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BRIDGES AND TROUBLED WATERS **On Mission Museums and the Encounter of Others**

Museums are related to the sacred realms of culture and the meaning of life. For missionary congregations, there has always been a need to re-present the people they encountered in far-away places to their communities in Europe. The article highlights the communicational aspects of museums and refers to two major SVD museums at the mission houses of St Gabriel's (Austria) and St Augustine's (Germany). Both museums are closed now, due to inappropriate administrative conceptions of a museum. The article also discusses the relationship of religious meaning and artistic expressions in the artefacts and the suggestion of returning objects to their original owners, particularly in France. The author pleads for an understanding of museums as spaces for communication and as bridges between different cultures.

There are museums dedicated to virtually any (un)imaginable topic, from matchboxes, bubble-gum dispensers and beer caps to cars and the wide variety of artistic and cultural artefacts. “In its original sense the Greek word *mouseion* was applied to a sanctuary dedicated to the muses of Greek mythology. In the 3rd century B.C. the term designated that part of the palace of the Ptolemaic kings in Alexandria [Egypt], that housed the library of Alexander the Great and was known as a place for learning. Yet though the term *mouseion* was not used to denote a collection of works of art, the idea of a public collection did exist in Greece. [...] No such collection is known in ancient Rome, but it is known that Roman generals plundered Greece and that many sculptures of Greek origin adorned public grounds and private houses.”¹ This 1965 definition of the museum introduces to the discussion regarding museums in the present German context: they belong to the venerated sphere of art and culture, the place

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¹ See (Hs. H.), *Museums and Galleries*, in: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 15, Chicago/London/Toronto/Geneva/Sydney/Tokyo: Encyclopaedia Britannica 1965, 1037-1053, 1040.

where the Muses offer beauty and inspiration for the construction of meaning in life on the one hand, and on the other hand, they are supposed to be full of stolen artefacts, as there is a lot of discussion on the transfer of art objects from one culture to another in many ways of conquest and trade.

The muse-related invention from classical antiquity was taken up in Renaissance times, first to describe the Medici collection in Florence (Italy) and later to become a showcase for extravagancies and curiosities of the ruling class and the learned related to it, mostly in Europe and Western societies. In Asia, the veneration of the past and of its personalities led to the collection of objects from the times of the Shang dynasty (16th to 11th century B.C.) in China onwards or in Japan in relation to the Tōdai Temple and its colossal seated Great Buddha.² Other cultures do not seem to have had a lot of interest in anything like a “museum.”

“Museum collections represented and embodied global connections: after all, at the most basic level, the removal of an object from one part of the world for display in another represents a connection between the site of origin and the site of display, and a collection of such objects represents a deliberately thought-through and systematised connection,” writes Michael Marten in his introductory notes to a debate section on “Mission History and Postcolonial Museum” in *Anthropos*.³ There is a close relation between museums, the colonial enterprise and the missionary engagement—troubled waters from many tributaries:

Nineteenth and early twentieth century museums were often closely connected to missionary activity, and missions themselves were an integral part of the colonial enterprise. Indeed, an important factor, that impacts on these questions in a wider sense, is the disproportionate significance of missionary activity in the broad setting of empire. The impact of missions in colonial spaces was often disproportionate to their status at home. Although seen by many as a dominant concern of the imperial era, missions were largely a minority pursuit, even within the churches. Their influence, certainly in terms of the wider impact of missions and missionaries on indigenous popu-

² See (G. D. L.), Museums, in: *Encyclopaedia Britannica/Macropaedia*, Vol. 24, Chicago/Auckland/London/Manila/Paris/Rome/Seoul/Sydney/Tokyo: Encyclopaedia Britannica 151998, 480-492, 481.

³ Michael Marten, Framing the Debate. Mission History and the Postcolonial Museum: *Anthropos* 114 (2.2019) 489-493, 489.

lations, cannot to be measured solely on the basis of their popularity—or otherwise—in the West.⁴

In this contribution I intend to show the SVD mission-related museums as spaces for communication which were intended to build bridges between cultures and manners of understanding cultures. As I had closer contact with the museums at St Gabriel's (Austria) and at St Augustine's (Germany), I provide additional information with regard to both which has not been analysed in the relevant studies so far. A purely economicist and administrative treatment in both cases will be shown as serious misconceptions for dealing with the responsibilities the museums have implied for the SVD.

To Get in Touch with Mission

Many years ago, I was marginally involved in a discussion about a photograph depicting Divine Word Missionaries in their Togo mission, probably around 1905. It showed several missionaries with their mission crosses in their sashes in front of obviously African huts in a village. However, doubts had arisen as the quality of the photograph was outstanding and there was the conviction that the missionaries may not have had access to the required equipment in Togo. It turned out that, in fact, the picture had not been taken in Togo at all, though the missionaries eventually worked in Togo, but at a mission rally in the parks of St Gabriel's mission house where they had constructed an "African village"⁵ with several huts, and there the missionaries were placed for their portraits. Such mission rallies were quite important in view of raising funds and motivation for the missionary enterprise. And one essential aspect for such awareness-building was to show and represent the places and contexts where the missionaries were sent and their work was needed. Beyond mere ideas and theories, visitors were to be able to *see* things and actually literally get "in touch" with "mission." In my understanding, this has an elementary relationship to communication, as the point has been to convey meaning through as many channels as possible.

This was the purpose of many museums and exhibitions in mission houses in Europe. Visitors were to be able to get a vivid impres-

⁴ Ibid., 490.

⁵ With the quotation marks I want to indicate some sort of labelling and my use of it: There is no such thing as an "African" village or culture, as any culture is much more local and varied, etc.

sion of the places where the missionaries were active.⁶ Often these places were described as strange and demanding, with different people and their cultures. The objects and artefacts from such countries and cultures were supposed to permit access and understanding.⁷ The people “at home” were to understand both the challenge of their missionaries and their sacrifice. It should become clear why mission and development were required for the peoples “over there” and the visitors were invited to make their contribution to the mission enterprise in many ways. Obviously, the presentations showed the particular accents of their time: the need for conversion and baptism in order to attain salvation⁸ on the theological and religious level; the importance of education, health services and development aid, on a more sociological level—hence the many mission schools, hospitals and workshops—, the importance of liberating people from oppressive influences of “spirits” and “demons.”⁹

This policy of visualising missions and cultures in awareness-building was quite alive in the 1970s when I studied at St Gabriel’s and belonged to the group of guides through the museum¹⁰ and the

⁶ Rebecca Loder-Neuhold has highlighted this aspect in her research on mission museums in her book *Crocodiles, Masks and Madonnas. Catholic Mission Museums in German-Speaking Europe* (Studia Missionalia Svecana 121), Uppsala: Department of Theology 2019.

⁷ On the aspect of missionaries who present “their” people at home see Catherine Marin, L’objet missionnaire: médiateur interculturel dans l’apostolat: *Spiritus* #220 (September 2015) 361-367.

⁸ Beyond a rather different outlook on mission nowadays, I cannot but express my highest regard for the motivation of the those SVD missionaries who assumed their mission over a hundred years ago. The missionaries for Togo I mentioned before were in no doubt that they might be dead within a few months after arrival in Togo due to deadly fevers; at most, they might endure for two years. But their hope to save a few souls from damnation took them to their mission. In our days, I could hardly think of anyone with a similar dedication and engagement for the wellbeing of others; maybe doctors and nurses taking on Ebola show a similar dedication.

⁹ See Linda Ratschiller, “Die Zauberei spielt in Kamerun eine böse Rolle!” Die ethnografischen Ausstellungen der Basler Mission (1908–1912), in: Rebekka Habermas/Richard Hölzl (eds.), *Mission global. Eine Verflechtungsgeschichte seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2014, 241-264.

¹⁰ The “Missions-Ethnographisches Museum” (MEM), still traceable at the SVD website (www.steyler.eu). For the structure, organisation and purpose of the museum, see Andreas Bsteh, Das Missions-Ethnographische Museum St. Gabriel, in: *Österreichs Museen stellen sich vor* 13, Vienna: Bundesministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Wirtschaft 1980, 23-30. The MEM does not exist anymore in the way the website presents

mission house. At that time, the museum was already modernised and showed a clear route from the first room dedicated to precious Chinese figures and artefacts in relation to the mission mandate according to Mt 28:19f (“go and make disciples ...”). Other rooms were dedicated to SVD mission territories—China, Japan, India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, African tribal cultures, Philippines, Latin America—following a track from high cultures to tribal settings leading to final considerations on the situation of the church and mission. The artefacts tried to convey partly the work missionaries had realised. As an example, for India, the commitment to the inculturation of the gospel message and its transmission was highlighted through the work of Georg Proksch SVD.¹¹ He was an excellent musician and had worked since the 1940s for coming to terms with Indian cultures. He established an ashram¹² and engaged in dance presentations of the gospel, in a sort of “Indian dress.” The MEM showed some of his musical scores and photographs of his dance performances. There was a fantastic collection of artefacts from Papua New Guinea with spears, bows and arrows, stone axes, trophy shields and a fair number of masks. In the Africa room, there was also a huge boa to be contemplated, presenting a rather natural setting of “Africa.” Nevertheless, there was also a modern Way of the Cross on display showing an understanding of this Christian veneration in a Congolese interpretation. So “Africa” was not reduced to vast jungles but offered also some questions regarding the missionary and colonial context.¹³

it. For good descriptions and analyses of the MEM see particularly Loder-Neuhold, *Crocodiles, Masks and Madonnas*, chapter 6 (pp. 174-243); also Rebecca Loder-Neuhold, The “Missions-ethnographische Museum” of St Gabriel as an Example of European Mission Museums: *Anthropos* 114 (2.2019) 515-529. For the important relation of the SVD missionary engagement with ethnology and natural sciences, see Rebecca Loder-Neuhold, Georg Höltkers Sammlung im Völkerkundemuseum Wien, in: François Rüegg (ed.), *Ethnographie und Mission. Georg Höltker und Neuguinea. Ethnographie et Mission. Georg Höltker et la Nouvelle-Guinée. Beiträge zum Workshop an der Universität Fribourg, Oktober 2016* (Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD 110), Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag 2018, 45-62.

