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Will Museums of Ethnology Have a Future?

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IF ONE PUTS THE QUESTION THIS WAY, it would seem that it is merely a rhetorical one which could only be answered affirmatively. The reason is that there are, in quite a large number, museums of this sort which by now have a very long history and have grown into big institutions with collections of tens and even hundreds of thousands of objects. Because of the sheer value of the collections it seems unbelievable that these museums could be abandoned. But if one looks at some recent publications on this topic, one gets the impression that a large number of ethnologists working in these museums are not at all sure about the security of the future of this sort of museum.

This view may be proved by looking at the following example. Out of five major publications on the subject of museums of ethnology which have been published in Germany between 1990 and 1993 as many as three included the term "future" or an equivalent in their title⁽¹⁾. In this way, the editors (four out of the five publications were compilations) gave the impression that they wanted to conjure up the future of this sort of museum. But besides this speculation, the extraordinarily large number of critical publications concerned with this topic indicates that there must exist some insecurity about the fate of museums of ethnology.

A third point which can be used in confirmation of this view is the distinction which can be drawn – especially in the German-speaking countries – between museums of ethnology as a special sort of museum and the ethnographical museums in general⁽²⁾. In Germany, as in some other countries too, museums of ethnology ("Museum für Völkerkunde") are exclusively or almost exclusively concerned with documenting and exhibiting the cultures of non-European societies, whereas ethno-

graphical museums ("Museum für Volkskunde", "Heimatmuseum", "Stadtmuseum") concentrate on collecting and exhibiting the material culture of European societies, and more specifically, of their own society.

The difference between these two types of museum can and must – for our purpose – also be seen in the difference between the prosperity of ethnographical museums on the one hand and the low prospects of museums of ethnology on the other. This claim can be proved by the following figures and facts. In 1988 the German Association of Museums ("Deutscher Museumsbund") reported the existence of 2,400 museums in West Germany, including West Berlin. This figure was compared with the number of museums in existence in the same territory in 1969, which was 673. This means that in the short period of less than 20 years the total number of museums had more than tripled. By far the greatest part of this enormous increase is due to the establishment of regional museums in smaller towns and villages. For this sort of museums in Germany the terms "Stadtmuseum" or "Heimatmuseum" were coined, and they can in general best be classified as ethnographical museums, because their purpose is to give a picture of the local ethnography and the history of the town or village in which they have been established.

Over against this, during the same period not a single museum of ethnology has been established. All that has taken place in this direction was the re-opening in 1970 of the largest one, the "Museum für Völkerkunde" in what was then called West Berlin, the re-opening of the "Museum für Völkerkunde" in Frankfurt-on-the-Main in 1973 in an old and rather small building, the restoration of the "Übersee-Museum" in Bremen in 1979, and the restoration of the "Linden-Museum für Völkerkunde" in Stuttgart in 1985. Granted that several millions of D-Marks were spent on these restorations, in comparison to what in Germany too, is called the museum boom of the late seventies and the eighties, these sums amount to almost nothing.

And, just to confirm this view, in 1992 the city of Frankfurt-on-the-Main cancelled the construction of a new building for its "Museum für Völkerkunde" at the last minute after the drawing up of all the plans had already been completed by a very famous architect from the U.S.A. This building would have been for the first time a real enlargement of a museum of ethnology in Germany, and would have shown that this

sort of museum is of some importance too. Now, by the act of cancelling these plans, the opposite seems to be proved.

If at the beginning of my paper I mentioned the extraordinary size of several of the museums of ethnology and the enormous value which is represented by their collections, because of which it seems unbelievable that they could be abandoned altogether, we have to realize on the other hand that this mere existence cannot be seen as simply being justified in itself. On the contrary, the museums of ethnology are urgently in need of a new identity for their future.

This issue is, of course, not a new one. In Germany the discussion about these problems which ultimately led to a real change in the policy of some of the museums of ethnology started at the beginning of the seventies. And already at the beginning of the sixties the never-ending debate about the possibility of changing the museums of ethnology into museums of non-European art had begun.

In retrospect, one has to confess that the first experiments of the museums of ethnology with a new identity were a failure. These experiments can be identified with the re-openings of the "Tropenmuseum" in Amsterdam and of the "Übersee-Museum" in Bremen after major restorations had taken place in 1979. The aims of the new exhibitions in these two museums were the same. Their curators wanted visitors to become aware of the politico-economical as well as the ecological problems which the newly established states in the so-called Third World are facing. During the following years the curators of these new exhibitions were obliged to take notice of the fact that the public didn't like this new identity of the two museums.

