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## Looking back ahead: a short history of collaborative work with indigenous source communities at the Weltmuseum Wien

### Um olhar para trás com vistas ao futuro: uma breve história dos trabalhos colaborativos no Weltmuseum Wien

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**Abstract:** In the last few years, collaborating with representatives of indigenous communities became an important topic for European ethnographic museums. The Weltmuseum Wien (former Museum of Ethnology Vienna, Austria) adheres to this form of sharing cultural heritage. Its Brazilian collection offers rich opportunities to back up Amazonian cultures in their struggle for cultural survival. However, to establish collaborative work in a European museum on a sustained basis is still a difficult endeavor. The article will discuss the projects which have been realized during the past five years with several groups from Amazonia, such as the Warí, Kanoé, Makushí, Shipibo and Sateré-Mawé. Projects were carried out in Austria, Brazil, and Guyana and ranged from short visit to longer periods of co-curating an exhibition. As for the Museum, results are documented in the collection, in two exhibitions and in the accompanying catalogues. It is less clear what the indigenous communities might take away from such collaborations. It will be argued that museum collaborations can help establish a new contact zone, 'indoors' and 'outdoors', in which members of heritage communities are able to break through the silence in the old contact zone and finally make their own voices heard.

**Keywords:** Museum studies. Collaborative work. Source communities. Weltmuseum Wien. Brazilian collection.

**Resumo:** Nos últimos anos a colaboração com representantes de comunidades indígenas vem se tornando um assunto importante para museus de antropologia na Europa. O Weltmuseum Wien (antigo Museu de Etnologia em Viena, Áustria) se compromete com essa forma de compartilhar um patrimônio cultural. A coleção brasileira deste museu oferece, assim, grandes oportunidades para apoiar as culturas amazônicas em suas lutas de sobrevivência cultural. Ao mesmo tempo, estabelecer um trabalho colaborativo num museu europeu de uma maneira viável continua sendo um empreendimento difícil. O artigo aborda os projetos que foram realizados nos últimos cinco anos com vários grupos da Amazônia, como os Warí, Kanoé, Macuxi, Shipibo e Sateré-Mawé. Os projetos – executados na Áustria, no Brasil e na Guiana – abrangeram desde curtas visitas até períodos mais extensos de co-curadoria de uma exibição. Respeitante ao museu, os resultados estão documentados nas coleções, em duas exposições e nos catálogos correspondentes. Menos claro, contudo, é o que as comunidades indígenas puderam levar dessas colaborações. Argumentamos que colaborações com museus conseguem abrir uma nova zona de contato, onde membros das comunidades de origem tornam-se capazes de quebrar o silêncio da antiga zona, para, finalmente, erguer as suas próprias vozes.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudos museológicos. Trabalho colaborativo. Comunidades de origem. Museu de Etnologia de Viena. Coleção Brasil.

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## THE REWORKED CONTACT ZONE

In the last years, collaborating with representatives of indigenous communities became an ever more important practice in European ethnographic museums (Peers; Brown, 2003). This was part of the reactions to the crisis of identity and legitimacy ethnographic museums have suffered from post-colonial critique. In order to “rework” (Clifford, 1997) relations between museums and source communities, attempts have been made to establish museums as “contact zones”, where curators and representatives of source communities meet (again) (Harris; O’Hanlon, 2013).

Introduced by Pratt (1991, 1992) the term “[...] *contact zone* [...]” generally meant “[...] social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.” (Pratt, 1991, p. 34, author’s italics) The dynamics within this zone should be recognized while theorizing sociological models.

Clifford (1997) applied the concept “contact zone” to ethnographic museums, where it could make an effect in two ways. For one, the context of asymmetric power relations immediately relates to most colonial and imperial collecting situations. “When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a *collection* becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship* – a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull.” (Clifford, 1997, p. 192).

On the other hand, this moral heritage gives reason to the museums to “rework” these relationships (Clifford, 1997, p. 194) by turning their storage rooms into meeting places (“contact zones”) of curators and source communities. Here, American (along with Australian and New Zealand) museums have done pioneering work, not in the least because geographic proximity of collections and their source communities allowed to overcome logistic obstacles more

easily (Mithlo, 2004; Van Broekhoven et al., 2010; Faulhaber, 2004; Velthem, 2003).

Nevertheless, meetings in the storage rooms transcend a fundamental boundary established by colonialism. At the time, collected objects migrated from the periphery, the place of discovery and appropriation, to the center, the metropolises, where museums are located still today, while the creators of the cultural testimonials, cared for there, stayed at the periphery or have been pushed further there. The contact-zone created by a “New Museology” (Phillips, 2005) now offered an opportunity to the marginalized to raise their voice in the center and break through its monopoly of representation. Accordingly, the possibilities of collaboration between ethnographic museums and source communities have been reviewed and theorized very optimistically (MacDonald; Fyfe, 1995; Peers; Brown, 2003; Byrne et al., 2011; Phillips, 2011; Allen; Hamby, 2011; Harrison, 2013). Already Clifford (1997) considered the opening of the debate by integrating contact perspectives a reaction to the actual concerns and requirements of representation within a complex civil society. To Ruth Phillips the collaboration changes the power structures within the “contact zone” and gives room to new forms of agency to the museums (Phillips, 2011).

