

## Anthropology's Interlocutors. Hawai'i Speaking Back to Ethnographic Museums in Europe

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The ferocious debates surrounding the developing Humboldt-Forum in Berlin indicate that ethnographic museums in the German-speaking world, where colonial histories are largely invisible in public discourses, are lagging decades behind the processes of political decolonization and critical reflections in their own academic discipline, as Christian Kravagna rightly asserts. Even such laudable critiques, however, while importantly alluding to the »symbolic colonialism« perpetuated through museological productions of »Otherness«, remain largely disconnected from *indigenous* critiques underpinning contemporary museum practices that are emerging e.g. across the Pacific as in Hawai'i. In other words, the critique itself often remains Eurocentric and approaches global, (post)colonial entanglements

and their mutual albeit mostly asymmetrical constitution through one-sided lenses, even if these are (re)polished as post-colonial, post-modern etc. The problem, then, goes even deeper and, apart from the mostly justified claims for moral redress, political concessions and legal reparations, which dominate the discussions around the Humboldt-Forum, becomes *intellectual* and *methodological* (cf. Schorch 2015).

For example, in the Hawaiian language there exist no words for ›art‹ and ›artifact‹. Hawaiians do have words such as *waiwai* (goods, valuables), *makamae* (precious) and *waiwai alii* (chiefly valuables), but do these equate to an artifact? Given the widely acknowledged beauty and skill in the creation of material culture, one might argue that the Hawai-

ian material world is imbued with the concept of art through beauty and artistry in every facet and not as separate from function. Yet, virtually all museological interventions produce and represent Hawaiian visual and material culture through the separation and imposition of these categories, thus attesting to the fact that so-called ethnographic objects in European collections remain largely disconnected from their ecology, that is, the cultural environments of their indigenous producers and customary sources of (anthropological) knowledge. Leaving the Eurocentric perspective behind and looking across the Pacific to Hawai'i allows us to overcome such critical myopia and illuminate what ›ethnographic objects‹ *mean* to contemporary Hawaiian *life* beyond their reduction to, and (mis)interpretation through, alien categories.

The persistent struggle of Hawaiians for sovereignty operates through the discourse of colonialism as well as through an emerging occupation discourse. The latter refers to Hawai'i's status as an independent nation under international law (as the first internationally recognized Non-Western nation with an array of international treaties and diplomatic relations in the 19th century, including consulates in Germany), and considers U.S. law and a potential nation-to-nation relationship under its umbrella, as in the case of Native Americans, as illegitimate and inapplicable to the Hawaiian Kingdom. In 1993, then President Bill Clinton signed into law PL 103-150, a joint Congressional resolution which acknowledged and apologized for the role of the United States in the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i in 1893, a move which has not yet yielded political outcomes but confirms this legal argument. We offer such historically and contemporarily profoundly relevant detail here since Hawai'i's (post) colonial status is, as Kravagna would agree, neither sufficiently addressed in ethnographic museums holding and exhibiting Hawaiian material culture,

nor widely known or acknowledged by publics, including anthropologists, in the German-speaking world.

In 2010, the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Hawai'i, sought to bring together the last of the three great *Kū* images in the world for the purpose of an exhibition. These images embody *Kū*, the Hawaiian deity most famously and reductively known as ›the god of war‹ but far exceeding this externally imposed categorical violence (which mirrors the above discussion on ›art‹ and ›artifact‹) insofar as *Kū* represents, more generally, the male principal and god of chiefly governance and politics (cf. Tengan 2014). As living entities, these embodiments of *Kū* were still capable of engendering fear. Some Hawaiians wondered whose protocols would be followed, what (or who) might be awakened, and whether negative consequences might occur. The loaning institutions, in this case the British Museum in London and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, worried about potential repatriation claims and efforts to retain the images. For the host institution, funding was a major source of concern.

