



ICME

ICOM
international committee
for museums and collections
of ethnography

ICME NEWS ISSUE 90 AUGUST 2020

BLACK LIVES MATTER AND ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS

A statement from ICME

COMMITTEE ANNOUNCEMENTS AND NEWS /
EXHIBITIONS AND CONFERENCES: ANNOUNCEMENTS
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WORDS FROM THE EDITOR



Dear ICME members,

Welcome to the 90th Edition of our ICME newsletter. The Black Lives Matter movement has placed demands on Ethnographic Museums to acknowledge the fact that many collections contain objects that were removed from their owners in the context of colonial violence. Many ethnographic museums have released statements stating a commitment to confront the history of their collections (and the newsletter includes one joint statement made by a number of UK heritage institutions). Some museums now see the repatriation of artifacts as an ethical obligation, but one that also creates opportunities for developing new creative collaborative projects.

This edition of the ICME newsletter carries a statement from the ICME Board. It argues that ethnographic museums have a responsibility to play a leading role in combating injustice and ignorance, but that this will require critical reflection and new forms of action. The features in this edition of the newsletter include an interview with Boniface Mabanza in which he reflects on the implications of the Black Lives Matter movement on museums. We also have an introduction to the new web site created by the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG) in the UK which provides resources on the repatriation of artifacts.

We are also living through a time when COVID-19 is making us all radically rethink our assumptions about travel and communication. On the one hand the pandemic is forcing us to explore new ways to network through the internet and encouraging international dialogue on virtual platforms. On the other hand, these initiatives are also reinforcing the digital divide, particularly in terms of

access to debates and virtual exhibitions and events that are now being posted online.

Museums across the world are being challenged to find new ways to be both accessible and meaningful to their publics. In the next newsletter we would like to showcase some of the ways in which ethnographic museums have engaged with the cultural impact of the virus. We would also like to share some of the imaginative ways in which museums have continued to provide a service. The editorial team is committed to making the newsletter reflect different perspectives from many different parts of the world. However, to achieve this goal we rely on our members. So please, contact a member of the editorial team if you would like to suggest or provide an article for the next newsletter.

Jeremy Silvester

HOW CAN MUSEUMS CHALLENGE RACISM AND COLONIAL FANTASIES?

Boniface Mabanza in conversation with Anette Rein (March, 2020)¹



*Dr Anette Rein and
Dr Theol. Boniface
Mabanza (Photo: Laura
Plönnigs)*

Rein: So how do you define racism?

Mabanza: Racism has two basic elements: 1. racialisation: the categorisation of people on the basis of external characteristics such as skin colour or cultural attributes. 2. The use of instruments of power to make racialisation effective. Behind this lies a history that has been shaped by Europe in its encounters with the rest of the world. In short, it can be said that hierarchisation, racialisation and

classification of people, combined with the existing cultural, economic, political and military instruments of power, have made it possible for some Europeans to enslave, colonise and exploit. Racification has served to justify this colonial exploitation and this brutality of enslavement ...

Large parts of the population reacted to the murders in Hanau, Germany, in February this year

with spontaneous meetings and expressions of sympathy. Do you have the impression that something has changed, and that the topic of racism as a mechanism of marking and exclusion has arrived in the consciousness of the population - as the reactions in the Frankfurt football stadium on 20.2.2020 let us hope?

For Germany as a whole, I cannot yet say that the context has been sensitized. I would say that here there is



The "Reiter" statue in storage at the National Museum of Namibia after its removal (Photo. Randy Mwatondange)

both. There is the development that we are becoming increasingly aware of the racist socialization we are experiencing in Germany. On an institutional level, this is expressed by the fact that there are more and more institutions that are conducting anti-racism training in order to work sensitively with diversity. Even sports associations are attaching more and more importance to the training of trainers in order to deal constructively with diversity, due to the large presence of people with migration biographies. Due to the experience of the two world wars, especially after the Second World War, there are many people in Germany who are sensitive and also able to react immediately to racist thinking and racist behaviour.