¹¹ Horst Rzepkowski SVD, Als Missionar in Indien. Pater Georg Proksch SVD (1904–1986), in: *Archiv für schlesische Kirchengeschichte* 47/48 (1989/90), 183-203; George Proksch SVD, The Indian Christian Dance Drama, in: Edwin Daly, SJ/James Connolly, CSsR (eds.), *Proclaiming the Word in Audio-Visual Language*, Bangalore: The National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre 1972, 67-72.

¹² This *ashram* is still functioning and has further developed the inspiration and vision of Georg Proksch: <https://gyanashram.net>.

¹³ The “soldiers” wear modern helmets, placing the Way of the Cross in the context of colonialism and imperialism.

The tours through the museum were generally embedded in a wider presentation of the SVD at St Gabriel's.¹⁴ They included the church, the library with its different sections (I liked to show different Bible editions in ancient languages in the biblical section of the library), the enormous printing press and the book binding workshops. The idea was to convey to visitors the purpose of the mission house: to prepare missionaries for their tasks all over the world, in theological formation as well as in professional skills—at that time, there were still brothers in formation as carpenters or in different printing professions. The tours also presented the spirituality behind this—easily understandable in the church architecture and artworks or in the museum and its itinerary, and finally, the task to provide also funds for the mission through the publication of several magazines like *Stadt Gottes* for families and *Weite Welt* for children, which also had the important charge to inform about peoples and their world views.

Mission Museums

Regarding the SVD mission houses, Jerzy Skrabania SVD affirms that from early on, due to Wilhelm Schmidt's influence, cultural and religious artefacts were collected and mission museums were established.¹⁵ Schmidt reflected on the meaning of mission museums in relation to his work for the establishment of the Lateran ethnographic museum and the exposition of 1925 where he was involved as the director:

If we want, as a provisional orientation, to determine the nature and purpose of a Mission Museum, we must go back to the notion of a museum in general. Experience in ordinary museums over the years has drawn a sufficiently clear demarcation between those whose purpose is purely representative and those which, in addition, are to provide an education for the future. The former, like natural history museums and most historical museums in general, show what has been achieved in a certain field of the nature of human activity, and *how* it was achieved. The others, while respecting the truth and reality of

¹⁴ At that time, the house community there consisted of around 150 members.

¹⁵ Jerzy Skrabania SVD, Höltkers ethnologische Sammlungen im Haus Völker und Kulturen, Sankt Augustin, in: François Rüegg (ed.) *Ethnographie und Mission*, 127-146, 127f.

things, present this partial manifestation of human activity in such a way that one can learn for the future how this activity could be carried out even better and more fruitfully. It goes without saying that the Museum of the Missions should be classified in the second category.¹⁶

Such an outline may have been directly related to the 1931 reorganisation of the old collection of objects since the beginning of the century in Steyl,¹⁷ the motherhouse of the Congregation: It presents the “reality of things” in different countries and it deals with the current developments of the people there, particularly under the influence of Christian mission. Today, this museum is still open and has drawn advantage from its original shape. It is now presented as a “museum of a museum” and displays how museums conveyed their meaning in the past. Other SVD museums were established at St Gabriel’s from 1900 onwards (closed around 2005), at the Neisse/Nysa mission house after 1892¹⁸ (closed in communist times between 1952 and 1975, open since then), at St Wendel’s in 1920 (still open), at Bad Driburg after 1921¹⁹ (closed in 1996), at St Johann in Blönried after 1928 (transferred to the *Haus Völker und Kulturen* in Sankt Augustin in 2013) and, finally, the *Haus Völker und Kulturen* at the mission seminary in Sankt Augustin in 1973²⁰ (closed in 2019; see below).²¹ Beyond the German-speaking area (which according to different times included parts of today’s Poland etc.), museums pre-

¹⁶ Wilhelm Schmidt SVD, *Les Musées des Missions et en particulier le Musée pontifical du Latran pour l’étude des missions et l’ethnographie*, in: Baron Descamps, *Histoire générale comparée des Missions*, Paris/Bruxelles/Louvain: Librairie Plon/L’édition universelle/L’Aucam 1932, 605-636, 605. My translation. On the Lateran exposition of 1925, see Angelyn Dries, *The 1925 Vatican Mission Exposition and the Interface Between Catholic Mission Theory and World Religions: International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40 (2.2016) 119-132.

¹⁷ See <https://missiemuseumsteyl.nl/de/missionsmuseum-steyl/>

¹⁸ Andrzej Miotk SVD has compiled a large collection of data about SVD mission museums in view of a publication on the topic (Andrzej Miotk SVD, *The Light of Science for the Mission: Historical Inquiry on SVD Museums*, unpublished manuscript). The Neisse mission house was founded in 1892, its museum is first mentioned in 1902, according to Miotk.

¹⁹ Regarding the Bad Driburg museum collection, Miotk’s information is not really clear: negotiations started in 1921, for 1932 there were reports about the importance of the collection.

²⁰ See Skrabania’s contribution in this issue of *Verbum SVD*.

²¹ For the SVD museums in Austria, Germany and Switzerland (therefore not on the Steyl museum in the Netherlands), Loder-Neuhold, *Crocodiles, Masks and Madonnas*, offers at least short overviews, for St Gabriel and the *Haus Völker und Kulturen* in Sankt Augustin in-depth studies.

senting SVD missions were established in Poland, Slovakia and Belarus.²² Miotk's list includes also exhibitions and museums outside of Europe, at least partly related to "mission," in China, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia,²³ in Australia (1963), as well as in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and the USA, in the Americas.²⁴ Some of these museums may be operating no longer or have an entirely different perspective, but it should be noted that apparently there has been a strong interest in going beyond the pure ideas and making "mission" and other peoples visibly accessible.

What should be considered a "mission museum"? For her research, Rebecca Loder-Neuhold set out with a first definition:

Mission museums are permanent and publicly accessible museums established by mission congregations in their mission houses in Europe and displaying various objects

²² These are in Poland: Bytom-Rybnik (1922/1930), Górna Grupa (1931/1932), the Missionary-Ethnographic Museum in Pieniężno (1964), the Mission Collection in Lublin (1969), the Missionary-Ethnographic Museum in Chludowo (1975/1994); the Mission Museum in Laskowice Pomorskie (1977); in Slovakia: the Missionary Museum of Peoples and Cultures in Nitra (1925); in Belarus the "Permanent Exhibition *The Way of the Bible*" in Baranavichy (2014). (According to Miotk's manuscript.) – For the particular value of mission-related museums in Poland and their importance for the anthropological discourse see Anna Nadolska-Styczynska, Missionary Museums. A Challenge and a Dilemma for Anthropologists: *Anthropos* 115 (1.2020) 163-170.

²³ In China, the Catholic Mission Museum in Qingdao (1904), the Fu Jen Museum of Oriental Ethnology (1940) and the project for a museum in Lanchow (1948). In Japan, the Ichikawa Archaeological Museum (1948) and the Museum of Anthropology at Nanzan University (1949). In the Philippines, the Museum at the Mangyan Research Center in Calapan City (1965), the Divine Word University Museum in Tacloban (1966), the University Museum of San Carlos in Cebu City (1967), the Abraeniana Museum in Bangued (1986), and the Holy Name University Natural and Photographic Museum (2005). In Indonesia, the Bikon-Blewut Museum in Ledalero (1983), a Maritime Museum, East Nusa Tenggara (1996) and the Simon Buis and Norbert Shadeg Museum and Widya Wahana Library in Tuka/Bali (2013). (According to Miotk's manuscript.)

