

Acquisition & Display Ethics

In Conversation with Prof. Holger Jebens
Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt, Germany.

For the research project, "Material Expressions of West African Spirituality in the Americas: Transatlantic Continuities in Haiti," one of my methods of enquiry includes the examination of "travelled" *Vodun* Objects within different collections. From the Frobenius Institute's ethnographic collection at Goethe University in Frankfurt, I selected five objects for analysis, including the figure of *Hevioso*, the Vodun deity of lightning, thunder, smoke, fire, and the earth. The figure has streaks of blood sacrifice (an indication that it was part of a ritual ceremony), protruding iron teeth, and is clad with chains and cowries. Research in this institution is made possible by Prof. Dr. Holger Jebens, head of the collection. The following conversation centered around object transfers, methods of ethical investigation, and display began from the storage, extending to the exchange of E-mails and a zoom meeting.

ZJ My initial misconception was that the Frobenius Collection was made up of objects collected by Leo Frobenius on his various travels and expeditions; however, they are more recent acquisitions from several sources. Looking back at the foundations of ethnographic collections, "things identified as "fetishes" were collected as ethnographic evidence;"¹ What brought about the decision to start a collection?

HJ Is this the collection you were looking into or the whole Ethnographic Collection?

ZJ The whole ethnographic collection to begin with.

HJ Many people have that impression when they hear about the Frobenius Institute's Ethnographic Collection, but most of the objects collected by Frobenius ended up in anthropology museums in Leipzig or Hamburg and Berlin. If you go to the new Humboldt Forum, there are also some glass cases with objects collected by Frobenius. The existence of the present-day Ethnographic Collection of the Frobenius Institute goes back to the activities of Eike Haberland, a former director of the Frobenius Institute. There are basically two

¹ Fabian, Johannes. "On Recognizing Things. The "Ethnic Artefact" and the "Ethnographic Object": *L'Homme*, No. 170, *ESPÈCES D'OBJETS* (avril/juin 2004), pp. 47-60 EHESS Stable

answers to that question. One would be that Haberland was interested in ceramics and, more generally, in the everyday culture of various African societies. In the sense of salvage anthropology perspective of the times, he wanted to have those everyday cultures documented. To keep things before they are lost, and when you look at plastic utensils being used today, then these ceramic objects have acquired new dimensions and new importance also for members of the source communities themselves. So, that would be one answer to the question. Then there is another answer which is perhaps a little bit less official. In former times directors of the Frobenius Institute had also been directors of the anthropology museum, the Museum für Völkerkunde here in Frankfurt. Then there was a separation prior to Haberland coming into office. People said that Haberland was not very happy about being the first director of the Frobenius Institute, who was not also director of the anthropology museum. So he decided he wanted to have a kind of museum of his own, you know, to become at least director of a little anthropology museum of his own. So he decided that the Institute should have its own collection and he asked people employed at the Frobenius Institute who were doing fieldwork with various groups to bring back objects from everyday culture. However, this is a less official version, of course, but there might be some truth to it. I don't know because I never met Haberland in person, but from what I heard so far, there could be a little bit of truth in that.

- ZJ Interesting, too, that the Institute has accrued close to 800 objects.
- HJ It is quite a big collection for such an institution as ours. You could, of course, dismiss it and say that it just goes back to an old white man who wanted to be important and add to his own prestige. One could dismiss Haberland's intention by saying that, but with a more positive view, you could also say that he did understand something of the importance of material culture and objects, unlike many other anthropology professors of his time and subsequent decades. So there are different ways to look at this.
- ZJ And, more importantly, the modes of acquisition would be something to look into as well. Because your collection is made up of relatively newer objects than one would expect to see in an ethnographic museum, the ways in which they were collected would probably be more transparent, am I right?
- HJ That's true. I would say that too. Compared to many other institutions, more objects have been collected within the context of ethnographic fieldwork of participant observation. So, it's not like those expeditions

of old times where collectors met people they didn't know at all, or perhaps they didn't even speak their language, and then they were just offered huge quantities of objects or somehow acquired them without knowing the people these objects came from. So, there's a difference to other collections that have been acquired in expedition-like contexts of an older past.