But there is also the counter-development since 2015, that "non-white"

people meet with massive rejection because the discourses of the right-wing forces are spreading, so that many see the presence of people who look different or come from somewhere else as a threat to themselves, to their life situation, to their culture, to their comfort - and express this. It goes so far that, according to my observation, there are many people who think that all non-white people only came to Germany after 2015. The fact that Germany has a long history with Africa and with black people living here has increasingly been pushed into the background.

As a result of the postcolonial discourses of the last decade, street names of people who were greedy and murderous during the colonial period as merchants, military or explorers in Africa are to disappear

from the public eye. Wouldn't it make much more sense to place the corresponding history under the existing street signs to explain why a new name was introduced?

An example from Namibia shows us how it could also work in the German context: In Namibia, there was an equestrian monument that had been inaugurated in 1912 in the then colony of German South West Africa at a very prominent location in Windhoek. In 2013 it was moved to the inner courtyard of the Alte Feste, which houses the National Museum of Namibia. When the government decided to implement it, white groups, mainly from the community of German descent, protested. They wanted to keep the representative of the then German "Schutztruppen" at exactly this place. However, the government wanted to build a symbol

of Namibia's independence (since 1990) there - a genocide memorial. They argued that the aim was not to erase the equestrian monument from the memory of mankind, but to keep it in a museum where the historical context could be better conveyed than on the street. This is also my suggestion with regard to Lüderitz and von Trotha etc. We should not name any more streets after Lüderitz and von Trotha, because they were not Einsteins and Mozarts. War criminals should not be honoured in public by giving street names. There is a completely different way of contextualizing their person in a museum, so that everyone can understand why the streets were renamed.

Various names and words were subject to censorship in the German language. Thus one speaks of the "N-word" or the "M-word" [a reference to German words that are considered derogatory – Ed]. Companies should rename themselves if they use the M-word as their name or abolish their defamatory logo. What do you think about the argument that in a few years, when the knowledge about the words and their underlying meaning will be forgotten because they are no longer allowed, then, for example, the historical awareness of the N-word will be lost with the disappearance of the meaning of the complete N-word?

As far as the N-word is concerned, I believe that it is important to take into account the point of view of those concerned. A very good friend of mine was born in Germany, his parents are

from West Africa. He changed elementary school several times, because he was directly confronted with it by the pupils. He fought because he could not stand it. I understand him when he told me: "I cannot hear the word, I cannot accept it if someone speaks the word in my presence". I feel the same way. But when it is told in a history lesson that this word was used in the 60s, in the time of Martin Luther King, it is accepted by those concerned. And also when it is used in a fighting attitude: "We are not what you think - we are what we are. You can call us what you want", then it is something else. But this story will not be told to the end if it is not made clear that this group has been working since that time on a self-defined identity as "African Americans". The people concerned do not forbid their children to know that there was a time when the N-word was used as a term for them. But let them know that's over now. The term must be classified, the ban has an educational effect. It should make people think about how bad the word is and that those affected do not want to go back there. I am in favour of this ban, because for me the latent danger is that people do not think about it, make jokes about it, trivialize the pain of those affected and say afterwards: "But that was not meant badly". Both the N-word and the M-word are insulting and hurtful for those affected. That's what matters - and that's where it stops.

Ethnographic shows supported the spread of racism in the countries of

the global North until the 1930s. In 2005, when a German zoo invited African musicians and traders, among others, to offer their wares, weave plaits and make music for four days on the zoo grounds under the motto "African Village", ethnologists and activists published the problematic connection to the former *Völkerschauen*. Interestingly enough, the Africans themselves did not see any connection to the *Völkerschauen*. How do you assess the mediation mandate of zoos or ethnographic museums, which normally tend to avoid close cooperation with each other?

There can be no excuse in this matter for an institutional leadership with a strong impact on society. It must be familiar with history and know the aftermath of history. Hiding behind the interests of the merchants to legitimize this is too cheap for me. There are people from Africa whose profile could have helped the director better than the traders in her assessment of the matter. But the director had no contact with them and she did not hear the African voices that had already taken a stand on such issues. It is not the first time that such events took place.

Do you find such events problematic even in a museum park?