²⁴ In Argentina, the Museo de Ciencias Naturales in Esperanza (1901) and the Mission Museum Stella Maris, Valle María-Entre Ríos (1961/2010). In Brazil, the Museum of Natural History and Ethnology in Juiz de Fora (1920/1969), the Museum of Natural History and Mineralogy of San Arnaldo in Belo Horizonte (1940). In Chile, the Museo Colegio Alemán de Santiago (1910). In Paraguay, the Yerba Mate Museum, General Artigas (2012). In the USA, St. Mary's Mission Museum in Techny (1926) and the Mission Museum in Girard (1962). (According to Miotk's manuscript.)

transferred from non-European mission fields by missionaries.²⁵

She expands her definition after the analysis of many museums in more detail and incorporates other aspects of the museums:

European mission museums are permanent and publicly accessible museums, established by mission congregations, located in their mission houses in Europe, and displaying typically ethnographical and natural history objects. These objects were “collected” and transferred from non-European mission fields mostly by missionaries with the intentions *inter alia* of advertising for the mission cause (propaganda), and of presenting themselves, their missionary engagement, their history and past missionaries, and the people they are converting. Further aims were to fundraise, to recruit and educate new members, and to present their scientific collections.²⁶

As I am acquainted with the museums at St Gabriel’s and at St Augustine’s, in the following section I shall take a closer look at these two institutions.

The Missions-Ethnographisches Museum (MEM) at St Gabriel’s

Andreas Bsteh SVD describes in his presentation of the MEM²⁷ the founding group since Wilhelm Schmidt and the anthropologists. Before and after World War II, the missiologist Johannes Thaurer SVD was the MEM director, later Paul Schebesta SVD with the collaboration of linguist Anton Vorbichler SVD, ethnologists/anthropologists Martin Gusinde SVD, Hermann Hohegger SVD, Klaus Klostermaier (then SVD), Josef Franz Thiel (then SVD) and missiologist Kurt Piskaty SVD. In 1976, the “missiological department of St Gabriel’s theological faculty” under Kurt Piskaty initiated a major renovation and reorganisation of the museum. Thus, it becomes clear that the MEM was tightly related to the theological faculty and so was tied into the formation processes at St Gabriel’s. The tours through

²⁵ Loder-Neuhold, *Crocodiles, Masks and Madonnas*, 40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 296f. – On the purpose of museums in general see also: Reinold Schmücker, *Wozu Museen und warum so viele?*, in: Bernadette Collenberg-Plotnikov (ed.), *Das Museum als Provokation der Philosophie. Beiträge zu einer aktuellen Debatte* (Edition Museum Vol. 27), Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2018, 37-49.

²⁷ Bsteh, *Das Missions-Ethnographische Museum St. Gabriel*.

the museum were managed through the faculty bureau and then coordinated with the Rector of the Mission House and other departments.

“The general objective of the reorganisation of the Mission Ethnographic Museum of St. Gabriel’s”—and therefore the idea behind it—“is in line with its previous tradition. The museum wants to show (1) where the missionaries of St Gabriel’s have gone [shown in the regional distribution], (2) which historical situations they encountered there [ethnological and aspects of the history of religions], and (3) what they have done in the sense of their missionary engagement in these countries” [the missiological aspect].²⁸ Despite the intention of presenting the historical situations in other countries, it was an Austrian museum with the corresponding particular perspective at the others. The exhibition was structured with the collaboration of the director of the Vienna ethnological museum (“Völkerkundemuseum”), Prof. Dr. Hans Manndorff, so elementary pitfalls were avoided. The MEM also had a tape-recorded guided tour for unaccompanied visitors (!) which was modified and adapted to the new layout.

At some stage I was invited to accompany a workshop with the SVD students at St Gabriel’s in what would now be referred to as interculturality.²⁹ We took up some of Clifford Geertz’ perspectives on dealing with other cultures and his “thick description.”³⁰ The group of students at that time was quite international, with several Europeans, but also Latin Americans, Indonesians and Filipinos. As part of the approach to cultures, we went on a tour through the MEM: In a first round, we looked briefly at the information any of the museum guides would have offered us. Then, in a second round, we asked the participants to tell their own story of their culture. So, in the room dedicated to Indonesia with fine *akat* textiles, the rice terraces and straw hats the group heard about “Indonesia.” Then, the Indonesian students—all from Flores—told the group what they knew about the artefacts: The Florinese *akat*-weaving was very well known to them, but the straw hats belonged to an island some 3,000 km away. That helped to understand that “Indonesia” is more complex than the dis-

²⁸ Ibid., 26. The explanations in [brackets] were added in the minutes of a meeting with A. Bsteh in St Gabriel’s dealing with the state and the future of the MEM (February 19, 2009, personal archive).

²⁹ It was probably in 2001, I worked in Ecuador at that time and was somehow involved in programmes for the introduction of new missionaries into the socio-cultural context there.

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, London: Fontana Press 1993.

play cabinet conveyed. Similarly, other sections of the MEM were treated in the same manner.

A further step we took during that workshop was the comparison of what the museum showed and where the SVD were working at that time. That was a moment of taking stock of what was shown at the MEM, how it might have arrived there and under what conditions. As an example, Gusinde's work was obviously considered highly important and the volumes of his study of the populations on Tierra del Fuego (Chile)³¹ were on display, but there were only few artefacts and objects related to that important work—because of the material conditions of their cultural production.

Then we went on to ask what actually was lacking in the MEM. By that time, it had already become clear that “mission” was no longer related to distant continents and had gone beyond the geographical perspective.³² So, to no surprise we discovered that there was no space in the MEM dedicated to “Austria” and we took some time to

³¹ His opus magnum: Martin Gusinde, *Die Feuerland-Indianer. Ergebnisse meiner vier Forschungsreisen in den Jahren 1918 bis 1924*, unternommen im Auftrage des Ministerio de Instrucción Pública de Chile, in drei Bänden herausgegeben von Martin Gusinde. Band I: *Die Selk'nam. Vom Leben und Denken eines Jägervolkes auf der Großen Feuerlandinsel*, Mödling bei Wien: Verlag der Internationalen Zeitschrift „Anthropos“ 1931; Band II: *Die Yamana. Vom Leben und Denken der Wassernomaden am Kap Hoorn* (1937); Band III/2: *Anthropologie der Feuerland-Indianer* (1939); Band III/1: *Die Halakwulup. Vom Leben und Denken der Wassernomaden in West-Patagonien* (1974). See also Martin Gusinde, *The Lost Tribes of Tierra del Fuego. Selk'nam, Yamana, Kawésqar*. ed. by Christine Barthe and Xavier Barral, London: Thames & Hudson 2015.

³² While before Vatican II, mission happened in “heathen territory,” mostly outside of Europe, the Second Vatican Council achieved a fundamental change in this perspective and declared that the church is essentially missionary, thus globally missionary. The famous sentence in *Ad gentes* 2 should be considered as a serious expression in that sense, though from *Ad Gentes* chapter 2 onwards, the geographical understanding of mission returns into the document under the suspicious heading “Mission work itself.” However, it took the SVD a quarter of a century to put this shift into practice and to admit missionaries also to come to Europe for their *mission* assignment—in the so-called “Roscommon consensus” of 1990. On these developments see Martin Üffing SVD, 25 Years Roscommon: *Verbum SVD* 56 (4.2015) 439-445; id., *Missionar-Sein in Europa. Missionswissenschaftliche Überlegungen*, in: id. (Hg.), *Mission seit dem Konzil* (Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD 98), Sankt Augustin: Steyler Verlag 2013, 177-219; id. (ed.), *Interculturality* (Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Roscommon25), Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut 2013. It should be noticed that the notion of a mission *in Europe* is still far from being acceptable in many church circles and traditionally missionary congregations.

design such a display room. The interesting questions were: What would be considered “Austrian”? How to present it? What would be considered outstanding features of “Austrians”? Obviously, this section never was implemented and our exercise was helpful—hopefully—only for the group in their approach to the culture and visibilisation of the “other.”³³

From 2005 onwards, the MEM was closed down. By that time, the theological faculty at St Gabriel’s had ceased to function, the students had moved out of the mission house. From 2008 onwards, the museum became interesting for other actors at St Gabriel’s: there was the Mission Procure with its interest in awareness-building. Also the editorial team³⁴ of *Stadt Gottes* and even more the children’s magazine *Weite Welt* were interested in expanding the services offered: *Weite Welt* had a lot of interest in teachers of religion³⁵ and from the publishing facilities at St Gabriel’s we offered those teachers visits to the MEM, with the implementation of playful and interactive tools.³⁶ At the same time, a task group tried to implement a more creative

³³ Regarding interculturality, thick description and the normativity of the local actors, at this workshop I experienced a wonderful failure: We were talking about table manners and the relevant local Austrian habits. The insistence was on observing what the locals do, with reference to eating with spoon, fork and knife (and not go for your *Schnitzel* with the spoon only etc.). At lunch, their participant observation unavoidably ran into an Austrian native who slurped his soup in the most outrageously noisy manner, and that was the end of a single normative discourse on “table manners,” even though it helped to understand different class-related habits also within an SVD community at one mission house.

³⁴ At that time, I was involved in the publication tasks and editorial perspective of the magazines and the SVD “dimension of communication” in the Austrian SVD Province.