ZJ And the objects I am examining?

HJ What I said about objects being collected in the context of fieldwork is not the case for this particular collection you are interested in. This collection is exceptional in that it has been put together by a collector and aficionado who just loved the places he went to and these kinds of objects. He wasn't an anthropologist, and, compared so a few anthropologists, he didn't know so much about the local context these objects came from. He bought them mostly from markets or traders he had contact with, sometimes over a very long time span.

ZJ One collector I looked up is Klaus Paysan, from Stuttgart. He was a photographer of wildlife, and I wondered if there was a diary or notes by him because I also read sparsely from some blogs that he attended several ceremonies. So perhaps one of those reliquaries I was looking at was one he acquired from such ceremonies.

HJ I am not sure. I vaguely remember that the collector who put together the particular collection you are interested in was in contact with quite a famous person, somebody who was renowned in one way or the other. But from the impression I have, it would be very difficult to argue that our particular collector acquired objects in a way that is problematic even from today's perspective. It would be very difficult to claim, let alone prove, that these are looted objects or objects that have been acquired against the will of the source communities. That's why we, as the Frobenius Institute, felt that it would be okay to accept this donation. Otherwise, we wouldn't have accepted it. In a way, this particular collection is not typical for our Ethnographic Collection. However, in another way, it is because these days, there are various collectors who become older and approach us and ask us if we could take their collections and preserve them for the future or to work with them.

ZJ The wall opposite your office holds the riveting framed portrait of *Hevioso*, the *Vodun* god of thunder. He was one of the objects I was coming to see, and there he was! The representation of such a deity

within a frame seemed to accord him another kind of agency, dissimilar to those he would possess in a shrine or even on a storage shelf, as I would later find. This was also symbolic of our “ways of seeing”, and it immediately recalled, Shlovsky’s concept of “defamiliarization” in “Art as Technique”, where *Hevioso’s* framed image takes him into the ‘unfamiliar,’ eliciting a prolonged process of perception² for me, the viewer. There is something powerful about the portrait.

HJ Well, as you just said, there seems to be something powerful, and as you also laughed while saying that, there seems to be some irony in it or some sense of humour, and these very emotions are also interesting and important, I believe. This is perhaps not a pure anthropological intention, but on the other hand, what is pure? I mean humour and irony, to be able to laugh about yourself – these are also important things in anthropology. I found it interesting, you know, not to have portraits of former directors aligned in our corridor, but those unfamiliar portraits. But there are also aesthetic reasons for choosing these particular pictures and not others from the same collection.

ZJ They are striking.

HJ Thank you, other people walk by these pictures or walk through the corridor without noticing them, so there are different sensibilities.

ZJ I beheld what I was looking for immediately, defamiliarized as they were.

HJ So that worked already

ZJ Yes indeed.

HJ On Shlovsky’s concept of ‘defamiliarization’: I believe that one of the key functions of anthropology as a discipline, in general, is to defamiliarize what is known to us, what is seemingly familiar to us and at the same time to make familiar what seems exotic or what seems strange. In my view, this is a kind of double effect, a seemingly contradictory effect that anthropology as a discipline, in general, has - a double movement, which is a specific contribution anthropology as a discipline can offer to science in general. This is where there is some kind of overlap between anthropology and art, and this is

² Shklovsky, Viktor. “Art as Technique.” In *Literary Theory, An Anthology*, Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1998.

something that tends to be neglected in many voices by non-anthropologists in our current times.

ZJ That is a significant point, especially as anthropologies already contend with a notorious history of exoticizing populations. Your take on defamiliarization is not often heard, as it concerns anthropologists.

HJ And it is especially not heard by non-anthropologists. Yet, this is something very important that our discipline can offer and that has value on its own, I believe. There is also one other thing that I believe is important: when we want to pay justice to or be respectful *vis a vis* people from the source communities, we also need to be respectful and have some empathy when we are dealing with our anthropological ancestors, rather than dismiss them as colonialists or whatever. We should treat those people in the same way that we are asked to treat to treat the people that we work with.

