

University of Gothenburg  
School of Global Studies  
Master program in International Museum Studies  
Module "Museum and Society II" fall term 2010/11  
Assignment 5 - Essay

**Representing the cultural "other" -  
Africa in Western ethnographical museums**

*by Stefanie Kreibich*

Date of submission: 2010-11-07

## **Abstract**

In this essay I examine the question whether African culture is represented adequately in Western ethnographical museums. I consider the history of displaying Africa from the cabinets of curiosities to early ethnographical museums which are a product of nationalist and racist ways of thinking. Within this process stereotypes about African culture have developed and four of them are asserted in this essay. By comparison of two contemporary ethnographical exhibitions from Washington D.C. and Berlin I attempt to prove that these stereotypes still can be found in today's museums. Incorporating "real" African voices turns out to be the most effective way to represent African culture, although they need a strong background to be heard. Regarding the stereotyped exhibition in Berlin I presume that the concept of ethnographical museums is out of date. New types of museums concerning not only foreign cultures but also domestic ones could be a less racist alternative.

## **Introduction**

Is it possible to display foreign cultures adequately in a museum? This question posed by Paola Ivanov<sup>1</sup> is not to be answered as a whole in my essay, apart from the issue if it can be answered at all. I am rather going to examine whether Africa and African culture is displayed adequately in contemporary Western exhibitions. From the origins of ethnographical museums - the cabinets of curiosities of the 16th and 17th century - I am going to assert the political and cultural background of their rise at the end of the 19th century. In conjunction with the history of ethnographical museums, I hypothesize that there are Western stereotypes about African culture which had an effect on the display of this topic. Four of these common stereotypes about African societies I am going to describe with the help of articles from Paola Ivanov and Annie E. Coombes. Furthermore I attempt to prove my second thesis that these stereotypes can still be found in contemporary ethnographical exhibitions. By means of two exhibitions from Berlin and Washington D.C. I am going to depict through which methods African voices might predominate Western ones in contemporary ethnographical museums.

## **History of displaying African culture in Western museums**

The origin of ethnographical museums can be traced back to the cabinets of curiosities of the 16th and 17th century. European sovereigns collected native pieces of art - so called curiosities - from their colonies in order to demonstrate not only their physical ownership of the colonies and its properties but also their intellectual one. Based on the fact that the main colonization of Africa took place in the second half of the 19th century, most of the African art collections arose at that time. Rich, Western travelers like David Livingston explored the continent and took native objects to Europe and North America<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of collecting and displaying African art in Europe was to show the hierarchy between sophisticated and

civilized European art and barbaric African art<sup>3</sup>. There were two major trends in society that led to this purpose: on the one hand the rise of nationalism in Europe and on the other hand the institutionalization of anthropology as a science<sup>4</sup>.

Nationalism and representation of nations was a widely spread phenomenon in Europe at the end of the 19th century. The colonialization of Africa was a power-political means in order to demonstrate strength compared to other nations<sup>5</sup>. McLeod defines colonialism as "the economic and military control of one nation over another by settlement"<sup>6</sup>. This kind of occupation of a country was legitimized by the ideology of imperialism according to Golding. The violence of this process is visible in the collections and the display of objects, that have been taken out of their context and brought to Europe<sup>7</sup>.

Europeans tend "to measure, categorize and hierarchize"<sup>8</sup> not only objects but also human beings by putting white males on top of the spectrum. In this context the concept of racism plays an important role. The idea of dividing humanity into groups according to their physical traits found its way to scientific discourses in mid 18th century<sup>9</sup>. Racial thinking of the middle-class public was carried into the New Anthropology and earned credibility through displays of artifacts and photos from Africa<sup>10</sup>. From the perspective of European museum curators belonged native Africans to the least sophisticated race and were born to be slaves because of their physical, mental and moral inferiority compared to whites<sup>11</sup>. The aim of demonstrating the superiority of the "white race" applies, according to Haraway, also to museums of natural history<sup>12</sup>. The display of Africans was in an evolutionary style. For instance, in many museums African art was juxtaposed with cave carvings from the Stone Age. At the same time human beings from Africa were treated like another kind of specimens and were displayed as mannequins or even as real persons<sup>13</sup>.