A researcher from the U.S.A., Christina Kreps, who had worked in the museums of ethnology in Holland, especially in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, for over a year, came to the following conclusion with regard to the changed policy of the Tropenmuseum:

"People go to museums to learn, but they also want to pass their time enjoyably. Providing museum visitors with more recreational and pleasant experiences is a trend evident in almost all Dutch anthropology museums today. Partially this movement is in response to almost a decade of confronting the public with problems and issues in museum exhibits. Most museum personnel agree that visitors are tired of having to face the same kind of issues they see on their evening news and read

in their daily newspapers, in museums. People often go to museums to escape reality and `step into another world`. Museums are reacting to this by, in some ways, going back to more aesthetically oriented approaches of earlier years, e.g., showing the beautiful objects of culture in pleasant surroundings. `Art` is once again important, and presenting the art of non-Western cultures is not only a way of creating a nice museum atmosphere, but, for some, it is also a way of generating respect for other cultures." (Quoted after a published lecture of the late Herbert Ganslmayr, 1990. See also Christina Kreps, 1988.)

Only at first glance do these altered aims of the museums seem to be a reasonable solution. On second thoughts it shows that the museums have come back in full swing to a point from which they had started in the early seventies. It seems to me that it must have been this staleness in the museums of ethnology which provoked Kenneth Hudson in 1987 to put forth the following thesis: "I think it is quite possible that the day of the ethnographical museum has already gone ..." This thesis has in the meantime become rather famous and in a certain way it seems as if the outcome of the last part of the conference "The Poetics and Politics of Representation" which took place in 1988 at the "Smithsonian Institution" and was published as "Exhibiting Cultures" in 1991 was solely intended as an opposition to Hudson`s thesis. This had the ironic effect that Hudson himself had to provide the last paper to this part, and he presented a paper which was the least inspiring in relation to the purpose of the conference.

But, just in this way, it reflected the state of the art of the museums of ethnology and made it understandable why such a great number of anthropologists working in these institutions are not at all satisfied with their situation. This can again be proved if we look at the proliferation of new publications concerned with this topic. Besides the five publications since 1990 in Germany which have already been mentioned, there have been several others, especially in the U.S.A. and in the United Kingdom ⁽³⁾.

This intensifying dissatisfaction with the situation of the museums of ethnology seems now to be mixed with general fears about the future of these institutions. This can perhaps best be seen in the most recent German publications (*Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 1993). It is the outcome of an international conference sponsored by the "Volkswagen

Foundation". Three interrelated problems characterize the bulk of the papers which were presented. The first can be identified as the old issue of the repatriation of ethnographical artifacts to their places of origin. Especially those curators who are in charge of collections of artifacts which formerly belonged to North American Indians are very worried by the "Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act" which was passed in November 1990.

Peter Bolz, curator of the North American collection at the "Museum für Völkerkunde" in Berlin, denounces the reasoning behind this act, as he sees it – with regard to the Native North Americans – in a somewhat shortsighted way, in the following manner (1993:72):

"... it seems as if Indians have given up the fight for the land and have switched to the fight over bones and artifacts. The politicians in Washington must see this as a great relief because it is much cheaper and easier to pass laws for the return of the objects out of museums than to pass laws for the return of land. It is always good for the image of politicians to show that they are on the side of an ethnic minority. Compared to the American Indians, however, museum curators are an even more neglected minority with nearly no lobby in Washington."

And despite the fact that federal laws in the U.S.A. are not applicable to German museums of ethnology he quickly tries to draw a line of defence for the collection he is in charge of, in the following way (1993:75):

"The situation regarding Native American objects here in Europe is different from the U.S.A. and Canada, in quantity as well as in quality. There are some bones in anthropological collections, mostly skulls, but their number is very small compared to the vast number in American museums. The old ethnographic collections are also rather small and do not contain sacred material of a currently practiced religious ritual. The collections acquired later, around the turn of the century, came mostly from the same collectors who collected for the American museums. This means that these were either duplicate collections made originally for sale to other museums, or that the objects were 'second choices' and did not contain original sacred material."

Besides the fact that his argumentation is not very convincing – neither the duplication of collections nor their "second choice" character prove that the artifacts he mentions could not be "original sacred

material" – even Peter Bolz has to confess that "(t)here are, of course, single sacred items in European collections, but their importance to specific tribal groups still has to be investigated."