ZJ It cannot be denied that colonialism enabled early anthropology. But, in spite of misdeeds that might have marred the image of our discipline, it shouldn't be a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

HJ And that often happens, as if the endeavour of anthropology is not legitimate in itself.

ZJ In approaching the unfamiliar, my students and I were discussing the text *Thinking Through Things* by Henare *et al.* It was quite contentious. The prevailing question was, do we have to let go of our preconceptions, even if they were correct, in order to appreciate not so familiar things? Or to see fully how other people want us to see things. Perhaps it is okay to acknowledge our initial perceptions while respectfully relating to objects from different cultures.

HJ It often happens, when you look at anthropologists from New Zealand, they often write about objects as if they were persons, and in my view, this is a *Maori* perspective. It seems to me that these anthropologists feel obliged to subscribe to a Maori point of view and to refer to these objects as ancestors or as living beings. I don't believe that there's this kind of obligation for anthropologists. I think it is okay to work with one another or to be in a dialogue with one another when you have different perspectives.

ZJ On the performative aspect of *Vodun* objects in the collection, it appears that these objects were used in a ceremony/ ceremonies at some point in their existence (I, however, cannot quite ascertain the age of the objects) which brings to mind Crispin Paine's quote:

An object-person is only 'alive' when interacting with a human-person, the act of relating is what does the animating. This 'relationality' means that every encounter is different, and any attempt to define the 'true nature' of the non-human person involved is doomed. It also gives added emphasis to the importance of performance, another area of study that has made big contributions to material cultural studies and especially to religious studies.³

Going by this quote, our discussions around the objects within the storage space could be regarded as a non-ceremonial / sacred performance. Do they have lives outside of the storage shelves? E.g., as exhibition loans.

HJ Actually, I would say that I am a curator for this particular collection or for the Ethnographic Collection of the Frobenius Institute in general and not by any means, nor by any stretch of the imagination, a specialist on Vodun. So, I don't know much about this. But as far as I understand, these objects were just stored in the private living room of that particular collector, and now they're in our collection. And then we have this photo exhibition in our corridor. Apart from that, they have never been exhibited anywhere. This doesn't mean that they could not be, in the future, because many of the objects from our collection are sometimes put on loan and are shown in exhibitions that we curate ourselves or are curated by other institutions. We have had a variety of institutions in the past, and who knows what you will publish on your research, so we can't foresee what the future life of these objects will be. I, as a curator, feel an obligation to treat those objects with some kind of respect and responsibility, so I would not loan them to whoever or whatever institution wants them. I would also feel obliged to look into what exactly is done with them or the context they will be put into. So, I think that this idea of responsibility and respect is important.

³ Paine, C. *Religious objects in museums: Private lives and public duties*. London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

Although I would not subscribe to the view that these objects are inhibited by any beings or alive in any sense, I feel that the question, *are they or are they not?* is not for me to answer as an anthropologist. So that's not something I would feel I'm competent to talk about, or that is important for me to think about. This is something where I guess my perspective would differ very much from the perspectives of source communities or others. But I feel that it's okay. I mean, I don't think that I am obliged to subscribe to the views of the people I work with as an anthropologist. It doesn't prevent me from being respectful or being responsible.

ZJ Since we spoke briefly about Anthropological methods, I am curious to know your thoughts about "Object Biographies", as this is the lens through which I would like to analyze the chosen objects of *Vodun*. I would like to approach object biographies as heuristic vessels that "dictate a plurality of ontologies" (Amiria J M Henare et al. 8). As objects accrue histories temporally, it is conceivable to reveal their multiple interactions. Might I add, some scholars have discredited object biography as an outmoded method used in museum cataloguing contexts that have aided in the rigid typecasting of cultures. Shall we then put a stop to narrativizing an object biographically? Do you suppose that object biographies have the capacity to develop into a critical investigative method?