African artifacts developed within Western exhibitions from exotic curiosities to ethnographic specimens later on and now to African art<sup>14</sup>. The reason for the first change in the manner of displaying was the rising market interest in African artifacts. This led to a more scientific classification of objects<sup>15</sup>. At the beginning of the 20th century Africans were displayed as a more natural version of white Europeans who went through a slower evolution<sup>16</sup>. If we think of James Clifforths two categories of artifacts<sup>17</sup>, we have to admit that by terming all African objects "art", we barely have an aesthetic rather than a scientific interest in them.

#### **Four common stereotypes about Africa in museum displays**

Many stereotypes about Africa could be found in early ethnographical exhibitions. I am going to depict four of them in the following and I attempt to prove in the next section that they still affect today's displays of African culture.

The first stereotype about Africa says that African people and societies, unlike white Europeans, have no history<sup>18</sup>. The reason for Africa's absence of history was the low status of

civilization. Curators like W.H. Holmes rated the Africans' manner of living "hardly above that of the beast"<sup>19</sup>. From an evolutionary point of view were the primitive Africans at the beginning of history when white men came to colonize Africa<sup>20</sup>.

This concept of "timelessness" was carried into the exhibitions, mainly by two methods. Firstly, many museums used dioramas in order to show the status quo of living in Africa which was basically based on hunting and gathering, agriculture<sup>21</sup>, religion and war<sup>22</sup>. The timelessness of these materialized episodes of African life was in the first place created by the labels. They did not clarify the dates of production or use of particular pieces from the conglomerate of artifacts that built the display. Often objects of different ages were put together, lacking any cultural context<sup>23</sup>. Therefore these displays implied that African life has always been like this.

The second stereotype is regarding war in African communities. Africa-travelers from the late 19th century reported on "warrior-peoples" that lived all over the continent<sup>24</sup>. Many museums used this cliché and displayed Africans as warriors fighting battles either with one another or with white Europeans<sup>25</sup>. Even every-day life displays served to underpin the image of African warriors. Labels depicted African societies as "well-organized [...] military organization[s]"<sup>26</sup>.

A further cliché about African cultures is their lack of deeper meaning in religious and ritual acts. Not only the mask - as the symbol of African rite - was called a "fetich" but every single artifact from Africa that could, in the widest sense, be seen as a religious object<sup>27</sup>. In fact, African artifacts had a deeper meaning but European travelers could not and would not decode their signification when collecting them on their journeys. Hence, museums had to face the problem of re-contextualizing objects that were collected without any information regarding their use or function<sup>28</sup>. However, objects like dresses and masks were often displayed in the context of people dancing and celebrating strange rites<sup>29</sup>. African religion in general was displayed as "superstitious nonsense"<sup>30</sup>.

The last relevant stereotype for my essay is the uniformity of African culture. Notwithstanding the ethnographical practice to build a decreasing racial hierarchy from North to South Africa<sup>31</sup>, museums presented all African societies as a "homogeneous fictional entity"<sup>32</sup>. Diversity of beliefs, values and art were basically ignored<sup>33</sup> in favor of a cultural uniformity that has never existed<sup>34</sup>.

### **New ways of displaying Africa - two contemporary exhibitions in comparison**

The before asserted stereotypes seem to be issues of a nationalistic and Eurocentric past. By comparison of two contemporary exhibitions that opened almost at the same time I attempt to show different ways of displaying Africa at the beginning of the 21st century.

