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Pompeii in Africa

or the Recentering of the World

In October 1894, the German colonial forces conquered Kalenga, the fortress and residence of the ruler of the Hehe, Mkwawa, who had resisted the German conquest in the mainland of what is Tanzania today, for almost a decade. The colonial troops set the town on fire. According to Friedrich von Schele, governor of *German East Africa* at the time, at least 250 people died during the conquest of Kalenga, probably many more.

Among others, 2000 cattle, 5000 sheep and goats were looted as well as ivory in value of 80,000 to 100,000 Reichsmark (the sale of which subsequently led to a considerable increase in export earnings of the German colony)[1]. In 1895, Adolf Bastian, the founder and director of the former *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* (Royal Museum of Ethnology) in Berlin and today's *Ethnologisches Museum*, complained in a letter to the General Administration of the Royal Museums in Berlin about the fact that no objects were looted for the museum during the fire:

> "[There must] have, however, been quite some booty, since [the] town of Kuirenga [Kalenga], which had many thousands of inhabitants [...], had been fled hastily during the seizure, and thus like Pompeii (however a Pompeii which saved the efforts of previous excavations) stood open to systematically equip more than one museum, [...]."[2]

The whole brutality of the "denial of coevalness" (Fabian 1983) between "researchers" and "researched" – or to put it in the words of Andrew Zimmerman (2001), the "antihumanism" – which shaped the ethnological discourse of that time, reveals itself in this comparison of the settlement of Kalenga destroyed by Germans with Pompeii: the objects were scientifically cherished as "remnants" of past eras, while the

contemporaries of the time and owners of the objects died in the war or were violently forced to flee under the indifferent gaze of the researchers – as if the members of those societies degraded to "natural peoples" (*Naturvölker*) and regarded as belonging to the past, did not in fact actually exist.

It may seem redundant today to recall this event, as it is only one of many testimonials of the recklessness of the former personnel of the ethnographic museums towards those "conquered": testimonies which prove the hubris of the colonizers, including scholars of all disciplines at that time, and the entanglement of the history of ethnographic collections and colonialism. Since already in 1983, Johannes Fabian published his book "Time and the Other", and over one and a half decades have gone by since Andrew Zimmerman asserted the "antihumanism" of German (museum) ethnology during the German Empire. Today, most anthropologists and historians who explore the contexts in which ethnographic collections were appropriated are able to cite similar or even more atrocious utterances of scientists of the time. However, it remains an urgent task of today's ethnographic museums to disclose and communicate to visitors the colonial classifications and hierarchies according to which historical collections are ordered[3].

Yet, even on a more general level, it is not insignificant to critically engage with the positions of (museum) ethnology during the era of German colonialism. Not only because there currently still is a fascination with the "scientific curiosity" of the 19th century or the *salvage anthropology* of those times[4], which in its collections materialized the stereotype of non-European "peoples" as being without history and culture and thus also the colonial hierarchies. Rather, because it is precisely the universalism represented by Adolf Bastian – this idea of □□explaining the world from one center – that seems to be increasingly regaining importance, especially in today's political situation: hence, in a situation which is dominated by discourses on

the absolutized “Other”, conceptualized as homogeneous, unchangeable and devoid of any intersection with the likewise essentialized “Self”, and again causes resentment – if not racism.

While the first phase of current globalization since the 1980s had made it possible to imagine the transgression of borders and the decentering of power, or even an end to Euro-American hegemony, ever since the “year of refugees” in 2015, calls for an exclusive “us” have increased in public discourse. A broader acceptance of the ambition to actually provincialize Europe and its traditions of thought (Chakrabarty 2000) may already be a thing of the past. European paradigms dominate the public and political discourse; universalistic positions are increasingly gaining weight in museums as an interface of politics, public and science.

Fortunately, the majority of anthropologists have long since not only critically engaged with Bastian’s ruthlessness towards the people they are concerned with, but also abandoned the idea of □□taking the “Self” as a benchmark and declaring it universal. At least since the emergence of constructivist approaches and later the actor-network-theory, the constructedness of all realities has been emphasized – i.e. also of “ours” – [5], while the ontological turn questions modern-western ontology itself, according to which the faith of “others” becomes no more in need of explanation than “our” faith. After all, the Christian idea of □□God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ is no more or less credible than the idea of □□the Azande of Central Africa which – according to Evans-Pritchard’s (1978 [1937]) famous example – lets them believe that a granary collapses due to witchcraft in the moment you rest underneath it in the shade. If today’s universalism promotes “understanding”, “tolerance” and “cosmopolitanism” of a European kind[6], and even pushes for cooperation with so-called *communities* in ethnographic museums, but at the same time still naturalizes the “us” as well as “our” ontology, science, (art) history, religion, economics, politics, etc., then Bastian’s indifference towards the fate of people who

were placed outside culture and thus outside humanism, definitely poses a prevailing danger. For, due to this claim of universal validity, “our culture” is still endorsed as “the” overall culture.

It is by now commonplace that knowledge systems and power relations are interconnected. The naïve enthusiasm about globalization, which succumbed to the neo-liberal logic, is rarely followed by a critique of neoliberalism in public and politics which retains the knowledge of a relational and decentralized world. Instead, it is replaced by the pursuit of assuring the “Self” and maintaining the (by now far from realistic) supposition of one’s own dominance and centrality. Yet, it is precisely the insight of an always constructed and therefore changeable world which opens up the possibility to shape this world.

Bastian’s universalism was limited to the attempt to find – in the thought of societies degraded to “natural peoples” – the supposedly more basic cornerstones of human thought. However, for him these societies were excluded from human history and culture. Yet, if we again draw on “our” (modern-western) paradigms in order to explain the world, instead of deconstructing them in a established anthropological manner, then we too will fail to be humanists and will – in contrast to the actors of colonialism – perish, for today’s multipolar and decentered world will most certainly not be comprehendible by such means.

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translated by Ulrike Flader

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[1] Pizzo 2007: 165-175.

[2] SMB-PK, EM, 776, 1895/0099, 133-134.

[3] Also see an interview with Katharina Schramm in the taz newspaper: https://www.taz.de/Archiv-Suche/!5452183&s=humboldt+forum&SuchRahmen=Print/.

[4] See *Jonas Bens* in his blog contribution on 7.11.2017. This kind of positive appraisal of 19th century-ethnographic science can also be found e.g. in an article recently published in the Berliner Morgenpost (https://www.morgenpost.de/berlin/article212585437/Wie-belastet-ist-das-Humboldt-Forum.html).

[5] For a more detailed discussion regarding anthropological theory, see Richard Rottenburg (2006).

[6] In contrast to the postcolonial notion of non-western „cosmopolitisms", as discussed in Breckenridge et al. (2000).

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