The Weltmuseum Wien (former Museum of Ethnology Vienna) dedicates itself to this form of sharing cultural heritage under the slogan “Not about them without them”. Its Brazilian collection – based on the Austrian Mission to Brazil in 1817– contains almost 6.000 objects and more than 20.000 photography and offers rich opportunities to support Amazonian cultures in their struggle for cultural survival<sup>1</sup>.

In the last ten years visits from and cooperation with representatives of indigenous societies increased at the South America department at the Weltmuseum Wien even if they are still comparatively low in numbers due to the obvious logistic challenges and budget problems. This

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed information on the collections in Vienna, see Augustat and Feest (2013-2014).

shift is motivated by the concern to uncover the continuities (and discontinuities) between historical collections and the contemporary life of indigenous societies. In this article we would like to highlight some of these experiences and present a short history of our collaborative work and how it was undergirded by various theoretical impulses.

## INDIGENOUS CULTURAL MEMORIES

At the beginning a very import impulse came from the theoretical approach of cultural memory by the German Egyptologist and scholar of Religious Studies Jan Assmann. His approach represents an important concept for understanding the significance of the past for the development of contemporary collective identities. Assmann sees the formation of group identity as the central function of cultural memory, and he also recognizes its highly selective nature: the group prefers to remember what fits their image of themselves and their present needs (Assmann, 1992). Thus, cultural memory is directly related to the present. It shapes the perception of the past or, in the words of the archaeologist Holtorf (1998, p. 24, griffin of the author), "Cultural memory is [...] not about giving testimony of past events, [as] accurately and truthful [...]" as possible, nor is it necessarily about ensuring cultural continuity: it is about making meaningful statements about the past in a given cultural context of the present. Although focusing on written culture, Assmann also recognizes the potential of material objects as bearers of cultural memory. He also stresses that societies develop their own specific culture of remembering (Assmann, 1992). These differences become apparent if we look at what happens with the possessions of the dead in our own in contrast to many Amazonian societies. We usually keep the personal belongings of the deceased as storage of memories and distribute them among relatives and close friends. Even if not all of the belongings are kept, it would be unthinkable for us to destroy them completely. But this

is exactly what happens in many Amazonian societies. The Yanomami of Venezuela conceive death as an insult against the community: it leads to social disintegration and grief serves to eliminate memories of the dead. Because of their role in exchange relations, objects continue to embody the social relations of a deceased person and, thus, have got to be destroyed after the owner's death (Herzog-Schröder, 2003)<sup>2</sup>.

Thus in addition to the universal reflection and expression of collective or individual identities in material culture, the connection between material culture and the past is obvious for societies which preserve objects and pass them on from generation to generation.

But what does Assmanns concept mean for societies, where personal belongings of the dead and ritual paraphernalia are destroyed after ceremonies and cultural change led to give up traditions which were manifested also in material culture, making it impossible to reflect upon the past on the basis of material vestiges?

An interesting change of cultural memory could be observed during a journey of Claudia Augustat to the Warí of Rondônia, Brazil, in 2011, together with Beth Conklin, one of the leading authorities of Amazonian anthropology, who had released a seminal monography on this group (Conklin, 2001). Augustat accompanied Conklin during preparations of an exhibition of the Weltmuseum Wien about one of its former directors, Etta Becker-Donner (Plankensteiner et al., 2011). Becker-Donner, a courageous field worker with a pioneering spirit, made two trips to Western Amazonian in 1954 and 1956 with the intentions to get in contact with then still largely isolated groups in the federal states of Acre and Rondônia. The "isolation" of these groups was, by and large, a function of prevailing frontier violence. Accordingly Becker-Donner's first fleeting "contact" with the Warí was characterized by the latter's hostility, her second meeting, two years later already occurred within the context of

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<sup>2</sup> See also Davi Kopenawa's critical view on keeping Yanomami artefacts in Western museum collections (Kopenawa; Albert, 2013, p. 345ff).

