stay in the region) the inhabitants of New Ireland. They were creating complex sculptures, the malanggans, that were only used during certain ritual festivals and then left to decay. Enthusiastic collectors therefore not only brought them material profit but also helped to dispose of objects that for their creators had lost all value.

That it was not only but especially image producing societies that were able to make use of the soft spot of collectors has been shown for many regions, e.g. for the northwest coast of North America[3] or the Central Bantu region[4]. As early as the 15th century workshops in the kingdom of Congo started producing ivory carvings for Portuguese traders and by extension for the cabinets of wonder at European courts; by 1900, during the heyday of ethnographic collecting, both Congolese and Europeans in the Congo Free State equally profited from the booming trade in ethnographic objects. The Congolese held back their goods in order to push up prices – or rather the amount of salt and other trading goods – and "haggled" so persistently that "it requires all the patience of the anthropologist and the entire passion for precious collections to endure this ordeal" as Leo Frobenius wrote. And the "natives" were no less keen on exchange than the collectors. According to

Frobenius “trading ethnographic stuff” even proved to be the only way to establish relations with them – “the great road, so to speak, that leads to a community of interests and to an agreement with the negro”. Masks, sculptures or decorated objects of daily use should not be seen as rare antiques of disappearing worlds, rather they were produced for exchange in the immediate vicinity of the collectors, as Frobenius candidly observed. The existence of such workshops may have disappointed collectors who, after all, were looking for the genuine and authentic. But some of them realized that the manufacturing practice was intact and that the new sculptures especially made for them had the same qualities as old pieces.[5]

The origin of objects in production for exchange refutes the accusation that they were looted art. But that does not devalue them for our museums. For the modern ideology of the authentic and of the originality of the artwork is one thing, the value of pictorial works from the point of view of African societies quite another. In Africa, pictorial works only partly and exceptionally were considered unique artefacts to be permanently preserved, for the most part they were regarded as transient and, if necessary, replaceable elements of a complex arrangement that we might just as well describe as performative art or ritual. They were predominantly made of wood or clay and exposed to the weather and termites without second thoughts; this was partly because they were meant to disappear inasmuch as the things they were reminiscent of were forgotten, and partly because they were regarded as prototypes and their repetitions as equivalents.[6] In this respect they resembled the performances of performative arts such as dance or music. Accordingly their producers should be compared to interpreters of performative arts rather than to visual artists in the sense of modernity. They practised a craft to which they were qualified either by long apprenticeship with a master or by vocation by a spiritual being. It goes without saying that their work was paid for with goods or services, and for this reason they could equally well produce for European collectors as for their king’s court or for other local clients.

However, the legitimacy of transactions and of the ethnographic objects thus collected remains difficult to determine since the value of exchanged objects was not a function of their practical utility. In all exchanges of this kind, at least one of the partners gave the gift a meaning that it didn't have for the donor. While shells, as opposed to pigs, for Europeans were as worthless as the notorious glass beads they traded elsewhere, the Papuan highlanders attributed a value to them, which they did not possess as things but as signs, as messengers from an entirely unknown world. Years later the Huli regarded the shells they offered me in exchange for dollar bills as nothing but things that had lost their meaning – like the malanggan figures at the end of the festival. African masks and figures too, from the African point of view, had an immaterial value as soon as they were animated in ritual, but their exchange value, to my knowledge, was negotiated independently between producer and client whose horizon did not in any way encompass a ritual animation of the objects collected. Collectors are neither interested in the ritual nor the practical use of objects because both, objects of daily use and paraphernalia, once transferred into museums always similarly function as exhibits as works of art and ornament do. The meanings and values attributed to them beyond this basic pattern were exclusively the product of the culture of modernity and changed with each of its periods.

Adolf Bastian, founder of the anthropological museum in Berlin, did neither perceive ethnographic objects as culturally or even artistically valuable artefacts nor as insignia of colonial rule as the suspicion of "looted art" would suggest, but rather as the expression of "peoples' thoughts", which had to be saved and preserved for the future in order to be analysed and "hermeneutically interpreted" "in the interest of the science of man". It was not until the following period starting around 1905 that these objects were elevated to the status of "primitive art", their shapes serving as a source of inspiration for modern art. Since Beuys and other contemporary artists the formal magic of these exhibits has faded while other ethnographic sources, most of all reports and films about shamans, have stimulated the genre of performance. Following the present debates about anthropological museums and especially about

the Humboldt Forum we must conclude that the obsessive concern with looted art stands in sharp contrast to the complete disinterest in the objects that formerly had fascinated as signs and messengers of faraway and alien worlds. With globalisation and migration the magic charms that the exotic used to exert on the interested public seem to have waned. Instead our gaze is now free to perceive the vicissitudes of wandering people and objects. If this impression is not mistaken, the Humboldt Forum may not only offer a presentation of various cultures and arts but also come up with a truly new design. It can tell the story of European colonialism in conjunction with the many conflicting stories of colonized peoples while the repository in Dahlem becomes a place of serious research and a source for changing exhibitions. Cooperation with the descendents of those who created these cultural goods is indispensible, not least because of their linguistic competences without which the huge sound archive can at best be partially understood. Looted artefacts are, of course, to be restituted, but beyond that individual objects can again circulate around the world and acquire a fresh meaning as signs that help postcolonial societies develop a new image of themselves.

The text was originally written for this blog, but first published in German in „DIE ZEIT“, May 8th, 2018. (Dieser Text wurde ursprünglich für diesen Blog unter dem Titel “Ethnologische Sammlungen. Keine Apologie – eine Richtigstellung“ geschrieben, erschien jedoch zuerst in der Wochenzeitung „DIE ZEIT“ vom 8. Mai 2018):

www.zeit.de/2018/20/tauschhandel-transaktionen-ethnologie-raubkunst

Translation by Robin Cackett.

Fritz W. Kramer *has taught* anthropology *at* Freie Universität Berlin *and art theory at* Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg. *He has published his theory of African art as performance – central to his contribution to this blog – in* The red fez. Art and spirit possession in Africa, *London:* Verso, 1993; *and in* Kunst im Ritual. Ethnographische

Erkundungen zur Ästhetik, *Berlin: Reimer*, 2014.

---

[1] Andrew Strathern, *The rope of Moka*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, p. XII.

[2] Cf. Krzysztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums*, Berlin: Wagenbach, 1986, p. 50.

[3] Douglas Cole, *Captured heritage: the scramble for Northwest Coast artifacts*, Vancouver: UCB Press, 1995. Cf. also Glenn Penny in this blog.

[4] Johannes Fabian, Curios and curiosity: notes on reading Torday and Frobenius; in: Enid Schildkrout and Curtis Keim (eds.), *The scramble for art in Central Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 79-108.

[5] Leo Frobenius, *Im Schatten des Kongostaates*, Berlin: Reimer 1907, p. 238, 355, 83.

[6] Cf. Denis Duerden, *African art and literature*, New York: Haper and Row, 1975.