HJ Yeah, well, I don't have a problem with object biographies, and I don't think that to attempt an object biography is an illegitimate endeavour. I wouldn't believe that when you mention critiques against the rigid typecasting of cultures, just like the formulation you used a couple of minutes ago, throwing out the baby with the bathwater. It has that kind of tendency, I believe, and this is what often happens these days in statements by non-anthropologists or by activists or even by some non-anthropological museum directors in Germany, where you feel that if this is put just one step further, it is not okay anymore to talk with people who are different from yourself as if you are only allowed to talk about a person that has the same skin colour, gender, age. - Where does that leave us with our discipline?

ZJ The idea of Otherness does not have to be demonized. There is so much to be derived from our differences. Alterity, difference, Otherness are used in negative terms.

HJ Difference can be illuminating. I mean, anthropology is ultimately about understanding yourself. The Other can be very illuminating in helping you do that. And I believe that this attempt to understand yourself is something that we all have in common. I remember my

fieldwork in Papua New Guinea in a remote highland village. There, I was as much an object of anthropological research as I was a subject. People asked me questions all the time and wanted to find out more about where I came from and how I was functioning. They wanted to know about my culture, and this is completely okay. I mean, I never would have said to anybody that it is not okay to talk about someone who has a different skin colour, gender, age or social status, to talk about myself or to come to conclusions about the way I function as a German. So what happens when the baby is thrown out with the bathwater?

ZJ The idea of sameness recalls an army of zombies without our personal opinions and convictions. It is the reverent ways in which we express them that *really* do matter.

HJ It is homogenizing. As if we were all living on little islands, and we were only allowed to talk about ourselves, you know, and any statement about somebody inhabiting another island is dismissed on the grounds that you are not living there, that you do not belong there.

ZJ That's right, and I'm glad that we're having this conversation because it's something that I am passionate about, in terms of who has the right to write about a culture. When carrying out unbiased research without denigrating a culture, it can be done right. Finally, what does *Vodun* as a religion and its objects mean to you as the head of the Ethnographic collection at the Frobenius Institute?

HJ As I said, the question of whether these objects are alive or are actually inhabited by some beings or not, is not a question for me to ponder, I believe, as an anthropologist. But as I also said, that doesn't prevent us from treating them with the utmost respect and sense of responsibility. So rather than thinking about the objects being inhabited or not, I feel that what I can ask or what I can look into is what is actually being said or done with respect to these objects. This is something that is interesting and that can be accessed with anthropological methods and also with a reflexive view. What is it that made these objects so fascinating for many western observers? And when you ask about the future life of these objects, well, what has not happened yet is that these objects have actually been used as part of rituals by some source communities. That could also be happening in the future if somebody wants to loan some objects, and this does not go against those considerations of respect and responsibility. Why not loan them for use in ritual contexts? That could also be an arena for anthropological insights.

- ZJ One of the objects I am examining from Gabon appears to have been used in a ritual ceremony. What I thought was red paint is described as animal blood on the inventory card. It's remarkable ...the possibility that they go back into ceremony.
- HJ Well, after being used in a ritual context, they would have to go back into our collection again. But I would not rule out them being used in a ritual context in the future. That has happened in other institutions, and I'm not fundamentally averse to it.
- ZJ Are there types of displays for Vodun objects or religious objects in general that you would find interesting?
- HJ Perhaps I should explain that when I talked so much about responsibility, I did so with the experience of certain exhibitions here in Frankfurt at the former Museum für Völkerkunde, where a former director hired artists to curate exhibitions, and these artists sometimes have very much felt at liberty to do with those objects pretty much what they wanted. For example, I remember a big figure, some kind of life-size doll clothed with various objects from various regions, including a mask from Papua New Guinea that I know is considered sacred by the people it came from. I can imagine that nobody would have done something like that with an object, say, from Australia or New Zealand, but people from Papua New Guinea are far away, and nobody has to ask them. It doesn't really matter what they would say about this. The artist was free to put that mask on that kind of mannequin to create the impression this artist wanted. And I feel this is utterly disrespectful, you know, not responsible at all. If the collector had asked the people, how about we take this mask and put it on a kind of mannequin? They would probably not have agreed to that. And probably their descendants wouldn't agree either. So this is an example of why in my view, responsibility and respect are important. You cannot just do everything with those objects.