incipient contact induced by the state organ SPI – Serviço de Proteção ao Índio which functioned as a kind of go-between between “isolated tribes” (índios arredios) and non-indigenous frontiersmen with extractivist interests. Although no profound research could be conducted Becker-Donner brought a small collection of Warí objects and documents to Vienna, among them photographs and film documents. During Augustat’s and Conklin’s visit in 2011 the Warí showed a vivid interest in these pictorial documents (Figure 1). In pre-contact time the Warí had practiced several forms of cannibalism; one modality of this ritual practice was a fierce de-subjection of the enemy person, the other a caring incorporation of deceased relatives (Conklin, 2001; Vilaça, 1999). In her book “Consuming grief” Conklin explains this ritual practice as an act of compassion that saves the body from rotting in cold earth. The grief over the death of a kin is so overwhelming that not only the complete dissolution of the body but also the extinction of any memory can bring relief. As a consequence, all material things that belonged to the dead had also to be destroyed. Although funeral practices

have changed due to missionary influence, Conklin avoided for years to bring along photographs that showed people that have died since her last visit in order not to stir unbearable memories. Interestingly along with the disappearance of traditional funerary rites people started to ask also for photographs of their dead and, during the 2011 visit, were thrilled to be presented with Becker-Donner’s spectacular documents from contact time. Obviously, the change of funeral practice under the pressure of Christian missionaries transformed a “culture of forgetting” into a “culture of remembering”, thus rendering special and unexpected importance for the Warí to be confronted with testimonials of their culture that had been hidden away at some inaccessible place in some faraway land. The Warí even played with the idea to install a small museum room in the school building: the desire to reconstruct their own history is becoming part and parcel for cultural survival and of the construction of Warí identity (Augustat et al., 2012; Cury, 2012; Cury et al., 2016).

As much as it might be expected that cultural heritage contributes to or even strengthens cultural



Figure 1. Warí looking at the pictures of Etta Becker-Donner. Photo: Claudia Augustat (2011).





them by their ancestors, they can tell us something about their meaning for themselves and how they use them to reflect upon the past. The result of such a study offers in our view a wonderful opportunity to integrate historical collections into the presentation of a contemporary people in the museum context. For example excerpts of an interview filmed during Claudia Augustat's fieldtrip to Warí was shown at the exhibition on Etta Becker-Donner in 2011/2012 alongside the documents of Becker-Donner (Figure 3). This created a multi-vocal situation of scientific and indigenous perspectives, where the interviewee Jimon Maram reflected on the time of the first contact the meaning of the past for the cultural identity of Warí nowadays: "Today everything is changing. And I do not want to lose our traditions. Because we need this, children need it... [We need to know] where we came from, where we lived".

## MULTIVOCALITY AND TRUTH TELLING

The desire to find out more about the own past and history is a major motive for indigenous people to participate in collaborative activities. That was also the case by Jose Augusto Kanoé who was member of a delegation visiting the Weltmuseum Wien in 2009.

Together with the Museum der Kulturen (Basel), the Ethnologisches Museum (Berlin) and the Rijksmuseum for Volkenkuden (Leiden) we staged a joint project organized by Brazilian photographer Gleice Mere and German independent researcher Andreas Schlothauer. They organized the journey of seven representatives from the Kanoé, Makurap, Tupari and Aruá to Europe to visit Museums holding collections of their ancestors<sup>3</sup>. The idea was to initiate a dialogue between the indigenous representatives and the museum staff to exchange knowledge on the



Figure 3. Warí section in the exhibition Abenteuer Wissenschaft. Photo: KHM, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Three of the museums are holding collections from their ancestors. The significant collections made by Franz Caspar and Emil Snethlage are located in the Museum der Kulturen and in the Ethnological Museum. The Weltmuseum Wien held a smaller collection made by its former director Etta Becker-Donner. The Museum in Leiden has no collection at all but joined the project as an experiment in indigenous collecting.

historic and contemporary objects and their related histories. At the request of the organizers formal receptions by representatives of the city councils and public events were also included. The trip was documented by a film team from Switzerland and photographed by Gleice Mere and Andreas Schlothauer. The indigenous communities had made objects of which they thought they could be adequate to represent their culture in a European Museum and donated them to one of the sponsoring Museums. During three weeks the delegates visited the participating museums, the Historisches Museum in St. Gallen, the Völkermuseum in Dresden, meet Swiss hunters in the Engadin and participated in more than ten public events. We could not discuss the whole project in detail here instead we would like to focus on some experiences, which became the fundament on which our next collaborative project with the Sateré-Mawé was built. For example the focus on the intimate work with the collections and the official character of the visit made it obvious that different interests came together and that the time of the stay was too short to cover both. And even if it seemed to be a great idea to have a film team to document the project it was difficult because the film team was also working on a documentary of the journey and what could have been a win-win situation became problematic: the two objectives of the recordings were never clearly separated from each other and the later utilization and accessibility of the material was never discussed properly. Until the release of the documentary the material is only limited accessible to the other partners of the project. And the condition of using the material after the release will be a matter of negotiation because it was never fixed in the frame of the project. Also “daily” problems mattered: the organization and the support of the visitor was underestimated. From the museum staff only Claudia Augustat and her intern Katrin Oberrauner were available and they had to take care on 12 people. This is an imbalance which nobody should underestimate and which make it difficult to create an atmosphere for working concentrating together and it

was also very difficult to integrate our self in the working process. The visit was a significant first step towards collaborative work and the problems involved therein. Although it inspired to continue, one question remained: did the visit have a lasting effect outside the museums, what effect did it have on the visitors themselves?