2010 was a year of great significance for other reasons as well. Not only was it the 200th anniversary of the unification of the Hawaiian kingdom by Kamehameha I, but it was also a year when hundreds of Hawaiian men would come together in an *'aha* (conference), to consider their roles and responsibilities towards their families, communities, and themselves. Remarkd Ty Kawika Tengan, one of the principal exhibit consultants, ›the return of the two *Kū* images that departed Hawai'i over 150 years ago leads us to reconsider the place of Hawaiian men in society today [...] Kanaka men are active, awake, and energetic. The task of nation rebuilding is at hand, and *Kū* is presiding‹ (Tengan 2010). Indeed, Hawaiian men would play an important curatorial role, with several representatives from the arts, carving, spiritual, *lua* (martial arts),

and political communities participating in ceremonial protocol, exhibition design, interpretation, and programming.

In the end, the two *Kū* images held at London and Salem came, and their towering presence weighing 800 pounds each (re)joined with the image of Bishop Museum. The exhibition *E Kū Ana Ka Paia: Unification, Responsibility and the Kū Images* opened with ceremonies and offerings to the sound of beating *pahu* drums, chants and *hula*. All three *Kū* were dressed, wearing *kapa* (paper mulberry) loincloth made especially for them. Opening and closing ceremonies, daily tours, school groups, free public programs, and cultural access all led to over 71300 people attending the exhibition over the course of four months. But what was more important? That these images were seen by more than 70000 people, or that *they* saw 70000 people?

Two years earlier, Noelle Kahanu, co-author of this commentary, had delivered a paper at the Symposium Musée du Quai Branly, *Exhibiting Polynesia: Past, Present and Future*, and contemplated the unification of the *Kū* images. »We dream that they will once again stand together, and that which was separated by oceans shall be united. Perhaps someday we will stand in their presence and reflect on the divine. They will look down upon us, these sacred vessels, and we will see ourselves in their eyes. What cords within us will resound?« It was a prayer said out loud, heard, and answered. Only through the active participation of *Kū* was this exhibition able to take place. People were fundamental to the process, but in the end, they were mere agents of *Kū*'s will. *E Kū Ana Ka Paia* was a ›temporary‹ exhibition, and yet its impacts were extraordinarily profound and far lasting, spawning discussions of cultural identity, political sovereignty, family and community responsibility and the role of museums in fostering cross-cultural dialogue. Inspired by the success of this exhibition, and because some of the most important

of Hawaiian cultural treasures continue to reside in Europe, we would ask of these institutions: Are there not alternate models and constructs beyond European exhibitions of Oceanic ›art‹ or ›artifacts‹? Should there not be more proactive and engaged dialogue about loans and possible restitution to their home communities? How might we collaboratively work together to ensure that the journeys of these treasures continue, thus (re)connecting histories with contemporary legacies and (re)awakening hibernating relationships and shifting genealogies?

Referring to Itala Vivan, Kravagna rightly demands that »the museum must become truly post-colonial, not only chronologically, but *constitutionally* [our emphasis]«. How can such reconstitution of museum practice be achieved? How can we co-create (anthropological) knowledge across cultural boundaries? These are *methodological* questions and we argue that collaboration is the methodological key to overcome the current predicament and enable deeper understandings. Collaboration means dialogue, which does not involve a gestural accommodation of a subaltern part for its eventual assimilation within the dominant whole, but refers to conscious, methodological co-production and co-interpretation at each stage of curatorial processes (cf. Schorch/Hakiwai 2014). There is no such thing as ›cultural anthropology‹ or ›cultural curatorship‹ since anthropological curatorship inevitably is, and should be defined as, an inherently cross-cultural form of knowledge production. The desperate grip on *Deutungsmacht* (power of interpretation), which still paralyzes discussions about museum practices, is thus not only politically and morally reprehensible, as the Humboldt-Forum conflicts show, but *intellectually* flawed. That is, ethnographic, interpretive authority can only be dialogically negotiated through a cross-cultural anthropology. This conceptual position changes the general idea of curatorship from *within* and (re)transforms it into an inherently

cross-cultural method that requires dialogical translation and interpretive reciprocity, thus overcoming scientific Eurocentrism and unsettling the futile grip on *Deutungsmacht*. The ethnographic museum as a »reflexive museum« (Schorch 2009) would not see this as a political threat to be pacified through su-

perficial rebranding exercises, as listed by Kravagna, but as an intellectual opportunity to *ask different questions*, addressing the radically globalized world we inhabit and approaching museums for what they inevitably are: radically cross-cultural spaces.