³⁵ In Austria, religious instruction has been part of the curriculum also in public schools at primary and secondary levels, in more recent times with elective options. The teachers were often brokers, particularly at the primary level (children aged six to ten). The magazine targeted a readership of eight to twelve-year-olds and insisted on age-specific and interesting reading material for entertainment and information. Thus, the magazine often provided teachers with useful material to talk about human rights, other faiths, sacraments, nature etc. *Weite Welt* in its Austrian edition was started in 1948 and had to be given up in 2010 for financial reasons, the edition from Germany was distributed until 2018, when also there the magazine was given up.

³⁶ I see this move as an important step to build a communicational relationship starting from the other and the dialogue partner. See in the same direction the study by Ann Davis and Kerstin Smeds (eds.), *Visiting the Visitor. An Enquiry into the Visitor Business in Museums* (Edition Museum Vol. 18), Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2016.

approach to the MEM with the intended employment of some guides trained in museology and pedagogy. In February 2009, the MEM was taken over by the Rector of the mission house and a commission tried to sort out the legal conditions for a re-opening of the MEM, like the implications of charging an admission fee (management, taxes), the availability of (professional) museum guides³⁷ and requirements of an adaptation of the exposition. The work of that commission was ended when the mission house administrator submitted an application “that the operation of the mission-ethnographic museum of St Gabriel be discontinued due to a persistent lack of human and financial resources and that the exhibits be used sensibly inside and outside the mission house or congregation.” The House Council accepted this application on July 14, 2011, and closed the MEM, at first temporarily. There were several interrogations: What should be future steps for a pedagogical and mission-related use of the MEM? Is there any interest of SVD missionaries in the MEM and mission awareness related to it? As far as I am aware, these questions remained without an answer.³⁸

In the course of the restructuring of the entire mission house³⁹ also the artefacts of the MEM were transferred. The minutes of a meeting with the “Real Estate Fund”⁴⁰ in charge of the management of the house stated the recent history of adaptations at the MEM, the relation to anthropology in connection with St Gabriel’s in the past, the financial situation and concluded: “Economically, such a business cannot be run positively. However, the operation of a museum is important for the St Gabriel site and its content component. A museum could be part of the ‘St Gabriel Life Worlds’ and provide this brand with added value.”⁴¹ The main perspective, then, related to possibilities for marketing, finances and “branding”—a basic pattern in going about cultural tasks when administrators take the lead. The minutes state that there is no structural connection to the SVD and its mission, at least not anymore. How to deal with the artefacts there, some of them considered of priceless value? Among the ideas, a project was

³⁷ I took part in actually long—and quite frustrating—discussions about the fact that there is something like a professional training for museum pedagogy at Vienna University and in the neighbouring town of Mödling, most likely some of these students were readily available for students’ jobs at our museum etc.

³⁸ As a logical step, I resigned from any responsibility and involvement with the MEM (letter to the Rector, June 23, 2012).

³⁹ See Béla Lanyi’s article in this issue of *Verbum SVD*.

⁴⁰ Meeting of November 22, 2012 (my archive).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

discussed to return artefacts to their original owners, in a world-wide tour through museums and with a publicity-oriented show event or handing over at the original places; it did not prosper for many reasons. Some of the artefacts seem to be on display in the newly ordered complex at St Gabriel's.

The Haus Völker und Kulturen at Sankt Augustin

Rebecca Loder-Neuhold describes the *Haus Völker und Kulturen* (HVK) well within its setting at Sankt Augustin. There are several institutions around the HVK museum: The philosophical-theological faculty⁴² for the formation of missionaries, several scientific institutes like the *Anthropos Institute* for ethnology, anthropology and linguistics, and *Monumenta Serica*, dedicated to sinology, as well as the *SVD Missiological Institute*. The museum developed from the artefacts stacked at the Anthropos Institute and was established with its own building in 1973.⁴³ “The source situation for the mission museum in St Augustin is relatively good since the museum is one of the biggest and most famous ones,” and holds about 10,000 objects.⁴⁴

⁴² The SVD had its own full-blown philosophical-theological faculty at St Augustine's (Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule SVD St. Augustin), first established in 1925 and gradually expanded until it received ecclesiastical and state recognition in 1983 and in 1999 became a “Faculty.” The SVD handed the patronage over to the Cologne Archdiocese on February 2, 2020. Meanwhile, the faculty has become the “Kölner Hochschule für Katholische Theologie” (KHKT) and will shift its seat into Cologne city in early 2021.

⁴³ The artefacts from Anthropos were turned over to the HVK on a loan basis. It appears that an exaggeratedly independent behaviour of the HVK was expected, because a Business Meeting of Anthropos with the (German) Provincial stated: “Fr. Superior General declared through his signature as binding the four main conditions of the members of the Institute: [...] c) the members of the Institute would enjoy free access to the Museum, and would be represented on its board of directors; [...] The province totally supported these points.” Minutes of the Business Meeting of October 14, 1972, signed K. Hoheisel and P. W. Saake (Archive Anthropos).

⁴⁴ Loder-Neuhold, *Crocodiles, Masks and Madonnas*, 338-343, 338. See also Jerzy Skrabania's article in this issue. – The permanent exposition extends over 16 rooms with a total of 1,400 square meters and for special exhibitions, a hall with over 200 square meters is available: according to the description of Josef Franz Thiel, then director of the HVK; in: Karl Josef Rivinius SVD, *70 Jahre Steyler Missionare St. Augustin*, Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionare 1983, 78.

The original statutes of 1973 described the functions of the museum as follows:

- 1) Visual and documentary material for the students of the Philosophical-Theological College;
- 2) Incentive for missionaries on home leave to collect museum objects and for comparative studies;
- 3) Function of general education;
- 4) Research material for academics.

In other words, the core tasks of the museum are described as collecting, researching, preserving and communicating. This is *the idea* behind the creation of the museum.⁴⁵

The internal Statutes of the HVK (version 2012) state its purpose clearly within the mission perspective of communication, interculturality and dialogue:

“§ 1 The objective of the HVK: With its collections, the *Haus Völker und Kulturen* (HVK) wants to inform about the traditional culture and religion of other peoples, thereby reducing prejudice and contributing to better mutual understanding and respect for each other. The collections of Christian art from these countries testify to how the Good News is received by these people and expressed in their own language of forms and symbols. Thus, the HVK is at the service of the missionary task of the SVD, because it shows both the world of the people to whom our missionaries go, as well as the Gospel taking root in these cultures. It contributes to building mission awareness.”⁴⁶

§ 2 The internal assignment of the HVK: The HVK belongs to St Augustine’s Mission Seminary: The Rector of the Mission Seminary is responsible with his counsel.”⁴⁷

In 2014, in the aftermath of a “general visitation”⁴⁸ the Provincial of the German Province (GER) approached the museum in order to

⁴⁵ Quoted in Skrabania’s report on the Museum to the Provincial, June 11, 2014 (my archive).

⁴⁶ In the architecture of the SVD mission perspective, there are four “dimensions” for the implementation of the dialogical approach to mission understood as *missio Dei*: all SVD missionaries stress a biblical, a communicational and a justice and peace practice, together with (building) mission awareness.

⁴⁷ Internal Statute, approved and implemented by the German Province in June 2012 (my translation).

discuss its “future.” Apparently, there had been consultations and demands for guidance the Province had asked of the Generalate, though I have no documentation on the questions GER had raised and taken to the Generalate in Rome:⁴⁹ “We had asked the visitors for information from the generalate regarding the future of our museums. The visitation report states: “The province currently has three museums, which implies expenditures. At the present time, the Society has neither the staff nor the means to continue these museums, and this will not change in the future. We strongly recommend that the provincial leadership convene a commission to explore alternative options for the future of these museums. We expect the provincial leadership to take a concrete decision on the basis of the results of this commission’s work.”⁵⁰

The Generalate, further, suggested for the work of this commission and the related tasks for the Province:

As you presented in your report for the General Visitation, running three museums and keeping items from a former museum (Blönried) is costly. Added to this, the structures of the museums are in dire need of repair. On the other hand, the number of visitors has been dwindling, although in Steyl it is not as bad as in the other two museums. In the visitation report we recommended that you establish a committee to explore other alternatives for the museums. The following are our proposals to this committee:

- In principle we would say, running one museum should be enough if you want to keep any.
- Starting to negotiate with other interested institutions to help us run the museums and take a decision in favor of the museum which attracts more visitors. Then bring the items to this one museum. The duplicates could be sold.

⁴⁸ Once every six years, the SVD Generalate “visits” each Province, in order to foster personal encounters with the members and to “strengthen the confreres’ conviction that the Society cares of each and every one of them.” It further is supposed to sharpen the Generalate’s perception of the life and work, the conditions and needs of the congregation (cf. *SVD Constitutions* 626).

⁴⁹ Following the adage that nothing comes from Rome that has not gone there before.

⁵⁰ Letter of Provincial R. Huning SVD to the Director of the HVK, July 21, 2014 (my translation). The letter refers to the HVK at St Augustine’s, the Steyl mission museum and the museum at St Wendel’s.

