

Opening address: KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE

As friends of our museum, you are no strangers to geographical and cultural mental leaps. If our building were open today, you could visit an exhibition of West African drums on the 2nd floor, celadon porcelain from eastern China on the 1st floor and, another staircase down, on the ground floor, an installation of images and sounds from Kolkata in eastern India.

To illustrate what this exhibition is basically about and – more generally – what the audio collection of our museum (which played a major role in the concept of the exhibition) is about, a cultural concept from the Tlingit on the American Northwest Pacific Coast seems to me particularly illustrative: *at.óow*.

Literally, the term means “possession”, or “something bought”. In the past, the purchase price was often a human life. The acquired thing could be a landscape – a mountain, the site of a historical event; it could be an astronomical phenomenon – the Sun for example, the Milky Way, the constellation of the Big Dipper; it could be a spirit; or an artistic form or a literary image – an episode from the raven myth cycle depicted in a totem pole, in a wall painting, in a woven fabric; *at.óow* could also be a song or a story, the story of Gathéeni for instance, “the bay where the glacier was” – today’s Glacier Bay in southern Alaska.

It is a long story, meticulously documented and published by the Tlingit ethnologist Nora Marks Dauenhauer;¹ I am going to summarize it in just a few sentences:

A young girl lived through her puberty, as was common among the Tlingit, secluded in a small annex to the mighty plank house of her clan. It was already the third and final year of her isolation, and the girl felt bored to tears. In the distance, behind a mountain ridge, she could see a small piece of a glacier sparkling in the sun. The girl threw the bones of a dried fish she had just eaten towards this glacier and lured it to her like a young puppy: “Come here, eat!”

And the glacier came. Mightily it spilled over the ridge and pushed forward, “faster than a running dog”, as the story goes.

With her thoughtless disrespect the girl had broken a taboo and thus forfeited her life. She was saved by her grandmother, who sacrificed herself in her place and stayed behind in the clan house, while the girl and her relatives fled to the open sea in their boats. From there they had to watch the glacier push the house and the grandmother down into the deep waters of the bay. Two of the men were so overwhelmed by the event that they spontaneously burst into song and composed two songs that are still remembered and sung on special clan events even today.

Sacrificing herself, for the price of her own life, the grandmother acquired a whole series of *at.óow* for her clan. These included the land and water rights of Glacier Bay; the right to the pictorial representation of ice, glaciers, icebergs, and of grandmother and granddaughter; the right to the rumble of the glacier; the right to the names of grandmother and granddaughter; the right to the names of the two singers, the right to the songs they had composed, and the right to this very narrative.²

¹ Dauenhauer, Nora Marks and Richard (ed.), *Haa Shuká, Our Ancestors. Tlingit Oral Narratives*. Seattle, London 1988. 244–291.

² Worl, Rosita Faith, *Tlingit At.óow: Tangible and Intangible Property*. Cambridge, Ma. 1998. 94–95.

Tlingit *at.óow* are the material and immaterial components of larger mythological-ritual contexts and celebrations.

So what do we have if we have a Tlingit mask or a Tlingit textile in a museum collection?

In our store rooms there are about a dozen pieces that may belong to the *at.óow* category, but however many of them there are, the collection is deficient.

Taken on its own, the mask in a museum is just as inadequate as the written narrative in a library and the audio recording of the song in a sound archive to represent its larger multimedia context. But the Tlingit themselves celebrate this context on special occasions, such as funeral rites, with carefully choreographed displays of their material elements accompanied by performances of their immaterial components.

Nora Marks Dauenhauer describes the irritation that indigenous people sometimes experience when visiting ethnographic exhibitions: to them the museum display of their artefacts seems like a movie, she writes: “at best like a movie without a soundtrack”.³

The soundtrack of things are the voices and stories and memories and observations and instructions, and perhaps songs and recitations and kitchen and workshop sounds of those who invented these things, made them, examined them, used them and eventually parted with them.

The omission of this soundtrack is not a minor flaw: it means that the indigenous context is missing, the indigenous perspective as expressed through language, music, rhythm, is missing; everything is missing that gave meaning and significance to the pieces on display at the place and within the society of their origin.

The “fetishization of ‘things’”, as the Canadian ethnologist Julie Cruikshank put it, the “object-dominated aesthetics” of ethnographic museums,⁴ prevents them from breaking away from their former function as ideological armouries of European colonialism.

But this function contradicts the very concept of the museum as a shrine of the Muses, a repository of universal knowledge, a place of education and wisdom, as a symposium – a place of alcoholic drinks and lively debate.

The often called for decolonization of ethnographic museums not only concerns questions of restitution of loots and human remains, it also concerns the restitution of interpretation and meaning, a reconsideration of how things are dealt with in ethnographic museums. The decolonization of ethnographic museums ultimately means understanding the pieces in their collections as mere fragments of larger, multimedia units.

The drum is incomplete without its sound; drum and sound are incomplete without the other drums and sounds of the orchestra and without the occasion and intent of their performance.

This is why the decolonized ethnological museum dedicates its resources not to the musical instrument, but to music, not to the mask, but to the ceremonial, not to the hammer, but to the workshop; the decolonized museum is not an arsenal, but an echo chamber.

³ Dauenhauer, Nora, Tlingit *At.óow*: Traditions and Concept; in: Abbot, Helen et al. (eds.), *The Spirit Within*, New York 1995. 20–29.

⁴ Cruikshank, Julie, Oral Tradition and Material Culture: Multiplying Meanings of ‘Words’ and ‘Things’, in: *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Jun., 1992), p. 8.

This is what we hope to portray in the exhibition space of KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE. Except for the usual furniture, there is only one tangible *thing* in the exhibition, namely a small figure of Kali, Kolkata's eponymous goddess.

The figure slowly revolves around so its appearance constantly changes; it is embedded in the sound of voices, dream tales and memories, of nursery rhymes, street vendors' cries and the songs of buskers, of religious processions, of traffic noise, of the cawing of crows, and it is embedded in the ever-changing play of light and shadow of Samuel Schütz's pinhole camera projections.

Light and sound envelop Kali in the exhibition room, just as they do in Kolkata, thus demonstrating that there is more to an artefact in an ethnographic museum than its label.