The physical and cultural survival of these vulnerable societies of Amazonian frontier zones dangles on a string. The unhopd-for reacquaintance with residues of one’s own culture stowed away in some remote place is certainly more than the recovering of “lost data” in the archive, but rather a highly emotional event that – at least potentially – could have a healing effect. In North America, where indigenous curating of ethnographic exhibits has long become a standard procedure, curators often hardly care about unfurling the cultural semantics of the exhibited objects before a non-indigenous public and complement or substitute the Western classification project by emic insights. They rather let the objects become catalysts for telling stories of grief and trauma: according to indigenous anthropologist Amy Lonetree the only way to be relieved from trauma is to tell the truth, to document the suffering and name the wrongdoers. It is the objects, which bring to light the will to survive of their creator during “crying time” (Lonetree, 2009, apud Kapfhammer, 2014).

Thus, one of the main concerns of the post-colonial project has been to make the voice of the marginalized, the “subalterns”, heard again against a hegemonic Western discourse (Chakrabarty, 1984; Spivak, 1988). The resuming of a submerged dialogue breaks through a “culture of silence” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 532 apud Freire (1970); see also Kapfhammer, 2002; Phillips, 2011, p. 194) in two ways: on the one hand the voices of the representatives of source communities are noticed and heard again within joint museum experience. [...] As this dialogue characteristically reaches out into the source communities, this “new contact zone” provides the opportunity to cut through that cultural *mutism*, which has become symptomatic for the relations of violence on the field of the “contact zone”.



Hence, the collaboration creates multivocality in the metropolis, while at the same time the collections take effect again within indigenous space on the periphery in order to break the silence on one's own culture imposed by local discrimination and to stimulate "auto-ethnographic" speech (Lonetree, 2009). According to Pratt (1991) "auto-ethnographic" speech is one of the characteristic genres of the "contact zone". By way of "auto-ethnographic" speech critique and resistance enforce access to the intellectual domains of hegemonic culture.

In the catalogue on the Etta Becker-Donner exhibit, that provided the context for the Weltmuseum's collaboration with the Kanoé, we tried to recreate this multivocality that accompanied the exchange of material objects and documents between the parties involved. The meeting provided us with two seemingly disparate texts: one, a text on the origin of mankind and the triumph of cultural agency, collected by Etta Becker Donner in the 1950ies; another, written down half a century later, by a young leader, based on his father's vivid recollections of the suffering on the "contact zone" of Brazilian frontiersmen, state agencies and indigenous people.

Origin myths of Amazonian people often contain passages, which resemble travelogues or ethnographic accounts. While the hero is rewarded with essential cultural acquisitions, he carries the risk experience dangerous encounters with strange beings. If (s)he doesn't succeed to make use of the socially acceptable traits of these strangers, the journey does not end in triumph, but becomes a trauma. The journey of the blue-winged macaw (*Primolius maracana*) in the origin myth became a triumph, because he succeeded to secure fire and maize for the Kanoé. José Augusto Kanoé's account on the other hand is nothing less than the description of traumatic experience (*sofrimento*<sup>4</sup>), which encounter with Western civilization meant for so many Amazonian peoples. However, what they really encountered was not "Western civilization" with its assets of bourgeois cultivation but a

brutal culture of terror (Taussig) advancing with Amazonian extractivism. "Contact" often meant physical extinction (*logo começaram as perdas*), as well as for the survivors the annihilation of the basic human capacity to express oneself through language (*há muitos anos ficamos calados*) and to orient oneself within a familiar environment (*viveram numa terra que jamais pensariam existir*).

The blue-winged macaw would have been hopelessly lost in the village of the jaguars if he had not succeeded in the last minute to establish a relationship with the jaguar mother, which left behind violence and destruction. Likewise, the sudden emergence of a small group of Kanoé in 1995 who still dominated their own language thus giving hope to the Kanoé's dream of regaining self-expression reminds of this fight against definite cultural destruction.

However short and disorganized the Kanoé's visit to the Weltmuseum may have been, it was an opportunity for representatives of one of Brazil's most vulnerable societies to raise its own voice and break through the silence frontier contact imposes inferior groups (Figure 4).

## THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

Based on our experiences during these brief encounters in the Weltmuseum and our fieldwork in the Amazon region, it can be said, that the rare experience of well-disposed allies – something unknown before on the periphery for the harried indigenous peoples of the Amazon – cannot be underestimated. Likewise, the "museum experience" by representatives of source communities, namely to experience, that there is a place in the metropolises, where – contrary to the actual "contact zone" at the periphery – one's own cultural production is appreciated, is likely to display its "therapeutic" effect (Phillips, 2011, p. 189; Augustat et al., 2012).