A museum park, on the other hand, is something completely different from a zoo and therefore not comparable. The accommodation of people in zoos during the folk shows was the equation of people with animals - that is the background. But basically one has to say,

as already Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o wrote in his book *Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe*: everything that can somehow give the impression that African art, African goods do not find their place in quite normal places where other goods of the same category are sold or exhibited, is a problem, because this again brings with it a classification and thus a racialisation.

Postcolonial studies have decoupled the concept of racism from natural characteristics. This de-biologization originally reacted to developments in right-wing identity politics in which ethnopluralism has been propagating since the 1970s: "Cultures are equal but incompatible, and each culture has its own territory". Not only a "home", but also quasi unchangeable characteristics are thus located. The originally biologically based racism has become ethnoracism. Do you see a connection between this "ethnic racism" and the terms "multicultural" or "intercultural" that are commonly used in our country?

Interculturality means that cultures can come into contact with each other, can cross-fertilise each other. For example, when we speak of intercultural competences to be mobilized for justice, it means that resources that exist in individual cultures are activated to bring about justice. Multiculturalism says first of all that there are several cultures. That is descriptive. The term also has something normative in that it implies a coexistence of people of different nationalities, languages, religions, which,

from my perspective, means that they can influence each other, which can have effects on their respective cultures. In any case, living with each other presupposes that they consciously or unconsciously identify commonalities by which they orient themselves.

So both terms mean something different than ethnopluralism, which is nothing other than holding on to the old idea of radical alterities that cannot meet. This automatically leads to apartheid. In South Africa, it was claimed that there are different, biological races, they have nothing to do with each other, but they can share a territory with each other - whereby the white people determine what the others are allowed to own and how they have to live. Ethnopluralism is a White vested interest, a refusal to deal with the effects of a persistent racism - without races.

When one uses the terms "inter-" and "multiculturalism", one assumes that there are different cultures. Some scientists even want to abolish the term "culture". Instead, these approaches speak of milieus and identities, each person belongs to different milieus with different roles and identities, whereby one speaks of plural identities and plural affiliations, which can also change again and again and are not eternally fixed for an individual.

That's exactly the point. It depends on the definition. Identities can also be recorded as singular or plural. In right-

wing milieus identities are reduced to only one criterion: the criterion "origin" or, so to speak, "culture". "They have a different origin, they have a different culture. They have nothing to do with us." In the case of Germany, we would say: "They don't belong here, they belong somewhere else." That's what was said with regard to Jewish fellow citizens and what is being said today with regard to Muslim fellow citizens or even black people and PoCs [People of Colour – Ed].

But identities are plural in the sense that what defines me is not only my origin, the fact that I was born in the Congo, but also my education, my passion for music, for football, my eating habits. All these are things I share with many other people in the world - regardless of their origin. When it comes to music or football, I can perhaps have more in common with someone who is in England or Hawaii than with someone who lives in Kinshasa, where I grew up.

When using the two terms "inter-" and "multicultural" it is always a question of definition in which direction they point. If "multicultural" also means that cultures that stand side by side have nothing to do with each other and therefore cannot learn anything from each other, then we are not far from what the ethnoracists say. However, if diversity and mutual material and immaterial fertilization are at the forefront, then it is a positive, forward-looking concept.

Racism and colonialism cannot be separated from each other, they are interdependent. The educational institution, the museum, is also affected in three ways: Through the collections, the staff structure and through topics that museums convey in exhibitions. Let us concentrate here on the last two levels: One demand for the decolonisation of museums is to employ more MiMi-Mi (fellow citizens with a migration background) in responsible, scientific positions. On the other hand, the

quota of women for leading positions is another requirement to change structures sustainably and to place new topics.

For me, the decisive factor is whether the history of migration must remain in the background. A friend of mine said that if people already call me a “person with a migration background”, they should call me a “person with a migration foreground”. Anyway, you can see that I am different. However, there are people who, when they say “with migration background”, think: “He/she

does not belong here”. But if the migration stories, the global biographies and gender diversity are an enrichment to the local context - that alone is interesting for me. The more perspectives (migration stories, women, non-heterosexuals etc.) are represented in leading positions, the better for the pluralization of the stories.