The exhibition "Afrika. Kunst und Kultur" (engl.: Africa. Art and culture) was opened in September 1999 in the "Ethnologisches Museum" in Berlin. Paola Ivanov gave a brief overview over the exhibition in an article. From her text and the pictures of the exhibition within the article I presume that the aforementioned exhibition is a kind of "modern cabinet of curiosities". Although the title implicates an examination with African culture, the exhibition's aim is to "represent the continent's artistic achievement"<sup>35</sup>. Despite the fact that ethnology is an interdisciplinary science that examines all aspects of societies, the Berlin museum concentrates on African art. African history before the European colonialization does not play any role, but a thematic field is dedicated to the history of European presence in Africa<sup>36</sup>. Regarding this and the fact that no specification of time is given, I draw the conclusion that the idea of Africa's lacking history and timelessness applies to this exhibition. Hand in hand with this goes the cliché of primitivism on which this exhibition is also based. The article says that one separate room broaches the issue of "primitivism in European art" by displaying artworks of German expressionists like Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein<sup>37</sup>. From my perspective is this a clear hint of an underlying evolutionary concept of displaying. The display of masks from Angola in a procession<sup>38</sup> in front of a white wall appears to be a conglomerate of fetichs. Nine different types of masks that served as inauguration rite for young male adults are exhibited without any context, like information about the course of the celebration or to which particular tribe they belonged. This implies strange religious acts on the one hand and a uniformity of rites on the other hand. Hence, all in all the exhibition "Afrika. Kunst und Kultur" in Ethnologisches Museum Berlin uses three of the aforementioned stereotypes more or less. The second part of this section will clarify if the same applies to the exhibition "African Voices" in Washington D.C.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History opened its exhibition "African Voices" in December 1999. In fact, the opening took place five years before the museum originally planned to start a renovation of the exhibition<sup>39</sup>. The previous exhibition "Hall of African Cultures" had to be closed down in 1992 after vehement protests of the public against offensive and pejorative displays<sup>40</sup>. Hence, the curators attempted to create an exhibition about Africa without using common stereotypes like the aforementioned.

Unlike the Berlin exhibition, "African Voices" had the aim to highlight Africa's long history, dynamism, diversity, global reach and contemporary relevance<sup>41</sup>. To meet this claim and the title of the exhibition the curators actually listened to the voices of Africans and African Diasporans (like African Americans).

The exhibition is divided into three main themes: Living in Africa, Working in Africa and Wealth in Africa<sup>42</sup>. Hence, in contrast to "Afrika. Kunst und Kultur" the main focus of the Washington exhibition is not on art but on actual life in Africa. Furthermore the Smithsonian's museum abandons the geo-ethic approach in favor of a thematically organization of the exhibition with examples from various African countries. This serves to avoid the

stereotype of Africa as one cultural unity.

Regarding the stereotype of African timelessness the exhibition attempts to disprove this prejudice by several actions. Within the exhibition there is a time line installed which is meant to show the broader historical context of particular events. Older artifacts are contextualized with contemporary ones in order to demonstrate consistencies or changes over time<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore all labels contain information about the date, the function and the maker of an object<sup>44</sup>. By providing the function of objects the museum attempts to abandon the stereotype of strange rites and religious acts in Africa.

Besides avoiding common stereotypes there are several promising approaches to making an exhibition about Africa. As mentioned before the curators listened to African voices, which means that they talked not only to African Americans but also went to Africa in order to receive an impression about real life in Africa and to display it<sup>45</sup>. The voices of African Americans§ were audio- and video-taped for the exhibition. Afterwards the interviewees were given the chance to edit their quotes<sup>46</sup>.

In consultation with African Diasporans the museum decided to use dioramas within the exhibition, although they often caused resentments before. In order to avoid this, the museum left out mannequins from the scenes<sup>47</sup>.

One major critique of mine regarding the Berlin exhibition is the emphasis of European influence on Africa. In contrast the exhibition "African Voices" highlights how Africans influenced other cultures around the world and established thriving communities during diaspora<sup>48</sup>.