On her trip with Beth Conklin to the Warí in 2011 (see above) Claudia Augustat also had the opportunity to visit José Augusto Kanoé in Ricardo Franco and it became clear that the visit to Europe had moved him more than

<sup>4</sup> Portuguese phrases are taken from José Kanoé's original text (Augustat et al., 2011).



Figure 4. Kanoé showcase in the exhibition Abenteuer Wissenschaft. Photo: KHM, 2011.

she had thought. Through the ethnographic collections and the public interest he experienced an appreciation and respect for his culture like he did never before. As the leader of his people he had never made an appointment with the governor of Rondônia, however in Berlin he was received by the Brazilian ambassador and was able to speak about the difficult living conditions of his people during a public event at the Brazilian Embassy. For José Augusto Kanoé the ethnographic collections of the Kanoé and other indigenous people in European museums are their ambassadors. Without them they would have stayed unknown and invisible (personal communication). Obadias Garcia Batista, who worked as indigenous co-curator for the preparation of the Exhibition of the Natterer collection, expressed similar feelings:

When I arrived here in Vienna, to be honest I was not quite sure what our work here would involve. I had no idea about the work of anthropologists, naturalists, the work of people who take care

of old things. For me it simply meant a kind of exhibition of something like trophies. That is what the concept museum meant for me. But with you I have learned that this is not the case. It is a matter of understanding today's world. But for that we have to understand the past. We have to understand the problems of the past so as to be able to deal with today's problems. So as then to be able to build up the world of tomorrow. This is what I have learned here. A culture does not allow itself to be locked up, to hide itself because the world is not a thing that can be taken to a different place or that can be stolen. Culture is knowledge that is how I would define it. Culture is not lost at the moment when you sell your craftwork. Culture is lost when the knowledge of a nation is lost; it is the knowledge that is lost, it is not stolen. This is the value of this museum, of these archives, everything that is collected here. Through this we can learn a lot. For me this is also a kind of education: becoming acquainted with the world of the past in order to understand the present so that one can build up the future (Obadias Batista Garcia, Sateré-Mawé apud Augustat et al., 2012, p. 125).

Ethnographic museums as “post-colonial contact zones” not only offer a “platform for trans-cultural negotiations and networks” (Förster, 2013, p. 200-204). Intervention by source communities in the work of curating puts front and center those genres of the colonial “contact zone” (as auto-ethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, vernacularism etc.). Pratt (1991) already spoke of and takes them seriously within balanced power relations (Lagerqvist, 2006). In short, to the four customary fields of action of museums, collecting, preserving, researching and displaying, another one is added, namely “negotiating the demands and requirements of those societies, whose cultural heritage they administrate” (Förster, 2013); concerns, which can be brought forth in one's own idiom.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2007 an indigenous person from the Amazon for the first time gave a talk in her own language in a lecture course called “The Ethnographic Cabinet”, where usually the museum curators showcase pieces of the collection. Laida Mori de Brabec, a Shipibo bilingual teacher living in Graz, Austria, was invited to talk about the Museum's collection of the Shipibo-Conibo, an indigenous group living in the Montaña region of Peru. When

she first visited the storage she was very impressed by the quality of the pieces.

Para mí estas piezas recolectadas por el Weltmuseum Wien tienen mucho significado [ya] que marcaron la vida de los indígenas shipibo-konibo [y] que en ellas se refleja la belleza y el espíritu de cada uno de los artistas. Que tuvieron una oportunidad que sus artes cruzan la frontera con propósito que ni el artista no se imaginaron. Pero ahora estos objetos mantienen viva la cultura y la historia del pueblo shipibo-konibo. Gracias al museo por mantener y por haber velado durante tantos años, también agradezco en nombre del pueblo shipibo a los organizadores por permitir sus gestos de transportar estos objetos hasta acá, sin estas personas y sin el museo estas artes hubieran sido solo una leyenda. Como indígena me siento muy orgullosa de conocer estos objetos tan finos que transformo en realidad mi memoria.

Laida decided to speak in Shipibo and her words were translated by her husband the Austrian anthropologist Bernd Brabec de Mori. She explained the use of the objects and focused on the meaning of the designs, the most remarkable mark of the art of the Shipibo-Konibo. Her lecture was enthusiastically received by the audience.

On a return trip to Peru later this year she also collected for the Museum, an incident, which marked first indigenous collecting in the South America Department. It is very interesting to see that the collection focuses on contemporary textile art which was developed from the traditional designs. Laida explains her way to collect like this:

Cuando compré las artes de los shipibo-konibo, no pensé nada en común que los objetos podrían representar al pueblo shipibo-konibo. Pero sí me gustó el trabajo de las artistas, como por ejemplo las telas pintadas y bordadas las únicas que estaban a mi alcance, me hubiera gustado también encontrar las cerámicas de barro. En este contexto para mí lo más importante era encontrar la calidad de trabajo de muchas artistas.