– If it is not possible to find convincing interested people or Institutes to help us in running the museum, we propose that you try to find other museums or universities that are interested in our collection and eventually give them as loan collection. Also here, the duplicates could be sold.⁵¹

The approach to “museum,” thus, centres prominently on management and economy, not on communication and the encounter with other cultures and understandings of the faith. The Provincial Superior installed a commission accordingly:

The first question, therefore, is whether the province should and can maintain its own museums in the medium and long run at all. In order to do this, it is necessary to clarify and state what costs are associated with the operation and how high the investment requirements are at each of the locations. However, there are also questions of content. Should the Commission plead in favour of the continued existence of one or more museums, it should show to what extent this can actually make a significant contribution to building missionary awareness. We further expect the Commission to explore alternative possibilities, such as e. g. loaning of parts of our collections to third parties, cooperation with other museums, etc.⁵²

A meeting of representatives of the three museums in order to find ways of pulling together the objects of the three museums into one did not produce any outcome, as each of the museums insisted on its importance for the missions. The St Wendel museum stated that it functions very cheaply and serves as an institution for building mission awareness; similarly Steyl, which anyhow is supposed to be handed over to an independent foundation. Initial enquiries with museums in the Cologne and Bonn area did not furnish major interest and handing artefacts over to the Lateran museum in Rome would imply that these objects would be stacked away in depots. The meeting was quite clear that there are no financially self-sustaining museums anywhere in the world—with the exception of the Getty

⁵¹ Ibid., quote originally in English. – Regarding the suggestion to sell objects, it should be noted that many objects belong to the Anthropos Institute and are on display at the HVK on a loan basis. In the HVK documentation to each artefact, the provenience and loan status are supposed to be registered.

⁵² Ibid.

Museum—, much less financially profitable ones.⁵³ This reflection from the commission again shows how far an economic approach to the topic of museums⁵⁴ in expectation of profits is intrinsically out of focus, to say the least.

Regarding economic and management aspects, HVK had sold an unspecified number of artefacts over the previous decades, particularly in the 1990s. The minutes of a board meeting in late 2005 report on the approval of such a sale which produced 155,000 Euros.⁵⁵ Thus, the HVK still had more than 175,000 Euros to its credit in 2012 which over the following years diminished constantly mostly because of running costs, most of them for heating the building. Further, the museum suffered from contradictory public prescriptions for safety: As an example, for a lecture in relation to an exposition of masks in the museum, a hundred people could have been admitted there, but a lecture on original sin—thus, without direct relation to an exposition, but using the beautiful space—would have been forbidden for any number of fire and safety regulations—the merciless grind of truly Germanic contradictory bureaucratic prescriptions. As St Augustine's Mission House was not willing to use some of the available funds to adapt the physical conditions to the prescriptions, such as escape routes and signs, the museum was kept semi-closed instead.⁵⁶ Around Christmas time, there were exhibitions of Christmas cribs from all over the world which attracted many visitors.⁵⁷

⁵³ Minutes of a meeting of the museum directors, November 5, 2014. The Steyl museum, meanwhile, has been handed over to an independent foundation: see <https://missiemuseumsteyl.nl/de/missionsmuseum-steyl/>

⁵⁴ Regarding the marketing approach to museums, see Ann Davis, Empowering the Visitors. Process and Problems, in Davis/Smeds (eds.), *Visiting the Visitor*, 89-103.

⁵⁵ Minutes of the meeting of November 4, 2005, and the Mission Seminary house council of February 28, 2007, with the indication that the money should be dedicated to the maintenance of HVK (my archive). – There are still rumours about lacking transparency with regard to the highly profitable sale of HVK objects in previous decades and the disappearance of the corresponding revenue for the HVK.

⁵⁶ Calculations stipulated that the required adaptations could cost around 100,000 Euros, while running costs (basically heating with a deficient system) amounted to 50,000 Euros annually (Minutes of the board meeting, March 27, 2017). Some repair work on the roof and the electric system was realised in 2017.

⁵⁷ These expositions presented large numbers of cribs: The Christmas exposition 2016 showed over 400 cribs, 245 from a recently acquired private collection, over 160 cribs from Latin America alone (press release at the closing of the exposition, January 19, 2016). The director of the museum reported around 1,800 visitors each year from 2014 to 2017, with around

In recent years, mission museums have become more endangered all over Germany, so in March 2017, a number of museum experts held a consultation at the HVK to tackle the question how to help sustaining these museums. There were several museums belonging to (missionary) congregations that had been closed down or struggled for their survival.⁵⁸ The most interesting reflection at that meeting, in my view, consisted in the observation that the objects in mission museums are not, in the first place, property in the private domain of the congregations and therefore goods to be traded but they have been *entrusted* by the first owners to the missionaries with the purpose of building bridges of understanding. Such a perspective, again, feeds into a communicational approach. The museums are responsible for conveying the meaning of the objects to the German society.

Finally, the semi-closed state of the HVK was conducted into a sort of limbo: In November of 2019, the Mission House decided to close the museum “for the time being.”⁵⁹ However, the information about this resolution was made “public” within the house community only in March of 2020, without giving further perspectives for the HVK nor any reasoning behind the decision. While the communicational policies and activities during the last years of the HVK were probably rather timid and limited to occasional actions by its director, Jerzy Skrabania SVD, the administrative and economic approach over the last years became at last the prick of the spindle to turn the HVK into the “sleeping beauty” of the Grimm fairy tale⁶⁰—a deep slumber befalling the entire castle with horses, pigeons and all. However, while the hedge of thorns grows thicker and deadlier by the day,

1,000 for the crib exposition of December 2014/January 2015 and around 1,100 the year after: Skrabania, board meeting, March 27, 2017 (my archive). In comparison: Josef Franz Thiel mentions “around 15,000 visitors yearly, interested in mission” in 1983: in Rivinius, *70 Jahre Steyler Missionare St. Augustin*, 80.

⁵⁸ For the documentation of this consultation see: LVR-Fachbereich Regionale Kulturarbeit/Museumsberatung, Köln/LWL-Museumsamt für Westfalen, Münster (Hg.), *Missionsgeschichtliche Sammlungen heute. Beiträge einer Tagung* (Studia Instituti Missiologici SVD 111), Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag 2017. In this consultation, the German Conference of Religious (DOK) was prominently involved, as many of the museums have relations to congregations; see Tanja Holthausen, Die besondere Situation missionsgeschichtlicher Sammlungen: *Ordenskorrespondenz* 58 (4.2017) 481-489. Holthausen had compiled a survey of museums and mission-related collections and expositions in Germany to estimate the situation.

⁵⁹ The HVK website was stripped down and does not report any new developments. It states bluntly “the museum is closed/shut down” (“geschlossen”) [accessed November 15, 2020].

⁶⁰ See www.grimmstories.com

some hidden movements might take place inside regarding a creative use of the slumbering treasures. There is no prince with his redeeming kiss to be expected any time soon to restore the museum to its communicational tasks and responsibilities within the German society.

Colonialism, Missions and Looting

Museums in the German-speaking area have been confronted with growing challenges regarding their collections over the last decade or so. The discussion started with the suspicion and occasional evidence that often museums owned art works which had come there in the context of the Nazi regime.⁶¹ In some dictionaries the German expression “Raubkunst”—robbed art—is translated directly into “Nazi-stolen art” or “Nazi plunder” (Wikipedia), thus indicating a particular relation to Germany over the last hundred years—funny though that by “objective” dictionary definition the British, French etc. could not have stolen art in their museums. Subsequently, the research into the provenience of their stock has become an important task for the art market and in the museum world.

This discussion expanded into contexts of colonialism and the missionary engagement. In a long conversation about the ethnological implications for the reopening of the “Humboldt Forum” in Berlin, ethnologist Fritz Kramer lamented that contexts and relationships between different actors even within a colonialist setting “are simply overlooked when the sometimes very justified accusation of looted art is over-simplified and expanded. I have the impression that the projection of the Nazi debate on ethnographic material is what our society can still do with ethnographic objects. They are hardly interested in anything else.”⁶² In the same conversation, the topic of looted art is discussed at length and placed within the possibility of “shared heritage.” Karl-Heinz Kohl draws on Levi-Strauss’ theory of communication to distinguish three basic forms of exchange: “the mutual ex-

⁶¹ The “Gurlitt Collection” contributed a lot to this discussion: around 1,500 art works had been assembled by German art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt in the first half of the 20th century. In 2013, the media covered widely what was supposed to be a major Nazi loot discovery. The collection is housed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Bern (Switzerland) now and there is extensive research being conducted in order to return looted art works to their owners.

