Bernhard Streck

“No power for nobody”

Let the exhibits speak at last

The goal is accomplished. The establishment of the new Humboldt Forum has revived what Adolf Bastian was aiming at by founding the Ethnological Museum in the middle of the aspiring metropolis Berlin [in 1873], but which was buried under the bombshells of the Second World War. Bastian’s key concern was, however, to present the results of a worldwide active salvage anthropology, an attempt by the well educated bourgeoisie to save the fruits of various cultures before the colonial proceeding globalization could crush them. Today, on the other hand, there is nothing more to save than the idea of rescuing itself, which lives off the more knowledgeable than charitable form of recognition of the culturally different Other.

The exhibits – these silent claimants – are soon to return from their postwar exile in Berlin’s district of Dahlem to the center of the capital and will find their new place – of all places – in a replica of the imperial palace of the Second German Reich. For urban planning reasons, the new building had to repeat the architectural dimensions and specific style of the Hohenzollern dynasty. However, inside, the exhibits will govern through their voiceless accusations of being victims of world civilization, acquired by businessmen, conquistadors, more or less scientifically trained collectors, and finally authorized museum ethnographers who tore them out of their contexts, bought them or preserved the objects, even though they were sometimes offered for sale voluntarily by their “bearers” who considered them as a burden of the past.

Ethnographic objects are masters of metamorphosis. What they retain after their journey from the distant but local cult sites, after being tied up throughout the long

transport route and after being subjected to the disinfectant regimen of the museum magazine until they arrive at their – often revised – place in a showcase is their agency. This agency is difficult to determine beyond its magic. Perhaps, however, this will become heard, when a perfectly familiar mystery is restored on the roof of the new home: the dome cross depicting the long-standing marriage between throne and church, the marriage between the Hobbesian monster Leviathan and Behemoth, which is characteristic of the Christian Occident, is re-worded in the new political lingo as “signs of tolerance and worldliness” (Monika Grütters).

It was more than often precisely this cacophonous symbolon, which gave the justification for the destruction of local sacred sites all over the world. There was no European colonization without the Christian mission. No matter how ruthlessly the pre-modern colonial looting or the organized one of the new machinist civilization that followed, acted – the traveling clerics believed to be able to distribute the right balance: the word of the church, which liberates from local ties of the ancestors, spirits and gods. For many years, their material embodiments found their way into art chambers of feudal lords, e.g. in the Berlin Palace, in the form of idols, fetishes and cult objects. The civic societies then created their own palaces for the immensely growing booty of the civilizing process: the ethnological museums of which Germany – the industrial nation with the smallest and shortest colonial possessions – has the most and largest.

Was it an unknown genius loci, which has brought the enigmatic acquisitions from the world conquests back from the city periphery into the center of Berlin? Bastian would have felt confirmed and welcomed the vitality of his “death angel”, which according to the well-known quote seizes the ethnic cultures as soon as Western civilization becomes interested in them. However, the fact that the rebirth of his ethnographic museum in the city center should be overshadowed by a cross would have caused skepticism in him. Concerning the Christian missionaries of the world,

he wrote in 1859: “The misunderstandings which they committed were the error of the system in which they were brought up, and to which they were much devoutly attached, but they are, of course, enough to make their attempts to convert often fill the reader with horror at the aberrations to which the human spirit, even in an advanced state of civilization is still exposed” (Adolf Bastian: Ein Besuch in San Salvador, der Hauptstadt des Königreichs Congo, Bremen: Heinrich Strack 1859, p. 313, Reprint LIT-Verlag 1988).

The exhibits in the Humboldt Forum will bear witness to the surprise assaults on the peoples’ spirits by the cross repeatedly documented in the ethnographic literature. The sign on the dome above them will make them speak. Furthermore, “through their silence they shout” is a saying in ancient Rome, which had the same fate as the thousands of world cultures, which did not have the strength of the Buddhists, Shintoists, Muslims, Jews, etc., but were imposed the cross. According to the decision of Horst Bredekamp, Neil MacGregor and Hermann Parzinger, this will be repeated, even though a relativization of the power of the cross is planned through the reproduction of the beautiful Sanchi Gate and adding the – surely always appropriate – word “doubt” (“Im Zweifel für das Kreuz”, press release of 6 VI 2017). The right answer to the denouncing outcry of the mere existence of these ethnographic exhibits would mean abandoning the cross, a true sacrifice, which – after many failed attempts – could be a plausible sign for the long-promised separation of state and church. Then, all power in this so impressively reestablished shell of the imperial palace would belong to the exhibits and the disempowered masks could begin to sing the unfortunately forgotten song “No Power for Nobody” of 1972 along with the legendary band “Ton, Steine, Scherben”.

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