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Markus Schleiter

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Markus Schindlbeck (ed.): Expeditionen in die Südsee. Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung und Geschichte der Südsee-Sammlung des Ethnologischen Museums. Ethnologische Museen zu Berlin. Berlin: Reimer 2007. 189 pp., 175 ill., 5 maps, floor plan

Almost forty years after Gerd Koch's guide to the exhibition of the South Sea Department of the Berlin Museum of Ethnology<sup>1</sup> and after the profound – and excellent – revision of its permanent exhibition which was completed in 2004, Markus Schindlbeck has edited an anthology that puts the exhibits in their historical context. The anthology consists of a preface, an introduction, a general overview of the collections in the Berlin museum, reports on six expeditions, and the floor plan of the permanent exhibition. All these parts of the volume are separated from each other by right-hand margins in different colours.

In the preface (7–8), the editor points out that he and the other contributors are concerned to correct the claim that the exhibition represents pre-European conditions. On the contrary, with the emphasis they place on collectors and expeditions, they clearly show that the material world of the South Seas cultures had already begun to change even before expeditions have been planned. Moreover, Schindlbeck and the other contributors also demonstrate that the collecting activities themselves contributed to these changes. This is nicely illustrated by photographs and reproductions presented in the anthology (and, to a much greater extent, in the exhibition itself, of course). The editor also points out that Koch's encyclopaedic approach represented in the earlier exhibition has now been replaced by one which highlights the main fields of the collection and which groups objects thematically.

In his introduction (9–11), Schindlbeck emphasizes that the history of the Berlin collection started with James Cook's expeditions.

The explicit aim of the expeditions was to collect objects. Although these objects were understood as culture documents, for quite a long time they were assessed primarily on aesthetic grounds. This led to an extremely biased view of the collected objects as pieces of art – and thus to their separation from their ethnographic contexts. One of the central aims of the contributions to this volume is to emphasize not only the relevance of the aesthetic aspects that go along with ethnographical objects, but also, and much more prominently, the importance of minute analyses of a collected object's origin, function and social status. These analyses are only possible on the basis of scientifically driven and anchored collecting activities which culturally contextualize the pieces and thus enable the museum curators to exhibit the objects in a scientifically appropriate way. Another aim of the contributors is to illustrate the hardships collectors endured during their expeditions and to oppose the still prevalent cliché that these expeditions were simply forays. Recent research on the processes of ethnographic collection has shown that this cliché is completely unfounded for the vast majority of cases. Moreover, this research has also revealed that the selection of the objects collected was based on different factors that resulted in unbalanced proportions of ethnographic artefacts. Some objects, especially those in everyday use, were considered unimportant, others, especially sacred objects, were hidden from collectors, and a number of objects were especially made for them. Many of the collectors did not recognize the symbolic value of what they were collecting because they had no time to become adequately acquainted with the cultures concerned. However, these shortcomings could – and still can – partly be compensated for by subsequent field research.

In his article on “Die Sammlungen” (The collections, 13–42), Schindlbeck provides an overview of the Polynesian, Micronesian, Melanesian and Australian collections. From

this the reader obtains an idea of the origin and the size of these collections. Schindlbeck refers to the expeditions on the basis of brief but informative geographical, historical and cultural background information, introduces the collectors, describes their plans for their collecting activities and how they went about them, and places the collected items into their cultural context by highlighting some of their specificities, as well as pointing out their uniqueness.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he also comments on aspects of colonial exploitation, on ideologies of the ‘noble savage’ that have been connected with the area ever since Bougainville,<sup>3</sup> on shortcomings in the systematic scientific processing of the vast majority of the collected items,<sup>4</sup> and on museum policies and ethics with respect to which items can be exhibited and which cannot.

In the next contribution, “Tjurunga für die Mission. Ethnographica aus Australien” (Tjurunga for the mission: ethnographica from Australia, 43–64), Schindlbeck assesses the importance of Australia in the Berlin collection. The vast amount of objects within the so-called ‘Aranda collection’ were collected by missionaries in central Australia between 1906 and 1912. The author first sketches the history of expeditions to central Australia and briefly characterizes the objects that were collected, including the ‘tjurunga’.<sup>5</sup> He then critically discusses the impact of anthropologists, and especially missionaries from the Neuendetelsau mission on the Aranda (also: Arrernte) language and culture. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, missionaries like Nikolaus Wettengel, Johan M. Bogner and Oskar Liebler sold their collections – including many ‘tjurunga’ – to Felix von Luschan, who wanted to make the Berlin museum a centre for Australian ethnographic objects. Given the ritual importance of the ‘tjurunga’ for the Aranda, Schindlbeck critically asks how the missionaries could collect so many of them and why the Arrernte sold them to them. Be that as it may, the ‘tjurunga’ – which, for ethi-

cal reasons are no longer exhibited – form a substantial part of the Australian collection in Berlin.

In 1907 (!) New Ireland was supposed to be one of the few regions in the South Seas where anthropologists could still find culturally authentic, ‘original’ objects before these manifestations of material and spiritual life had been ‘spoiled’ by European cultural dominance. In his article “Unterwegs mit der Kolonialgesellschaft. Eine Expedition des Museums für Völkerkunde” (On the way with the colonial company: an expedition of the Museum for Ethnology, 65–90) Schindlbeck reports on the German Navy Expedition to New Ireland (1907–1909). The participants of this expedition developed innovative methods of field research, such as participant observation, the linguistic documentation of myths and stories, and the naturalistic photographic documentation not only of objects, but also of people and their rituals and festivals. These methods and the question of how to find and collect ethnographic objects are the focus of this article. The expedition resulted in the collection and documentation of 2500 ethnographic objects which covered the culture of the area as comprehensively as possible.