⁶² Karl-Heinz Kohl/Fritz Kramer/Johann Michael Möller/Gereon Sievernich/Gisela Völger, *Das Humboldt Forum und die Ethnologie. Ein Gespräch* (Der ethnologische Blick Vol. 1), Frankfurt: kula Verlag 2019, 46.

change of people through entering into marriage alliances, the exchange of goods and services, and the exchange of messages. If strangers meet who do not speak a common language and between whom there are no social ties, they are dependent on exchanging things if they want to communicate with each other. Research travelers have been able to observe this time and again in situations of *first contact*. The exchange establishes peaceful relations. The alternative to exchange is war.”⁶³ Certainly, in many situations such exchange and communication took place under power imbalances. Nevertheless, in Cook’s expedition, “almost everything he and his people brought to Europe from the South Pacific had been exchanged for things that were unknown there and whose usefulness the islanders quickly recognised. [...] Was it really an unequal exchange when he took wooden statues of the gods and feather robes, stone tools and clubs and traded them for nails and iron tools? Metal was unknown on the islands, and the things of the Europeans were so much sought after that the Tahitians even offered the love services of their wives for them. Cook had to strictly ban this trade when his sailors began pulling the iron nails out of the hull.”⁶⁴ The argument of *shared heritage*, however, functions as a rejection of restitution demands: “The return demands made to the British Museum when Neil McGregor was still in charge of it were even rougher than the current ones to the ethnological collections in Berlin. McGregor countered their demands through the concept of *shared heritage*. What he means by that is that the artefacts are in fact here in London, but they belong to all of us. This is an argument intended to fend off demands.”⁶⁵

Artefacts—Religious Objects and/or Art?

In her introduction to the meeting at the HVK, Ulrike Gilhaus stated:

Houses with collections of non-European ethnology, like the mission history museums, belong to the museum category of special cultural-historical museums and have been criticised for many years. This is not only directed against the collections from the colonial era and the often questionable circumstances of their acquisition, but also very strongly against their presentation, which reinforces

⁶³ Kohl et al., *Das Humboldt Forum und die Ethnologie*, 44. Chapter 4 in this conversation deals with looted art and restitution (35-52).

⁶⁴ Kohl, in: *ibid.*, 36f.

⁶⁵ Sievernich, in: *ibid.*, 49.

and establishes the Eurocentric perspective already provided by the collection. Occasionally, the accusation is made that ethnographic museums have lagged behind the academic debate on how to deal with ethnographica for years. The exhibitions, critics say, were largely based on regional and ethnic principles. Their objects, which were taken out of context—usually presented in rigid permanent exhibitions—represented people from tribal cultures as objects exposed, lacking multi-perspective interpretations, values and world views. The objects remained static, alien, enigmatic and, at best, beautiful.⁶⁶

In this context of public discussion, there is the suggestion to return objects to the original owners. It implies several courses of action: First, there is the requirement of research into the provenience in the museums. It applies particularly to public museums, but also to the missionary collections administered by religious congregations. Thus, it should become clearly established how objects have come into the museums now. For the HVK, as an example, it is clear that many objects were bought in Papua New Guinea, even if there were power imbalances at work and the intervention of missionaries considered friends of the local population was important, as the original owners might not have given their artefacts to other agents.

There is a further consideration for the objects in mission museums which has to do with religion. Karl-Heinz Kohl observes:

There are cult objects, which you first make with great effort, and which you want to get rid of as soon as possible when the rituals for the dead are finished. This actually widespread custom is based on the idea that the spirits of the dead are still present in their images. And they have to be expelled once and for all by letting them rot or be eaten by termites. Our museums, on the other hand, proceed in the exactly opposite manner: Objects in them are kept for all eternity. That is, of course, a problem. How would people from Melanesia or Africa react when, in one of our museums, they once again encounter the embodiments of their ancestors, who they believed had long since entered the shadow realm?⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ulrike Gilhaus, Einführung, in: LVR-Fachbereich Regionale Kulturarbeit et al. (eds.), *Missionsgeschichtliche Sammlungen heute*, 9-14, 9f.

⁶⁷ Kohl, in: Kohl et al., *Das Humboldt Forum und die Ethnologie*, 47.

It is interesting to see that for the HVK ethnologist Josef Franz Thiel explained in 1978 the specific purpose of the museum with regard to religious art and the differences to objects understood as art:

Since the art of the primitive peoples is not a *l'art pour l'art*, but a religiously committed art and thus has a religious function in the first place, the art object is voided when it loses its religious function. It may be thrown away, even if it is a great work of art. On the other hand, as an ethnologist, one finds that when a new art creation comes about, it is precisely the Christian churches that give the impetus, because they are provoking a new artistic creation by bringing new ideas that are to be realized with the old forms. [...] Since the HVK does not want to be an art museum in the conventional sense, the preferred goal of the house is to collect this new Christian art.⁶⁸

Particularly in the mission museums, there are many such artefacts from the religious realm and it is the task of such museums to convey the meaning of religions in different cultures. But this also implies a further difficulty in the contemporary discussion, as the modern enlightened expert has long ago abandoned any reference to religion. Therefore, it is rather confusing when missionaries report on dealing with fetishes,⁶⁹ for example: When people become Christians, they actually may feel liberated from the anguish and fear their fetishes exerted on them. This is the first moment of confusion: that conversion should imply liberation, as mission generally is suspected to be a colonialist imposition. While the postmodern interlocutor has given up “religion,” he will insist that the fetishes of African peoples must be preserved. Still more confusing is that the newly converted should approach the missionary and bring their fetishes and demand that the missionary destroy them, as they still exert some strange power and it is believed that missionaries may not be afraid of it or subject to it. The missionary is required to destroy and burn the fet-

⁶⁸ Josef Franz Thiel in a letter, quoted in Jerzy Skrabania SVD, *Haus Völker und Kulturen. Seine Entstehungs- und Wirkungsgeschichte*, in: LVR-Fachbereich Regionale Kulturarbeit et al. (ed.), *Missionsgeschichtliche Sammlungen heute*, 41-52, 47. For an overview of religious objects in mission museums of the Spiritans in France and the topic of religious meaning vs. art in the artefacts see Nicolas Rolland (ed.), *Afrique, à l'ombre des dieux. Collections africaines de la Congrégation du Saint-Esprit*, Paris: Somogy éditions d'art 2017.

⁶⁹ Until our days, older missionaries still tell such stories about their work in African countries.

ish and there is no possibility and liberty to take it into a museum. The missionaries, then, will be accused that in their ignorance they have destroyed such priceless cultural objects. Or a story Heide Lienert-Emmerlich—an ethnologist and former collaborator at the HVK—used to tell: In a certain Papua New Guinea community she worked with, they kept asking her about a certain stone related to special rituals and powers: “Is it still in your place over there (a German missionary museum)?” “Yes, I saw it before I came here.” “That is good, because it is so powerful and we don’t have the elders any more who could control it. So, it must be as far away from us as possible,”—and Germany is far enough. Through modernisation and cultural change, the communities have lost the tradition and capacity to deal with the spiritual powers of old, but they have not lost their fear of them. For missionaries in such contexts, there is no way out: They are condemned for destroying fetishes (and religions), and they are condemned also for giving credit to people they work with and who actually are afraid of such religious items and practices.

Back to Their Origins

In relation to the demands of restitution, French President Emmanuel Macron decided in a magnificent gesture to take a bold giant step ahead beyond long-standing French practices and official positions. In a discourse at the University of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) on November 28th, 2017, he declared: “Starting today, and within the next five years, I want to see the conditions put in place so as to allow for the temporary or definitive restitution of African cultural heritage to Africa.” This was further explained: “African cultural heritage can no longer remain a prisoner of European Museums.”⁷⁰ This proclamation was all the more unexpected as only one year earlier, France had categorically refused to return even the smallest amount of cultural heritage objects to Benin by virtue of the inalienability of public French art collections. As a result of President Macron’s statement, a commission was installed to study the possible measures and proceedings for such a general restitution. Its report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy tackles the colonial history as a “long duration of losses” and the “appropriation of cultural property and heritage: A crime against peoples” (chapter 1, 7-26):

⁷⁰ See Felwine Sarr/Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, 2018, 1. The report is available in French and in its own English translation by Drew S. Burk at <http://restitutionreport2018>. A German translation (by Daniel Fastner) was published in 2019 in Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.

To speak of restitution in the year 2018 is to thus simultaneously reopen the old colonial machine as well as the file containing the erased memories of both the Europeans and the Africans, with the Europeans no longer having any idea how to continue to maintain their prestigious museums while the Africans find themselves struggling to recover the thread of an interrupted memory. Given this context, there is nothing surprising about why the question of restitution also occupies such a large place with both the intellectuals and the press beyond the mere Franco-African framework. From the British Museum (69,000 objects from sub-Saharan Africa) to the Weltmuseum of Vienna (37,000), to the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Belgium (180,000) to the Future Humboldt Forum (75,000), to the Vatican Museums and those of the Musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac (70,000): the history of the African collections is a European history that has indeed been a shared history. In 2007, Alain Godonou, a specialist of African museums, estimated that in comparison “with certain rare exceptions, the inventories of the national museums in Africa itself hardly ever exceeded 3,000 cultural heritage objects and most of them had little importance or significance.”⁷¹

There are obviously different views on the significance of the African collections in Africa and in Europe:

That starts with the sober facts. Most of the ethnological collections are things of daily life. They have little to do with our ideas of cultural representation. When the then director of the Berlin museum in question was supposed to receive the spoils of the colonial wars in his house, he did not know what to do with the tens of thousands of spears. The dispute is mainly about the objects that have inspired the artists of the modern age. Europe chooses its Africa, which it wants to give back to the Africans.

