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‘Cannibals’ with Chestpains

On Ethnographic Collection Histories

A *Pacific Presences* Workshop meeting at Cambridge in July of this year revealed an estimated 250,000 Oceanic artifacts available in numerous German Völkerkunde museums. The astonishment behind this number is twofold: 1. Most of these objects were collected during a relatively short time (roughly between the years of 1870 to 1914). 2. Comparatively speaking German museums house more Oceanic artifacts than France (65,000), The Netherlands (80,000) and Russia (10,000) combined (Buschmann, forthcoming). Assuming that similar numbers also emerge from the rich African collections in the same museums, one can easily grasp the multiple controversies surrounding the Humboldt Forum and related Völkerkunde museums highlighted in this fascinating blog space. The focus of this blog – the novel rethinking of ethnographic collection – should, however, engage “newer” as well as “older” considerations.

Older considerations involve collection histories (Provenienz-Forschung), source material for which is, in some cases, available in museum archives. Such sources reveal the acquisition histories for and post-colonial routes taken by many of these artifacts.

Bernard Streck’s important call (see blog entry October 3rd, 2017) to let artifacts speak is a sound proposition. Allegorical as speaking artifacts may be, one cannot but wonder what the objects might say? Would they agree with Adolf Bastian’s ghost which continues to haunt ethnographic hallways both within and outside of Berlin? Would they be satisfied to be remnants of a widespread Fin-de-Siècle European salvage paradigm? Or would they resent serving as trophies attesting to a renewed

German “imperial nostalgia”? (Rosaldo, 1989). But can artifacts truly speak? They cannot, notwithstanding the noisy passage of the occasional wood parasite. Yet, artifacts do indeed have biographies (Appadurai, 1986), trajectories (Clifford, 1988 and 1997), and they are entangled in a web of colonial projects that informed their acquisition (Thomas 1991 and 1994). In short, artifacts represent a sort of post-colonial flypaper that attracts and holds traces of their colonial histories. They are neither silent nor vociferous. “Sticky” artifacts hold celebration and condemnation and speaks both to the abuses in the German colonies of Africa (see Paola Ivanov’s blog contribution, November 21st, 2017) as well as the supposed absence of such violations in the Pacific. The overstretched dichotomy between the benign German administration in the Pacific Ocean and its savage counterpart in Africa was created by historian Hermann Hiery penned: “To Compare the German Approach and the Melanesian response to the well-known colonial wars in German South West and East Africa … is absurd” (Hiery 1995, 7).

Artifacts allow us to avoid such oversimplifying dichotomies that claim a radical difference between the German colonial administrations of Africa and the Pacific. Artifacts hold tragic as well as comedic elements and prevent easy discourses and categorization. Bastian, who is rightly criticized for placing ethnographic collections over the lives of their producers (Ivanov), stands at the beginning of defining which areas within the German colonies were suitable for ethnographic “plunder” that he, as most ethnographic practitioners of his time, saw as rapidly vanishing. This salvage paradigm argued that artifacts would become testimonies for societies experiencing rapid acculturation (or in some cases obliteration).

Bastian’s scientific gaze informed both evolutionist and diffusionist outlooks governing German Völkerkunde before the First World War. Yet, his concerns were never quite shared by ethnographic collectors residing in the German colonies. Useful in this regard is Michael O’Hanlon’s (2000) distinction between primary and

secondary collections. Primary refers to the collection activity performed by trained individuals, while secondary refers to the collection activity performed by individuals whose residence in the German colonies was tied to the primary tasks of commerce, conversion, or general administration. Secondary collectors saw collection through other eyes and generally employed a terminology of collecting firewood (*Feuerholz sammeln*) in utter disregard for the scientific discourses professed by the ethnologists. If practitioners queried such secondary collectors about the lack of clear determination of the artifacts they would retort, such in the words of a northern German schooner captain, that: "I always ask these guys once, because if I ask them twice they will always tell me something else" (*Ick frog de Kirls immer blot eenmol, denn wenn ick se tweemol frog denn segg se mi immer wat anners*) (Stephan 1907, 3).