## Conclusion

As the preceding section showed there are different ways of displaying Africa in contemporary museums. Brian Durrans, a former curator in the department of Ethnography of the British Museum summarizes standards for this type of museums. He claims for a sensitive exposure to various audiences with different interests within the exhibition. Furthermore objects should be contextualized and information about them should be provided. Former ethnographical exhibitions tended to be object-orientated, hence, Durrans claims for a human-orientated approach<sup>49</sup>. Basically these standards were implemented at the Smithsonian's museum in Washington, but not at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. Therefore I have to draw the conclusion that there are still museums that base their exhibitions on stereotypes like the aforementioned. From personal experience I have to admit that what applies to the Berlin museum also does to the Völkerkundemuseum in Leipzig (these are two out of three main museums on this topic in Germany). In contrast the example of the Washington museum proves that there are ways to integrate African voices adequately into Western exhibitions. Why is that?

According to Mary Jo Arnoldi was the revision of the Washington exhibition caused by public protests. Unlike in Germany there is a strong African Diasporan public in the USA that is

able to raise their voice against offensive exhibitions. In Germany, or more general in Europe, there are less African Diasporans and they are less organized. Hence, there are no objectors against stereotyped exhibitions like the one in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. Unfortunately many curators do not care about these kinds of flaws without a protesting public.

From my point of view the whole concept of ethnographical museums is outdated. Even though the public attitude to Africa has changed, museums are often not able to adopt these ideas and display them. Concentrating merely on African art is not the appropriate way to display African culture in today's museums and it is not what Ethnography as a science is about.

Housing an exhibition about African culture in a museum of natural history [sic!] is problematical, too. It gives the impression that Africans are closer to nature than people from other continents and seems to refer to the stereotype of "savages". New types of museums could solve the problem, for instance a "culture museum" that does not only display foreign cultures but also domestic ones.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Ivanov 2001, p. 351.
- <sup>2</sup>Ivanov 2001, p. 352.
- <sup>3</sup>Cannizzo 1989, p. 83.
- <sup>4</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 44.
- <sup>5</sup>Ivanov 2001, p. 353f.
- <sup>6</sup>Golding 2009, p. 25.
- <sup>7</sup>Cannizzo 1989, p. 84.
- <sup>8</sup>Golding 2009, p. 29.
- <sup>9</sup>Golding 2009, p. 25.
- <sup>10</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 109.
- <sup>11</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 141.
- <sup>12</sup>Haraway, 1983.
- <sup>13</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 145f.
- <sup>14</sup>Cannizzo 1989, p. 88.
- <sup>15</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 159.
- <sup>16</sup>Golding 2009, p. 29.
- <sup>17</sup>Golding 2009, p. 31.
- <sup>18</sup>Ivanov 2001, p. 355.
- <sup>19</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 711.
- <sup>20</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 712 and Coombes 1994, p. 131.
- <sup>21</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 706.
- <sup>22</sup>Ivanov 2001, p. 355f.
- <sup>23</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 711f.
- <sup>24</sup>Ivanov 2001, p. 355.
- <sup>25</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 102.
- <sup>26</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 707.
- <sup>27</sup>Ivanov 2001, p. 356.
- <sup>28</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 132.
- <sup>29</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 714.
- <sup>30</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 148.
- <sup>31</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 707.
- <sup>32</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 69.
- <sup>33</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 712.
- <sup>34</sup>Coombes 1994, p. 111.
- <sup>35</sup>Ivanov 2000, p. 36.
- <sup>36</sup>Ivanov 2000, p. 36.
- <sup>37</sup>Ivanov 2000, p. 36.
- <sup>38</sup>Ivanov 2000, p. 34/36.
- <sup>39</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 17f.
- <sup>40</sup>Arnoldi 1999, p. 716.
- <sup>41</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 21.
- <sup>42</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 20.
- <sup>43</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 20.
- <sup>44</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 22.
- <sup>45</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 34.
- <sup>46</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 32.
- <sup>47</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 29.



<sup>48</sup>Arnoldi 2001, p. 35.

<sup>49</sup>Durrans 1992, p. 14.

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