Although further plans for a temporary exhibition curated by Laida were not possible to realize until due to budget problems, cooperation is evaluated as a success on both sides.

La cooperación con el Museum pude notar el cambio en mi sentimiento, no en mi vida si no al contrario me hizo reflexionar profundamente sobre mi cultura en diferentes aspectos. La oportunidad que me dio el Museum para mí es un regalo que nunca me imagino tenerlo este privilegio y este espacio que he encontrado [...].

## THE “FROZEN EPISTEME”: HIDDEN TRUTHS IN MATERIAL OBJECTS

Encouraged by the results of previous encounters with members of source communities the Weltmuseum Wien decided to include indigenous consultation also into the preparations of the exhibit of the famous Natterer collections, one of the most copious collections of indigenous artifacts from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Brazil. The intention was to put into practice director Steven Engelsman's dictum “Not about them without them”. Organizationally it proved to be wise to combine curatorial expertise, fieldwork experience and indigenous competence to realize collaboration with representatives of the Sateré-Mawé. During two visits, in 2012 and 2013, which lasted for two weeks each, we were able to carry out joint curating of the Sateré-Mawé section in the exhibit in a room dedicated to continuities and discontinuities of Amerindian life in Brazil between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, joint authorship of the catalogue article (Augustat et al., 2012), public relation work in Vienna and the elaboration of a booklet in Sateré-Mawé language on the 19<sup>th</sup> century objects of the Natterer collection to be taken back to the communities of the Área Indígena Andirá-Marau in the Brazilian rainforest. The aspect, that collaboration between museum and source communities thematically and spatially is much more unruly and carries much further than to be reduced to discourse on metropolitan ground thus only replicating obsolete power relations, cannot be overemphasized. What follows is an example of how pretentious it would be to maintain, a seemingly simple act of consultation (on shamanic utensils in this case) would not escape intellectual control of metropolitan museum curators. Rather, discourse on 200 years old objects travels

through time and space telling a “truth” (Lonetree, 2009) quite untrammelled by Western opinion leadership.

As a matter of fact, critique of a possibly too optimistic view of the museum “contact zone” did not fail to appear in theoretical debate (Boast, 2011) and referred above all to the inherent asymmetry of relations in this zone, a fact already underlying Pratt’s definition of the colonial contact zone (Pratt, 1991, 1992). The neo-colonial nature (Harrison, 1997) of these “contact zones” allegedly persists, because museums were hesitating to hand over intellectual control. Although artifacts would serve as “catalysts” for new relationships between ethnographic museums and source communities and, therefore, would be “revitalized”, museums would persist as “instruments of governmentality” mainly because of their regime of financing and prescribed professional practices (Boast, 2011).

After all, the situation is paradoxical: on the one hand collaboration between ethnographic museums and source communities has become best practice of a New Museology<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the structural positioning of museums in metropolises makes sure that the asymmetries of power relations persist. A possible way out of this catch-22 situation is offered by a revised perspective on the claim for authority of knowledge by the colonial museums. A radical post-colonial critique following Said (1978) often denied the colonized any possibility to express themselves and, doing so, threw the baby out with the bathwater. Later exponents of post-colonial critique like Bhabha (1994) rather advocated for calling more attention to the emerging hybrid forms, rather to the commanding tone of colonial authority silencing everything (Bhabha, 1994).

Resuming a dialogue with the source communities (Phillips, 2011) without doubt serves the righting of this hegemonic claim and contrasts the monopoly of representation with an independent voice. However, the question is, if the colonial conviction to control the

epistemological grasp on the collection has not been an illusion from the outset. The “contact zone” in the metropolitan museum storage, where today the encounters with the creator actually take place (the “contact zone” Clifford spoke of) is fundamentally different from the real “contact zone” on the periphery, the “middle ground” (Conklin; Graham, 1995), where the collecting actually had taken place (the “contact zone” Pratt spoke of). There, on the middle ground, the activity of researching and collecting by colonial and imperial individuals was guided and shaped more or less unconsciously by the epistemological power of local indigenous specialists (Burnett, 2002; Roller, 2012). “[H]e is better acquainted with the names and properties of plants and trees than any man in Pará, and is a glorious fellow to get wasps’-nests, and to dig out the holes of monstrous spiders” (Bates, 1848<sup>6</sup> apud Raffles, 2002, p. 138).