⁷¹ Sarr/Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 15. – It is interesting to see that the French original also refers to the missionary collections and museums: “... from the Vatican museums to the Quai Branly (70,000) to the many Protestant and Catholic missionary museums in Germany, the Netherlands, France, Austria, Belgium, Italy, Spain: the history of African collections is a well-shared European history,” 12; the reference to the mission museums is omitted in the official English translation.

The dubious claim that 90 to 95 percent of Africa's cultural heritage was now outside the continent has been strikingly refuted by ethnologist Z. S. Strother, who teaches at Columbia University. The Nigerian National Museum in Lagos alone has 50,000 works of art; the Musée du quai Branly in Paris is estimated to have only 20,000 more objects. Strother sees the real reason for the push to return the objects as soon as possible in Emmanuel Macron's political ambitions in Africa. The image of the French there is to change quickly.⁷²

The Sarr/Savoy report acknowledges that this historical colonial process has a profound impact even on the objects which make restitution more complicated:

How are we able then to reconstitute to these objects the sense and functions that once belonged to them, without neglecting the fact that they had been captured and then reshaped by a plurality of semantic, symbolic, and epistemological dispositives for more than a century? In certain cases, the sacred items or objects of worship have become works of art worth contemplating in their own right, ethnographic objects, or mere artifacts whose value can be derived by considering them as witnesses of history. Simon Njami emphasizes that the return of objects does not mean restituting them as they once were, but re-investing them with a social function. It's not about a return of the same, but of a "different same."⁷³

In this sense, museums play a vital role for the constitution of an individual and collective identity. Meanwhile, there are also serious questions about the public function of museums. Maybe these are the task of a "philosophy of the museum": "If one understands philosophy as a science that 'captures its time in thought,' as Hegel put it," then such an understanding of museums' contribution to identity-building is lacking. A philosophy of the museum might ask: "Can or should the representation and foundation of social and cultural identity still be the tasks of museums today? Does the museum serve the cultural

⁷² Johann Michael Möller, Im Lager der „Bremser und Erbsenzähler“. Das Gebot der Sorgfalt in der Kolonialismusdebatte ist essentiell, in: Olaf Zimmermann/Theo Geißler (eds.), *Kolonialismus-Debatte: Bestandsaufnahme und Konsequenzen*, Berlin: Deutscher Kulturrat 2019, 44-46, 45f.

⁷³ Sarr/Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 30.

memory of a society in particular? Or does the museum primarily have the purpose of teaching cultural and art education?"⁷⁴

As the Sarr/Savoy report deals particularly with public museums, it takes into account the legal frameworks of colonial appropriation and more recent prohibition of acquisition in the course of war.⁷⁵ A further thorny question is whom the objects are to be returned to, and who will take care of them. As the French commission deals with public museums, their addressees are not surprisingly national states:

Within the framework of these international relations, the French State must be carefully attentive to respecting the sovereignty of the various nation-states; with this in mind, the procedures of restitution will be undertaken on a state by state basis, which doesn't exclude the possibility of administrative arrangements in working toward direct collaborations with other State institutions or administrations and their homologues in other countries. [...] The property of the French State will thereby be granted to the requesting state, it is then this (requesting) state's responsibility, after the negotiations, to give this property back to its community or initial owner.⁷⁶

It is presupposed that modern states represent their population and different peoples. Obviously, there have been experiences in the past when "state representatives" demanded artefacts to be handed over to their countries and the respective objects turned up on the art market in Brussels a couple of months later—unsurprising and obvious acts of corruption.⁷⁷ Interestingly, the Sarr/Savoy report does not mention the possibility of corruption at all, even when they refer to "organized illicit exportation of valuable cultural items from West

⁷⁴ See Collenberg-Plotnikov's presentation with these indications in Collenberg-Plotnikov (ed.), *Das Museum als Provokation der Philosophie*, 7 and 18.

⁷⁵ The pictures of US soldiers carrying off ancient objects from museums at Bagdad come to mind. These artefacts, consequently, are not on display in US museums, but most likely found their way into the illegal art market. Up to the 19th century it was considered legitimate to appropriate what had been taken from the enemy. Only after treaties in 1899 and 1907, this practice was banned. See Sarr/Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 9-12.

⁷⁶ Sarr/Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 82.

⁷⁷ This happened at St Augustine's with a diplomatic representative of an African country in the 1980s.

Africa.”⁷⁸ Beyond the abuse through corruption, the level of state negotiations may not work in the end, as the state does not necessarily represent the peoples in their territory—also a consequence of the colonial intervention.⁷⁹ The legitimacy of modern states for the negotiation of claims can become rather complicated. In relation to the genocide perpetrated by the German Empire on the Herero (in today’s Namibia), Nama leaders questioned the legitimacy of the procedures by the Namibian ambassador in Germany:

Firstly, as Nama leaders, we do not understand the position of the Namibian ambassador to Germany in the genocide negotiations. We understand that the government has appointed an envoy to speak on its behalf. Therefore, we do not know in what capacity the ambassador is commenting on a planned Marshall Plan for Namibia to resolve the genocide. Is this the ambassador’s personal position on reparations or is it the position of the Namibian Government? We have no answers to these questions because neither the Namibian Government nor the Namibian Ambassador to Germany have ever held talks with the Nama leaders in view of a conclusive outcome.⁸⁰

Taking stock of the legal frameworks brings the entire project into further problems, as French laws and even the Constitution make it extremely difficult to extract objects from French public museums:

In France, the massive arrival and musealization of African cultural heritage didn’t happen over night. It took place over a relatively long period, beginning in the latter part of the 19th century and continuing through the second half of the 20th century. Obviously, no one in France or Africa foresees the return of the entirety of these historically formed ensembles which have been progressive-

⁷⁸ Sarr/Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 59.

⁷⁹ This holds not only for large African states with their arbitrary frontiers from colonial times, the same internal oppositions can be observed in Europe, e. g. in Belgium (Flanders vs. Wallonia), Spain (Catalonia vs the rest), Great Britain (England vs. Scotland).

⁸⁰ Nama Traditional Leaders Association, Nichts über uns ohne uns. Antwort an den namibischen Botschafter in Deutschland auf einen deutschen Marshallplan für den Genozid an Nama und Ovaherero, in: Zimmermann/Geißler (eds.), *Kolonialismus-Debatte*, 55-56, 55.

ly transformed through a symbolic, economic, and scientific usage that has taken place in France.⁸¹

The Sarr/Savoy report painstakingly goes into detail about what kind of legal dispositions and procedures could be taken in order to return objects. In the end, the report comes up with a rather tiny list of objects which should be returned.⁸² In practice, the listing and publication of inventories of objects in their actual place and the virtual accessibility in the Internet may be easier ways to make artefacts accessible. But also that is easier said than done:

All ethnological museums now promise to put their inventories online. In fact, this would finally allow researchers in the societies of origin to search for the possessions of their ancestors; it would also greatly facilitate provenance research. But for this, the data sets have to be completely revised, according to Lars-Christian Koch, whose house shows a small part of the collection online. One has to correct terms such as “negro” or “south-west Africa,” identify photos that show scenes of violence and objects that, according to the understanding of the societies of origin, are not allowed to be seen by all. Although it is often about tens of thousands of objects, German museums believe that the curators can do this work in passing. The comparison with the Musée du quai Branly, which opened in 1992, shows how illusory this is. There, 70 scientists worked for six years to put all 320,000 objects online. It was only thanks to this preparatory work that Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr were able to make detailed recommendations in their report for President Emmanuel Macron on the handling of individual objects from former French colonies.⁸³

The point of restitution of objects to their African origin lies in the possibilities and demands for the appropriation of history:

On a continent where 60% of the population is under the age of 20 years old, what is first and foremost of great importance is for young people to have access to their

⁸¹ Sarr/Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 43. And the French original still adds: “No one wants to ‘empty’ the museums of some to ‘fill’ those of others,” p. 37.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Recommendations from p. 50 onwards.

⁸³ Jörg Häntzschel, Totales Chaos. Die Situation der ethnologischen Museen in Deutschland, in: Zimmermann/Geissler (eds.), *Kolonialismus-Debatte*, 67-69, 68f.

own culture, creativity, and spirituality from other eras that certainly have evolved since, but whose knowledge and recognition can no longer merely be reserved for those residing in Western countries or for those who count themselves among the African diaspora living in Europe. The youth of Africa, as much as the youth in France or Europe in general, have a right “to their artistic and cultural heritage,” to make a brief reference to a similar remark drafted in 2005 by the Faro Convention and the Council of Europe. While we should not forget to mention that this should be a right for all cultural heritages, we will naturally begin with those cultural and artistic resources inherited from Africa’s past itself, held and stored in museums and countries completely out of reach for the African youth who often are unaware of not only the richness and creativity of this legacy, but often are not even aware of its existence.⁸⁴

The setting of cultural objects from Africa within European museums easily implies some sort of framing and “othering.”⁸⁵ The original owners of these objects may be portrayed in manners that conflict with their own view.