What do you think the optimal composition of a museum team should look like in order to develop other visions and objectives in museums? What kind of training do you consider necessary that goes beyond a professional training?

What I wish for is not only valid for museums. On the level of conceptual work, that is: what is presented and how, and how a museum should be filled with life, as many perspectives as possible should be represented. It depends on the respective focus of a museum how people with global biographies, with their experiences and local knowledge can contribute something to bring out the diversity of a museum's work in a different way.

As you said in your commentary on a scene in Jean-Marie Teno's documentary film “The Colonial Misunderstanding” (2004), a curator in the film made a derogatory statement about the Herero from your point of view, because she emphasized that Herero leaders “already knew how to read and write and exchanged their agreements on fighting strategies in writing” (= racial, ethnic marking:



Renaming von Trotha Street (Photo. afrika-hamburg.de)

“Africans could not read and write”). In your opinion, how could racist, discriminatory or even sexist statements in museum exhibitions be avoided?

The emphasis on the fact that the formerly illiterate Herero learned to read and write in the missionary school is an expression of the fact that they have thus come closer to the model of their role models, the colonial masters. The fundamental question remains: why is writing the central criterion of evaluation? There are cultures that have developed other forms of communication, including historiography, and the preservation of their traditions. This was not discussed in the exhibition! Museums should always convey many contexts and perspectives.

But one could also understand this remark by the curator in a completely different way. After the arrival of the foreigners from Europe, for example, the indigenous craftsmen very quickly adapted to the new needs and produced objects of desire in suitcase size, which the soldiers or colonial officials could transport home more easily. That is a creative potential. The Herero were in the mission schools, learned to read and write there - in order to then use these techniques of their enemies for their own warfare. In my view, this is a creative, strategic achievement and not a devaluation of the Herero.

I agree with you. If one were to ask - but these questions are not asked like that - what the colonialists learned from the Hereros. But, at that time,

one was not allowed to formulate it in such a way that the Herero had anything to learn from for their own everyday life. There is much that the colonizers observed and adopted, but it did not fit into the story of the ignorance of the others. To this day, the medical knowledge of medicinal plants is stolen in certain areas, for example by some companies in the pharmaceutical industry. So far, only a few court cases against this have become known. The industry continues to say: “We discovered it ourselves!” They don't say that the knowledge is centuries old and that they have used it without question.

What do you see as the greatest tasks and opportunities for museums as complex educational institutions?

As I said earlier: How do museums manage to convey the historical contextualization of objects? How do they manage to develop a connection to current social and global problems with their historical objects? They must contribute to the many opinion-forming processes that take place in society and provide cross-generational offerings. The latter is already practised in many museums. With reference to world cultural heritage, museums are predestined to break down these divisions that the racists of yesterday or today have established. Museums have the potential to deconstruct identities and develop a critical potential for society. There are museums that function in an elitist way. They address a specific audience. But museums must also be able

to address broad sections of society. In my view, that would be an important function for society. In contrast to the common interfaces with adult education centres, Protestant and Catholic academies, for example, museums still focus on collections in order to convey special themes. And in this I also see the opportunities for museums to help shape important social discourses.

Thank you very much for the exciting conversation!

Dr. Anette Rein is an ethnologist and journalist, former Director of the Museum of World Cultures, Frankfurt and is the President of the German Association for Freelance Ethnologists (<http://www.bundesverband-ethnologie.de/webvisitenkarte/15>)

Dr. Theol. Boniface Mabanza Bambu is a literary scholar, philosopher, theologian and expert on development and trade. He has been working since 2008 as the coordinator at the church office for Southern Africa (KASA) in Heidelberg (www.kasa.de)

Endnotes

- 1 The full version of this interview was published in German (with footnotes) in MUSEUM AKTUELL, vol. 263 and 264, pp. 30-35, 2020 under the title: “Boniface Mabanza im Gespräch mit Anette Rein. Rassismus: Wie kann man ihm begegnen, wie können Museen mit kolonialen Phantasien umgehen?“