The questions of repatriation and of the connection between the artifacts collected in museums of ethnology and the descendants of the peoples to whom these artifacts originally belonged were also of significance for several other papers in this special issue of the "Zeitschrift für Ethnologie". These papers show that the topic of repatriation, an issue which – for ethnographical collections – also had its beginning in the early seventies, cannot be handled as dilatorily as it has been done in the last decades, and as Peter Bolz, who has been quoted above, still tries to do. Behind the papers of Jo Allyn Archambault, a Native American working at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, citizen of New Caledonia and working at the "Musée Néo-Calédonien" at Nouméa, and Mina McKenzie, a Maori working at the Manawatu Museum at Palmerston North in New Zealand, there stands the firm will to work constructively within the framework of this rather complicated issue.

All three authors describe in some detail concrete museological enterprises which in their respective fields of interest had been worked out in cooperation with larger museums of ethnology in the U.S.A. as well as in Europe. In this way they all support the view which a fourth author, Christian Kaufmann from the museum of ethnology in Basle, explains emphatically in the following way (1993:54):

"What is going to happen if the European museums of ethnology do not wake up to play their part in the dialogue?" (Kaufmann refers to the dialogue between the cultures of the highly industrialized countries and the cultures of the less industrialized countries of the so-(badly)-called Third World as well as to the title of the conference at which he read his paper.) – "The answer is, given the dense net of economic and social exchange that links up the `four corners` of the globe, rather simple: Then, the ethnological museums in Europe are going to a definite rest. For sure, our colleagues from the art galleries will eventually come and save some of the art works for their exhibitions – ... The rest will slowly disintegrate. And our colleagues in the non-European countries will be left standing alone, their backs to the wall, fighting a bureaucracy which always places economical development as

something quite different right on top of the ladder of priorities. ... The world-wide dialogue between museum institutions and the professionals they employ is one method to aim for a world that learns to control its conflicts. Survival is a matter of cultural learning at a 11 knots of the web, not just at some." (Emphasis in the original.)

The third problem which is faced by museums of ethnology in our days is raised by Christian Feest in the special issue of the "*Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*" under discussion here. Feest points to the fact that museums of ethnology were for a long time seen far too much as purely educational institutions, and he adds that they are, nevertheless, rather badly equipped for this task. But what to him seems worse is that this one-sidedness inevitably led to the neglect of the research work which is necessary to restore the contextual background to the collected artifacts for the purpose of providing a better understanding of them. This, in its turn, is a prerequisite also to the fulfilling of the task of international cooperation which has been set for the museums by Christian Kaufmann.

Besides his strong plea for taking up the research work he has described, Feest's paper includes some well-founded arguments against the view that the museums of ethnology could be purely educational institutions, especially if the educational function of the museum is seen as being fulfilled by setting up exhibitions of artifacts. Feest's argumentation runs quite convincingly in the following way (1993:93):

"The ... reason why exotic artifacts are far from the best medium to teach an audience about other cultures, lies in their visual nature. Since we are used to read visually encoded symbolic information on the basis of the knowledge of our own system, we tend to take for granted our ability to read visually encoded symbols produced by other cultures. Since the museum visitor cannot and probably should not be forced to read all the helpful information ideally offered by the curator, the result may be misunderstanding rather than understanding."

This caution can, of course, neither lead to the abandoning of the museum's task of setting up exhibitions nor to not taking the educational function seriously. The question how the educational tasks of the museums of ethnology may best be executed may have been raised at the conference which provided the material for the publication under discussion, but in the published papers there are unfortunately no traces

of an answer to it. But an answer to this question is today more urgent than ever. However one wants to explain the phenomenon of multiculturalism, the phenomenon itself and its associated problems are facts in nearly all highly industrialized countries.

Museums of ethnology can and should provide means which could help to smooth down at least some of these problems. In Germany this is far from being a new question, and thus some experience has been gained for example with exhibitions, which should in itself provide educational possibilities with regard to information about minority groups in Germany. As an example I want to draw attention to an exhibition which was shown several years ago in Bremen, Hamburg and Lübeck about Turkish migrant workers and their families in Germany. (See: *Türkei,...* 1974.)

A Turkish social worker who had studied in Germany criticized this exhibition in the following way (Meral Akkent, 1989:153):

"Please imagine", she asked, "that the presence of German tourists in Turkey is not wanted, and one arrangement which is chosen to give the Turks a positive feeling towards the Germans is an exhibition. The title of the exhibition is 'The Germans'. The aim of the exhibition is to broaden the Turks' minds and to inform them about the Germans. The content of the exhibition: German tribes, the development of several German Empires, the First World War, Fascism, the Second World War, the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany. The exhibition ends with Germans relaxing on the Turkish beaches!"