Restitution, through the transfer of propriety that it allows for, breaks up this monopoly of control concerning the mobility of objects by Western museums. These cul-

⁸⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁵ See also Dirk Rupnow, *Migration und Museum: Verheißung oder Aporie?*, in: Ljiljana Radonic/Heidemarie Uhl (eds.), *Das umkämpfte Museum. Zeitgeschichte ausstellen zwischen Dekonstruktion und Sinnstiftung* (Erinnerungskulturen | MemoryCultures Vol. 8), Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2020, 75-91. Visitors may receive the messages at a museum in different manners than the intended ones: See Aida Rechen, *Social Representation Theory and Museum Visitors*, in: Davis/Smeds (eds.), *Visiting the Visitor*, 139-151. – I wonder whether some level of “othering” is not related to the elementary recognition of the other, because the fascination (or rejection) of the other depends a lot on this difference. The museum brings the “other” into the picture (see Rosmarie Beier-de Haan, *Vielfalt – Gleichheit – Individualität. Das Museum als eine „moralische Anstalt“*, in: Collenberg-Plotnikov [ed.], *Das Museum als Provokation der Philosophie*, 127-152). The alternative might be the search for sameness, which is one of the more stupid characteristics of mass tourism, where the tourist looks for precisely the same of his own context in a different place, with the ensuing complaints about food, time, language etc., because it is so different from home (for a funny report on that global affliction see Marco d’Eramo, *Die Welt im Selfie. Eine Besichtigung des touristischen Zeitalters*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2018). I cannot take this discussion further here.

tural objects are then free to circulate in a new manner, but within a temporality, a rhythm and a meaning placed on them by their legitimate owners.⁸⁶

It demands also the creation of a new relational ethics:

Objects, having become diasporas, are the mediators of a relation that needs to be reinvented. Their return to their communities of origin does not have as its aim to substitute one form of physical and semantic imprisonment by another, that would this time be justified by the idea of the “rightful property owner.” It is indeed a question of re-activating a concealed memory and restituting to the cultural heritage its signifying, integrative, dynamic, and mediating functions within contemporary African societies. But, through the re-appropriation of these objects, it’s also about once again becoming the guardians of the human community.⁸⁷

Conclusion

In my reflection I set out with the meaning of *mouseion* in European classical Antiquity and its relationship to the meaning of life, inspired and fostered by the muses in the Greek world and the aspects of leisure, looting and showing off in the Roman imperial context. Some of the aspects related to the meaning of life, the exhibition of different worlds and their interpretations and the shortcomings of a purely administrative approach have become visible also in the two museums I have presented here.

In concluding, it is worthwhile returning to the concept—the *idea*—of a museum. The *International Council of Museums* (ICOM) offers this definition, adopted in its General Assembly in Vienna (Austria) in 2007:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Sarr/Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*, 38.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁸ See <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> [accessed November 15, 2020].

This is also the definition several of the researchers on missionary museums have used, notably Rebecca Loder-Neuhold.⁸⁹ While the aspects of acquisition, conservation, education and study at the SVD mission museums may have been reduced due to the dwindling numbers of students and young missionaries in preparation for their engagements worldwide, their perspectives of serving society and its development could be kept up for a long time, until administrative impositions limited the scope of the museums to their profitability in economic terms and consequently led to the closure of two major SVD museums. Museums are not remembrances of the past, their historical importance is different. “History only exists when there is a tomorrow. Conversely, there is only a future if the past is prevented from constantly leaking into the present, i.e. when *mimics* of all kinds are defeated. In consequence, museums have less to do with the past than with the future: musealisation is less about preserving the past and more about creating the future of public space, the future of art, and the future in general.”⁹⁰

The ICOM apparently finds it necessary to take into consideration also other aspects to their definition of museums and includes new dimensions:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Loder-Neuhold, *Crocodiles, Masks and Madonnas*, 32; ead., The “Missions-ethnographische Museum” of St Gabriel, 515; see also Felicity Jensz, “Kurze Anweisung Naturalien zu sammeln”. Ein historischer Blick auf die Sammlungstätigkeit protestantischer Missionare, in: LVR-Fachbereich Regionale Kulturarbeit et al. (eds.), *Missionsgeschichtliche Sammlungen heute*, 15-25, 25.

⁹⁰ Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art. Kunst in Zeiten des globalen Bürgerkriegs*, Zürich: Diaphanes 2018, 15.

⁹¹ This is a summary of the proposals for a new definition, adopted in 2019. See <https://icom.museum>

This ICOM expansion of the concept is fascinating for me as a Divine Word Missionary, as it acknowledges the pluralistic setting of our present time. We are living in a world of *polyphonic spaces* requiring *democratisation* and *critical dialogue* about the *past and future*. Museums are not the lifeless deposits of artefacts, but hold them in *trust for society*. Most of the elements in this proposal for an updated definition of a museum are closely related to the purposes of the museums at St Gabriel's and St Augustine's and retain a lot of the actual keywords and fundamental attitudes of intercultural missionaries. Museums may contribute to the articulation of collective identities, through the identification with others,⁹² and this would be the most important aspect of their communicational possibilities. The definition does not bypass the conflicts and challenges of our days, the "troubled waters" to be navigated towards a world characterised by *human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing*. All the more sad is the fact that the SVD museums I have presented—and others that may face a similar fate—could not be used any more for the bridging of such troubled waters. Maybe there was an inadequate view of museums as spaces for leisure and enjoyment, as pastimes for idle SVDs, that led the administrators responsible to give up on the task of bridging. Maybe they could not conceive of the feelings of being weary, feeling small, having tears in one's eyes, of times getting rough and lacking friends—if I may allude to these lines of the Simon & Garfunkel song of 1970,⁹³ to describe the requirements of establishing spaces of communication and dialogue. In the end, such communicational efforts and bridges for dialogue require considerable personal engagement and are related to the personal attitude of "I will lay me down like a bridge over troubled water." Apparently, such missionaries could not be found and such bridges are not available and maybe are not even considered important any more.

⁹² See M. Elizabeth Weiser, Individual Identity / Collective History. Personalizing Essence in the Museum, in: Davis/Smeds (eds.) *Visiting the Visitor*, 39-54.

⁹³ Remember the first lines of the song: "When you're weary, feeling small / When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all, all / I'm on your side, oh, when times get rough / And friends just can't be found / Like a bridge over troubled water / I will lay me down ..."

ABSTRACTS

Museen sind mit den heiligen Bereichen der Kultur und dem Sinn des Lebens verbunden. Für die Missionsgesellschaften war es immer notwendig, die Menschen, denen sie an weit entfernten Orten begegneten, ihren Gemeinden in Europa zu re-präsentieren. Der Artikel beleuchtet die kommunikativen Aspekte von Museen und verweist auf zwei große SVD-Museen in den Missionshäusern von St. Gabriel (Österreich) und St. Augustin (Deutschland). Beide Museen sind jetzt geschlossen wegen unangemessener Verwaltungstechnischer Vorstellungen von Museen. Der Artikel behandelt auch das Verhältnis von religiöser Bedeutung und künstlerischem Ausdruck in den Artefakten und den Vorschlag, Objekte an ihre ursprünglichen Besitzer zurückzugeben, insbesondere in Frankreich. Der Autor plädiert für ein Verständnis von Museen als Kommunikationsräumen und als Brücken zwischen verschiedenen Kulturen.

Museos se relacionan con los reinos sagrados de la cultura y el sentido de la vida. Para las congregaciones misioneras, siempre ha habido una necesidad de re-presentar a sus comunidades en Europa a las personas que encontraron en lugares lejanos. El artículo destaca los aspectos de comunicación de los museos y se refiere a dos importantes museos verbitas, en las casas de misión de San Gabriel (Austria) y San Agustín (Alemania). Ambos museos están cerrados ahora, debido a concepciones administrativas inapropiadas para comprender museos. El artículo también analiza la relación entre el significado religioso y las expresiones artísticas en los artefactos y la idea de devolver objetos a sus propietarios originales, particularmente en Francia. El autor aboga por la comprensión de los museos como espacios de comunicación y como puentes entre diferentes culturas.

Les musées sont liés aux royaumes sacrés de la culture et du sens de la vie. Les congrégations missionnaires ont toujours ressenti le besoin de re-présenter pour leurs communautés d'Europe les personnes rencontrées dans les pays lointains. Cet article met en relief les aspects communicationnels des musées et se réfère à deux grands musées SVD dans les maisons missionnaires de St Gabriel (Autriche) et de St Augustin (Allemagne). Tous deux sont maintenant fermés, en raison de conceptions administratives inappropriées d'un musée. L'article traite aussi de la relation entre l'expression artistique et la signification religieuse des objets ainsi que de l'idée particulièrement discutée en France de rendre les œuvres à leurs propriétaires premiers. L'auteur plaide pour une conception des musées comme espaces de communication et ponts entre différentes cultures.