Secondary collectors could be motivated to acquire artifacts through the promise of purchase, a multitude of state decorations available in Germany, and, lastly, outright flattery, which reveal the aesthetics and poetics inherent in the collection of artifacts. Monetary incentive for collecting was the most obvious of the three motivations, but many ethnographic institutions were frequently cash strapped to allow for large purchases. The second incentive, orders and decorations, points to something quite unique to the German collection context. In post-unification (1871) Germany, most states that composed the union retained their ability to bestow orders and decorations on individuals who performed civic and military duties for such former kingdoms as Bavaria, Prussia, Saxony, or Württemberg. Karl von Linden, who would inspire the creation of the Linden museum a year following his death in 1910, knew about this collection incentive like no other as we can see from a letter he addressed to Karl Weule (soon to be the director of the Grassi Museum in Leipzig): "Obviously my blue eyes alone won't entice any patron to relinquish [a collection to the museum]; alas I soon discovered the proper cure for buttonhole ailments… As far as I can remember each of my patients has left my clinic in good health" *Es versteht*

sich von selbst, dass kein Gönner wegen meinen blauen Augen sich diese Liberalität gestatten würde, allein wie ich seiner Zeit bemerkte bin ich in der Lage, Knopflochkranke mit Erfolg zu behandeln… Allein, meines Erinnerns habe ich noch jeden Kranken gesund aus meiner Klinik entlassen (Linden to Weule July 25, 1903 Linden Museum Stuttgart, Leipzig Museum File). Orders and decorations were commonly carried in the bottom hole of one's overcoat giving rise to imaginary diseases as allegories for the craving for such a decoration: Buttonhole ailments (Knopfloch Krankheit) or chest pains (Brustschmerzen). Such allegorical ailments might seem as strange to the twenty-first century observer as any unfamiliar ritual practiced in New Guinea and readily aid in the anthropological purpose to make the familiar strange.

Collection histories also allow us to transcend the dry scientific discourse surrounding German Völkerkunde before the Great War. Practitioners may have attempted to erect disciplinary boundaries around this nascent academic field, but their attempts were frequently eclipsed by more aesthetical appeals. For instance, when the German frigate *Gazelle* returned with examples of the extravagant mortuary malaggan carvings from New Ireland during the 1870s, Adolf Bastian was among the first to notice their aesthetic appeal: '[I]t was primarily the wonderful and whimsical carvings from New Ireland that triggered a general astonishment among scholars' … *besonders die wunderbaren und wunderlichen Schnitzereien aus Neu-Irland, welche allerseitiges Erstauen in Fachkreisen hervorriefen.* (Bastian, 1883, v). Other museum directors, most noticeable the above-mentioned Karl von Linden in Stuttgart, would not only second this opinion but placed this admiration in the realm of aesthetics: 'I am almost ashamed to say that I am crazy about the extravagant carvings of [New Ireland]' *Ich schäme mich eigentlich, es zu sagen, dass ich ganz närrisch und verliebt bin in diese Extravaganz der Schnitzkunst Neumecklenburgs* [Neu Irlands]. (Linden to Max von Thiel, June 27 1907, Lindenmuseum Stuttgart, Thiel file). Such sentiment could only resonate along the colonial periphery, where local

colonial officials, missionaries, and traders were less taken by abstract ethnological theoretical constructs and more by the flattering letters forwarded by Linden in Stuttgart. Secondary collectors acted on flattery, monetary incentives, and "chest pains" or, in other words, on the poetics and not the scientific motivations exhibited by the practitioners of Völkerkunde. Such considerations provide possible answers for the large quantity of African and Oceanic artifacts housed in German museums.

Few secondary collectors bought the scientific motives that guided Bastian and others, yet they still found ways to engage in collections and forwarded, almost in a feeding frenzy, thousands of artifacts from the Pacific to German museums. It was almost a cannibalistic ritual that consumed indigenous material culture. Ironically, it was the German individuals who quickly adorned their recollections of the Colony of New Guinea with the trope of Cannibalism, presumably to guarantee a market for their published accounts (see, for instance, Krämer-Bannow, 1916). In a more comedic rather than tragic incident, such tropes could be projected back on the German colonizers. In 1909, ethnologists Paul Hambruch of the famed Hamburg Südsee Expedition traveled to Pohnpei in 1909 to interview powerful priest of this island, now located in the Federated States of Micronesia, about the supposed existence of cannibals on the island. Investigating accounts that ferocious cannibals had once roamed the islands, Hambruch kept pushing the Priest about the whereabouts of these 'savages.' 'Where did they go?' Hambruch consistently queried his informant. Stone-faced the priest replied: 'New Guinea, Sir', thereby engaging as well as subverting the trope the Germans had created for this Pacific region in a process which David Hanlon (1999) labeled counter-ethnography. Such witty engagements with the discipline of Völkerkunde highlight the possibilities in which artifacts can be displayed in more nuanced ways that ultimately reflects the poetics of collecting in addition to the well-worn post-colonial politics.

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