This description is of course meant as a caricature of the German exhibition about the Turkish migrant workers. Its original title was "Turkey. Native country of people in our city", and not as Akkent supposes "The Turks". Because I know the exhibition, whereas Akkent confesses that she only had descriptions of it from several of her Turkish friends, I can also say that her caricature is somewhat overstated. Nevertheless, in many cases a caricature strengthens the imagination, and Meral Akkent has done this successfully with her criticism.

But the main reason why I can side with her is the following. In my opinion, not only exhibitions in which the good will of the authors is too dominant, but also exhibitions which are set up with more reflection and critical didactics will mostly not achieve their goal: to broaden the minds of the visitors about alien peoples in a way which

really could help to smooth down the problems of living together with foreigners. For this aim, I think, the museums of ethnology will do better if they make use of their ability to become cultural centres which concentrate on the dissemination of the living arts and performances of alien peoples. By this I mean music festivals, dance, theatre, and films, for example from India or West Africa which do not reach the commercial cinemas because of their cultural specificity. This is a dimension of the educational function which several members of the staffs of larger museums of ethnology in big cities of Germany, for example in Bremen, Hamburg and Stuttgart, have already begun to develop, but which still has to be expanded.

In that context it may also be possible to set up exhibitions of modern paintings and sculptures from countries of the so-called Third World – an activity, which some staff members of German museums of ethnology pursue very eagerly, but which, in my opinion, is nevertheless beset with too much ambiguity⁽⁴⁾. If there is an interest in setting up exhibitions of purely modern art in a museum of ethnology, I personally would prefer exhibitions which have been created by an artist especially for that purpose, and which as far as possible should be designed by that artist in cooperation with an ethnologist as curator. However, it seems of minor importance to me whether this artist is a European or whether he or she comes from a non-European country. Anthony Shelton has given a vivid description of this sort of art exhibition during the meeting of the “EASA Network on Material Culture and Art” in September 1993 in Coimbra.

There are now three main tasks or aims the museums of ethnology should pursue in the future:

- intensify the cooperation with museums and cultural centres in the countries from which the collections in the European and North American museums of ethnology originated which Christian Kaufmann has postulated so emphatically,
- intensify the research which will help to restore the contextual background to the artifacts necessary for their understanding, as Christian Feest has pointed out,
- develop the possibilities of becoming cultural centres for the dissemination of the living arts and performances of peoples from the so-called Third World and from other alien countries.

But there still remains the question of how to give a new design to the main function of ethnological museums, at least as it is seen by the public: the permanent or semi-permanent main exhibitions of the future. With regard to this question, I believe, there are essentially two options. The first would be finally to convert the museums of ethnology into museums of non-European art. Quite a lot of museum ethnologists will strongly oppose this solution (see the statement of Christian Kaufmann quoted earlier in my text), and I must confess that I, too, would not feel happy if I had to chose it.

My personal preference lies in the second option. This could be described as developing the museums of ethnology into museums of social and cultural anthropology in the most general sense of the terms. Some steps in this direction have already been made by setting up large exhibitions which focussed on the method of cultural comparison, for example at the "Museum für Völkerkunde" in Cologne⁽⁵⁾. The museum of ethnology in Europe which has gone farthest in this direction is the "Musée d'ethnographie" at Neuchatel in Switzerland. Since 1979, but more continuously since 1982, there has been a series of special exhibitions, mostly curated by Jacques Hainard and Roland Kaehrs, which also had their focus on the method of cultural comparison⁽⁶⁾.

The experiences of the museum in Cologne as well as of the museum in Neuchatel show that this new direction in organizing exhibitions ultimately leads back to the center of our own society. This can best be seen in the newest exhibition at the museum in Neuchatel (1994). It has the title "Marx 2000", and its aim is to "take a critical look at the ultraliberal capitalist society as it stands at the close of this century." Furthermore the exhibition is supposed to show "that nothing escapes the market anymore, and that choosing what sells best inexorably marginalises that which sells badly or not at all." Finally "the exhibition suggests that the entire planet is subject to the following rule: to achieve maximum profit no matter how or with what as fast as possible." (All quotations from the introductory text of the exhibition.)