However, colonial self-image dissimulated massive involvement of researchers/collectors into the intersubjective fields on the periphery (Raffles, 2002, p. 138; Burnett, 2002, p. 32) and tried to purify the “hybrid” (Bhabha, 1994) epistemologies of the “contact zone” from indigenous inking. As Raffles shows from the example of the Victorian naturalist Henry Walter Bates, the collaboration of researchers from the imperial metropolises with local indigenous persons actually established a “dialogic field of interleaving taxonomies” (Raffles, 2002, p. 143; Grove, 1995, p. 88; Burnett, 2002, p. 32). The dependence on local personnel made the field into a “contact zone”, where indigenous persons “participated in the metropolitan regionalization of the Amazon and intervened in the emergent logics of metropolitan science” (Raffles, 2002, p. 247). The formative feedback of the periphery on the metropolis has recently put in the limelight again by Chakrabarty (2000) who advocated for analyzing the European centre (as a “province among others”) and colonial peripheries within a common epistemological field in the first place.

<sup>5</sup> At least in countries “close to the source”, less so, up to now, in German-speaking countries; Förster (2013, p. 202), but see Crane Bear and Zuyderhoudt (2010), Van Broekhoven et al. (2010).

<sup>6</sup> On his indigenous collaborator.



Paradoxically, it would be the older collections [like the Natterer collection from the beginning of the 19th century], which still show the most clear-cut matrix of indigenous knowledge as far as their formation could have been governed least by the Western classification project. From this perspective the emergent indigenous episteme, inscribed into colonial collections (Allen; Hamby, 2011, p. 210), offers the opportunity to resume this silenced “trans-cultural” dialogue by collaborating with source communities.

It came as a sort of surprise as the two Sateré-Mawé colleagues<sup>7</sup> revealed to us the empowerment hidden in a few unassuming objects – some pestles and a brush – that made part of what of some shamanistic paraphernalia that were obviously given to Natterer as a set (Figure 5). Curators with a perspective of objects as art would have reached for the finely carved snuff tray with its serpent-shaped handle. Curators with a knack

for ergologic aspects would hardly consider the simple pestles mortars and brushes that accompany the snuff set, too simplistic and obvious would appear their technical function. Nevertheless the indigenous colleagues lumped together some supposedly insignificant tools by judging them according to their ontological status as mediators of communication with non-human entities in the sylvan cosmos of the Sateré-Mawé. There was no doubt about the overt function of these objects as pestles and mortars to grind hallucinogenic *paricá*-snuff and as brushes to heap the powder on the artful snuff tray already mentioned.

However, the application of the objects by far surpasses their overt function as tools: they rather symbolize shamanic agency. According to our interlocutors, they were used by Sateré-Mawé shamans (*paini*) “to call” their “masters” (portuguese: *mestres*, sateré: *kaiwat*). Like many other indigenous groups in Amazonian the Sateré-Mawé localize a plenitude of



Figure 5. Collaborative work during the preparation for the exhibition Beyond Brazil. Photo: Videostill: Claudia Augustat, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Obadias Batista Garcia and Ranulfo de Oliveira had been longtime collaborators with Wolfgang Kapfhammer during his fieldwork among the Sateré-Mawé.

game animals within a domain under the control of spirit masters (Kohn, 2013; Fausto, 2008). To be able to tap this abundance of game, shamans set up a strategy that consists in putting oneself on the same level as the “spirit masters”. Sateré-Mawé shamans did this by way of incorporating these spirits. To accomplish this, our colleagues explained, they wielded the objects, thus assuming the very attributes related with the powerful spirit masters. Attributes, which the human shamans assume and thus will be able to enter into the spirit realm: this pestle made of hardwood is adorned with toucan feathers. The shaman seeks to assume toucan qualities, because this bird is known for his ability to regurgitate the kernels of palm fruit. It is considered to be able to perform one of the classic healing techniques of Amazonian shamans, who suck pathogenic particles out of their patients’ bodies and regurgitate them for public scrutiny of the efficaciousness of the shaman’s practice. There is linguistic evidence that also the very action – i.e. to pestle stuff in a mortar – summons up the supernatural partners of the religious specialists, or rather: allows them to enter into the realm of the spirit masters in order to be able to communicate with them as subjects. Sateré-Mawé hunters were proficient in a lot of petty everyday rituals as strategies to tap the plenitude of the spirit masters’ game resorts. One of those served to allure a sloth. If a hunter heard the whistle of a sloth he knocked with a pestle on the bottom of a mortar, as if preparing *paricá*: *ton, ton, ton*. Reportedly, the sloth felt compelled to answer this call and so the hunter was able to spot it and kill it. The phrase *toheaipetok* (“he/*paricá*-snuff/pounded”) in everyday language means “to seduce” or “try” someone and alludes to the shamanic action of snuffing the hallucinogenic *paricá*, i.e. to act upon someone without intervening physically, to do something “magically”. It is interesting that sloths seem only to give voice while procuring a mating partner, so the sound-effect of the pestle amounts to some kind of seducement. The sexual, or – in sociological terms –

affinal mode of relationship between a hunter and his game animals is a common phenomenon in Amazonian ontologies (Descola, 2011, p. 502ff.).