Christine Suck’s contribution, “Ein vergebliches Ringen in der Wildnis. Der Sammler Johann S. Kubary” (Struggling in vain in the wilderness: the collector Johann S. Kubary, 119–146), features the tragic life of an ethnographer who lived permanently in the South Seas and who collected almost 800 artefacts from the Caroline Islands for the Berlin museum. After presenting a brief biography of this ethnographer, Suck reports on Kubary’s activities as a collector for the Berlin museum, describes and assesses how and under what conditions he collected ethnographic objects, and presents some of them. Kubary was a pioneer in his field. However, Suck points out that he was never properly acknowledged by his contemporaries nor properly paid for the artefacts he collected for Berlin. He remained

an outsider, died at the age of fifty under mysterious circumstances, and is now almost forgotten. – I hope that this interesting, informative and critical article will provoke further and more detailed research on this fascinating and quite tragic figure in the history of the Berlin museum.

“Federmäntel und Kalebassen. Eduard Arning, Arzt und Sammler auf Hawai’i” (Feather coats and calabashes: Eduard Arning, physician and collector on Hawai’i, 147–164), Schindlbeck’s last contribution to this volume, features the man who collected one of the most important collections of Hawaiian ethnographic objects outside Hawai’i. The article provides the reader with biographical data on Arning, describes and assesses how and under what political and social conditions he did his collecting, and presents some of the objects in more detail. Schindlbeck also manages to provide the reader with fascinating information on the history as well as on political and social changes in Hawai’i at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the last contribution to this anthology, “Verflochten in Beziehungen. Über das heutige Sammeln neuer polynesischer Flechtkunst” (Woven into relationships: collecting new Polynesian pieces of wickerwork nowadays, 165–186), Hilke Thode-Arora reports on her activities in collecting pieces of wickerwork on Niue, on the aims she pursued with her collection, and on the social contexts in which she became involved during her collection. Before her expedition, the Berlin Niue collection consisted of about a hundred pieces, four of which were specimens of wickerwork. The author rightly points out that this reflects a gender bias towards mostly male collectors and their indifference with respect to post-mission developments. Thode-Arora’s expedition was meant to counterbalance this bias. After a brief introduction to Niue, the Niueans, and their culture and history, the author reports on the Niueans’ own assessments of ethnographic collections in museums

and on the pride her consultants and weavers took in their wickerwork. Of specific interest are the author's remarks on the field ethics of the collector, the subtle relationships between the collector and the weavers, and the sometimes complex interactions involved in coming up with an adequate price for an object. Thode-Arora's experiences illustrate that collectors who are also participant observers will become involved in personal relationships with their consultants and the producers of ethnographic objects. This involvement usually results in mutual sympathy which will inevitably be expressed by the exchange of gifts, through which collectors will obtain artefacts they would never have dared even to ask for.<sup>6</sup> However, the author also points out that every collector should accept that some people will decide to not sell a specific piece of interest.

The volume ends with the presentation of the plan of the permanent exhibition of the Berlin Museum.

This plan and the layout of the book is as fantastic as the photographic reprints and the photographs of ethnographic objects. The articles and the objects referred to – some of which are presented in the book – create a new and more intimate relationship between the visitor to the museum and the objects presented in the collection. The footnotes printed in the margins also provide the interested reader with a *bonanza of scientific information*. All in all this volume is very well edited.<sup>7</sup>

Schindlbeck has edited and published an impressive anthology that not only provides important information on the Berlin museum, its history, its ethnographic collections, its collectors, and its past and present research; the volume also fascinates the reader with its aesthetic layout. It is a must for every person interested in the Pacific and its peoples, their history, culture and art, and it illustrates quite impressively why an article in the "Bulletin of the Oceanic Art Society" (10:2, 2005) refers to the Berlin Museum as the 'mother museum' for ethnographic artefacts of the South Seas.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gerd Koch: *Südsee. Führer durch die Ausstellung der Abteilung Südsee*. Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Photographs of some the objects are excellently reproduced in the book.

<sup>3</sup> See Gunther Senft: "'Noble savages' and 'the islands of love': Trobriand islanders in 'popular publications'", in: Jürg Wassmann (ed.), *Pacific answers to Western hegemony: cultural practices of identity construction*, 119–140. Oxford: Berg 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Schindlbeck points out that this criticism does not hold for Gerd Koch's expeditions (36).

<sup>5</sup> I.e., mythical beings – totemic ancestors – and ritual objects, usually made of wood or stone, that are representations or – from the emic point of view – manifestations of such beings or ancestors.

<sup>6</sup> Thode-Arora mentions a cricket bat which in former times was taboo for women to touch (185).

<sup>7</sup> There are a few shortcomings: Spencer and Gillen (1899) are mentioned on p. 38, but are not listed in the references on p. 42 (the reference is given in the contribution on ethnographic objects from Australia on p. 64); the reference to Matthews (1907) is given twice, first in note 48 on the margins and later once more in the references on p. 63; Parkinson (1907) is mentioned in the caption to figure 88 but not given in the list of references on p. 117 – but even mentioning these few oversights is nothing but carping.

<sup>8</sup> Schindlbeck refers to this publication in his preface (7).

Gunter Senft

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