I prefer this new identity of the museum of ethnology because it makes two points very clear. First, whenever we formulate the message and the meaning of an exhibition, we can do that only from the point at which we stand ourselves. Second, as Peter Winch (1964) has convincingly demonstrated, seriously to study an alien culture means

that we must try to expand our own culture instead of simply trying to integrate the alien way of living into the boundaries of our own. In exhibiting artifacts of alien cultures together with a reconstruction of a traditional context into which these artifacts supposedly fitted, as is normally done in the traditional museums of ethnology, the claim formulated by Winch cannot be satisfied. The reason is that the boundaries of our traditional museums of ethnology exactly represent the boundaries of our own way of living. Therefore, these traditional museums of ethnology cannot and should not have a future in a world which aims at the peaceful co-existence of many different cultures.

The last sentence should not be (mis)understood as a resigned paraphrase of a thesis Franz Boas put forth in another connection and under other circumstances in 1916, after he had retired from all museum work and had also withdrawn from every sort of popular ethnology. "As a matter of fact", Boas wrote (1916/1974:332), "the number of people in our country who are willing and able to enter into the modes of thought of other nations is altogether too small." Whereas Boas thought, with regard to quite another context, that his countrymen were not willing to understand the ways of life of other peoples, I am, with regard to the educational work of museums of ethnology, convinced that they really are not able to do so, unless the creators of exhibitions build bridges for them which in every case have to start from their own ways of living, in order to overcome the gaps between their own culture and the cultures of the others.

Only in this way can I see a possibility to enlarge our own culture for a more general public, in order to give visitors to museums of ethnology the chance to understand alien cultures in the sense in which Peter Winch has used the term understanding. However, in my opinion, the risks of misunderstanding will prevail if we try to make visitors immediately understand the emic views of foreign people by setting up exhibitions of alien objects which can be exhibited at the most in recontextualisations, either "in situ" or "in context", of which Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991:388ff.) has given a critical description of almost all possibilities. This practice of traditional museums of ethnology, in my opinion, has no future.

Notes

- (1) See the following publications: Kroeber-Wolf, G. and B. Zekorn, (eds.), 1990; Harms, V. *et al.*, Eds., 1990; Zwernemann, J., (ed.), 1991; Völger, G. and K. v. Welck, 1993; *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie = ZfE*, 118 (1) 1993.
- (2) I mention this distinction only to show the aggravation of the problems specialized museums of ethnology have to face in comparison with other museums, in this case the general ethnographical museums in Germany. With regard to the long-established separation between the disciplines "Völkerkunde" (cultural and social anthropology) and "Volkskunde" ("folklore studies", but very often pursuing – in an international context – the same goals as the adherents of "Völkerkunde") I am of the same opinion as Christian Kaufmann who expresses this view with regard to our work in the museums in the following way (1993:47):
 "... the border line so dear to many German-speaking anthropologists, i.e. the line neatly dividing folklife studies from social and/or cultural anthropology at universities and on the paper of learned journals, is simply of no interest. But, I am afraid, there is more to add to that line: We should definitely fight any tendency, hidden or open, to re-introduce racist terms of reference into the discussion. As soon as the division between folklife studies and anthropology is no longer seen as a pragmatic division of labour between two disciplines of research with different roots – the first tracing them back into German as well as classical philology, the second looking to its fathers or uncles in cultural geography and biological anthropology – it becomes obsolete indeed. It should never be used, not even by inference, as being based on a scientific evaluation of facts. ... By neatly separating the two, such a model of reference helps create an isolated system of (de)classification for everything alien."
- (3) As examples see: Ames, M.M., 1992; Hainard, J. et al., 1989; Karp, I. and S.D. Lavine, Eds., 1991; Pearce, S.M., Ed., 1989 and 1990; Price, S., 1989; for an overview see: Jones, A.L., 1993.
- (4) See my article: *Die Zukunft der Völkerkunde-Museen*, 1990.
- (5) These exhibitions were concerned in 1981 with the consumption of drugs compared cross-culturally, in 1985 with the roles of women as brides compared cross-culturally, and in 1990 with the roles of men, seen by the display of the social life of clubs and fraternities compared cross-culturally; see Völger, G. and K. v. Welck 1981, 1985, and 1990.
- (6) Starting with several exhibitions which took a critical look at the art of collecting and arranging exhibitions (for example in 1982, 1984, 1985, and

1989) the team at the "Musée d'ethnographie Neuchatel" also tried their hands on themes like "Le mal et la douleur" (1986), "Des animaux et des hommes" (1987), "Les femmes" (1992) in cultural comparison; see J. Hainard et R. Kaehrs, Eds., 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989, and 1992 as examples.

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