The “objects” actually partake of or are extensions of the subjectivity of their human manipulators. Wielding them ratchets their agency unto the level of the “spirit masters” (Kohn, 2013). The efficiency of the shaman’s tools lays “frozen” (Kohn, 2013) in primordial time as recounted in mythological narratives, a kind of knowledge, which can be tapped on occasion. When Kapfhammer went back to the Área Indígena Andirá-Marau of the Sateré-Mawé a few weeks after the 2012 consultation period in Vienna, the cosmological relevance of these shamanistic tools was further corroborated. With exhibition catalogue and booklet at hand we did not miss the opportunity to show the pictures and texts on the ancient Sateré-Mawé objects of the Natterer collection to a contemporary indigenous public. Watching the pictures of the shamanic bundle, one gentleman singled out the little brush used to heap the hallucinogenic powder and felt inspired to tell a myth on the origin of the animals. Once again it was the seemingly unimposing brush that triggered his cultural memory, what was relevant to him, was that the brush has been made from the hair of a giant anteater (*tamanduá bandeira/sateré: hiba*).

The story goes like this: Once upon a time the harpy eagle wanted to attend a fest (*dança da tucandeira*, male initiation rite). He asked his wife, the giant anteater (*tamanduá bandeira*), to accompany him, but she declined, telling him that she was menstruating. Instead of her the harpy eagle took off with his wife’s sister, the *tamanduá* (*tamanduá colete; sateré: ariukere wê hit*). But his wife had been lying to him; instead of staying at home she had run ahead of him to attend the fest. When her husband arrived, she was already dancing with tapir. Already drunk as it was the custom, the jealous harpy eagle lost his temper and wanted to avenge himself. He called thunder for help and with all force he began to transform the persons present. First he transformed his wife’s lover Tapir, telling him: “You will serve as food for

our descendants!". Next it was his wife: he pulled her nose, cussing her: "You won't serve as food, but your hair will be good to stir *paricá*-powder!". She turned into the Giant Anteater. Next came the Peccary and the Deer, who both received blows that defined their corporal shape. Finally, the woman, who was grating guaraná, was turned into the Turtle, another one became the Trumpeter bird.

The animals receive their final corporal shape and voice and are allotted a specific "phagic" destiny. The narrative establishes a field of alimentary relations between human and non-human agents of the forest. This way, the inspection of the utensils on the museum contact zone opened a space for reflection on some basic principles of indigenous "*eco-sophia*" embedded in a "cosmic food-web" (Århem, 1996), but there is more to it: the myth on the origin of animals also recounts the distribution of hierarchies within this web of human, non-human, and more-than-human relationships: who potentially survives on account of her subjectivity as a predator, who potentially loses her subjectivity and will be objectified by being preyed upon, and also who is exempt from this web of mutual predation like the giant anteater, who is "subjectified" into the higher order of a "spirit master", whose assistance will be sought after by human shamans longing to become more than human.

The colonially inflected cosmology of the Sateré-Mawé has also "frozen" (Kohn, 2013) the firm conviction of who is the biggest predator and therefore the most powerful "spirit master" by calling the White man *ahiāg pot'u* (demon/eater, i.e. "cannibal"). This expression of common everyday language of the Sateré-Mawé addresses most clearly power relations on the middle ground, the contact zone *sensu* Pratt, where the bag of shamanic tools changed hands 200 years ago (very possibly at a moment where these shamanic strategies were beginning to lose their efficiency in favor of the new colonial powers and hierarchies). The meeting on the contact zone *sensu* Clifford, the metropolitan museum, laid bare this hidden ("frozen") indigenous episteme and

opens up the opportunity for redressing and "reworking" (Clifford, 2009) century old power relations. Unintimidated by metropolitan place and power indigenous discourse cannot but reveal the "truth" of colonial pasts and post-colonial presents. It is up to us Western collaborators to listen closely and learn the idiom of the "contact zone".

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

It could be shown that the South America collection was able to carry out collaborations with indigenous source communities in a variety of contexts both within as well as outside the museum, although these cooperations are still far from being an established practice at the Weltmuseum Wien. All the collaborative contacts, however fleeting, have led to presentable results on behalf of the museum. What concerns the benefits for the indigenous counterparts, we think the most serious argument is a moral one. First, whatever colonial burden ethnographic museums carry with them, we think it would be arrogant once again to back away from collaborative projects over the heads of our indigenous contemporaries because of our critical post-colonial stance. It has been argued that a metropolitan and a peripheral "contact zone" have to be distinguished. We suggest that museums and their critics be a little bit more modest and take a step back in order to be able to see what "reworking of relations" can be done on the peripheral "contact zone", where indigenous people are really under pressure. Access of vulnerable people to long hidden testimonials of one's own cultural activities can provide moral support and should be part of the ethical commitments of post-colonial museums in the metropolises. Our indigenous colleagues will see that truth be told.

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