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ON LABELLING. THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF AMNESIA

by

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*Os tesouros passavam pelas nossas mãos e
iam-se acumular nos povos mais práticos e
bem dotados para capitalizar.*

(A. Jorge Dias, 1971:22).

INTRODUCTION: MEMORY AND FORGETFULNESS

What meaning or value would memory hold without the counterpoint of forgetfulness? The question is intrinsic to this essay on amnesia in memory of Dr. Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira. It refers not only to the memory of Dr. Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira, deceased, and indeed to his own memory which served to exhume «um excelente conjunto oceaniano (que é o único com representatividade existente no País)» (1985). It concerns the loss of significance — for that is what memory is made of — of a collection of exotic artefacts, and the reconstitution of meaning for them in another historical moment.

It was our privilege to document and present this collection of Melanesian artefacts to the public in 1989. The problems we faced in so doing in mid-1980s' Portugal were of a totally different order than they would have been in the 1920s or '30s when the artefacts first arrived in the country. The modernist «discovery» of primitive art as a source of aesthetic inspiration involved challenging established criteria of beauty and value. Emerging as this collection did into a post-modernist world, re/presentation of the objects somehow had to accommodate the very act of their arrival — which was far from self-evident. Their coming out coincided, in fact, with a recent revival of Anglo-American anthropological interest in *material* culture: to collecting, storing and displaying «exotic» objects in western museums (e.g. Clifford 1985, Williams 1985, Stocking 1985). At the same time, museum ethnographers are

beginning to pay much more attention to the histories of collections¹. This is a shorthand way of «explaining» the various «tacks» taken in the in the exhibition catalogue *Melanesian Artefacts/ Post-modernist Reflections* (Bouquet and Freitas Branco, 1988). It meant, amongst other things, dedicating as much analytical attention and respect to appendages as to the objects in and of themselves. Labels and numbers attached by Europeans to the Melanesian objects constituted, in the first instance, our *only* clues as to their arrival in Portugal. Incredible as it may seem, no one could remember with any degree of certainty how this collection had come into Portuguese hands. Time had erased the detail from memory transforming it into other stories and attributing different origins: intimations of arrival on a missionary boat returning from Africa...

The intriguing but totally inconsistent rumours surrounding the objects made their aesthetic display in modernist terms quite inappropriate. Scientific research has long been acknowledged as the essential companion and fundamental basis for exhibiting artefacts. It was, for example, one of the most important principles practiced by Georges Henri Rivière and his colleagues with the founding of the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris in 1937 (Chiva 1987a, 1987b). If the value of combining research with the establishment of permanent collections was already clear to some in the 1930, those research procedures have, in the course of the half century which has elapsed, through their intricate connection with the objects, themselves been transformed into textual artefacts which are themselves susceptible to inquiry (cf. Bouquet 1989). This turn of events within the anthropological world (cf. Scholte 1986) has fundamentally altered the perception of contemporary research procedures. These are coming to be regarded as integral to the transient *enscènement* of the artefacts with which they are so interdependent. Hence, there is a responsibility to make these sources and procedures, at least insofar as this is possible, equally visible and accessible to the visiting public. This seems to be a way of avoiding not only the reification of the object (cf. Chiva 1987a: 19; Raphaël & Herberich-Max 1987:88), but also, and perhaps equally important, of ethnographic text and its unquestioned authority.

¹ For example the most interesting Symposium: «Treasure hunting» organised by the Volkenkundig Museum Nusantara, Delft 20 and 21 October 1989. Among the most interesting contributions were those by P. M. Taylor («The Indonesian Collections of William Louis Abbott (1860 - 1936) at the U. S. National Museum (Smithsonian Institution)»), Ruth Barnes («The present through the past: the Ernst Vatter collection in Frankfurt/a. M.»), and S. Ohnemus («The ut cousins F. and P. Sarasin and P. Wirz and their significance for the Museum für Völkerkunde Basel»).

Documentation and comparison of the Melanesian collection obviously involved contacts with international institutions and individuals all of whom were understandably curious to learn of the sudden appearance of what was, by 1986, a collection of primitive «antiques»! Personal credibility was soon on the line when it was clear that the researcher had no precise details of the collection she was documenting. It is possible that someone more versed in the everyday life of museums would have succeeded better than I at impression management. Acute unease did in fact have the advantage of inciting determination to solve the riddle of the collection's origins, rather than dissuading. After weeks in the Royal Tropical Institute library in Amsterdam with the photographs and index cards on which I had written every detail I could find about each individual object, I suddenly realised that the «*números antigos*» (which had been faithfully transcribed but to which I had never paid much attention) might have a logic of their own. Later, we discovered that the number underneath a photograph of one of the objects (the Yimar headmask) in an article published by Luschan in 1911, corresponded with the number attaching to «our» Yimar headmask. Jorge Freitas Branco was able to proceed from this clue to identify the «origin» of the collection in Berlin — by comparing the numerical sequences in Helm's catalogues with “our” (Kelm, H. 1966 I. II, III).

Such sleuth-like tactics led us into areas which apparently bore scant relation to this historical Melanesian collection. These concerned European alliances and rivalries, and the European exchange of exotic valuables; the nature of anthropology in Portugal during the early twentieth century and the *Estado Novo*; and a rather specifically Portuguese image of the exotic which I, as an outsider, hazarded to reflect upon. The project forced a confrontation with the sheer passage of time not simply upon (exotic) objects, but also on the mundane and authoritarian words which are physically attached to them.

These ruminations were conducive to speculation on Portuguese categories and values, beyond what could be said (on the basis of German contemporary commentators and subsequent anthropological works) about the Melanesian artefacts and their makers. In short, “the hidden side of the collection” (Peltier: 1990).

THE ARRIVAL STORY

The story these objects has as much to do with amnesia as with discovery or, to put it metaphorically, with European sleeping beauties as with Melanesian ancestor figures. Originating from what was German New Guinea

(Kaisar-Wielhelms-Land) until the First World War, the objects date from the 1880s until 1914. They arrived in Oporto in 1927, forming part of the reparations ceded by the Berlin Museums to Portugal in exchange for the recovery of an extremely valuable archaeological collection from Iraq, seized *en route* to Hamburg in 1916, after Portugal entered the First World War as British allies.

They were sent on arrival to the University of Oporto, and deposited in the Museu Etnográfico. Information derived from the hastily inscribed Berlin inventory, combined with that on the original labels written out by various German individuals and expeditions to New Guinea during the colonial period and still attached to the objects on their arrival, was translated into Portuguese. But the objects were never systematically studied nor, in their totality, were they exhibited. Indeed, by the time we encountered the collection in Lisbon in the mid 1980s, even their precise origin had been forgotten.

The explanation for this extraordinary lapse is partly political, partly institutional. From 1928 until the revolution of 1974, Portugal was largely isolated from the rest of Europe. This meant that unlike exotic collections elsewhere in Europe, the Oporto collection never served as a source of inspiration for the *avant-garde*. Nor was Portuguese anthropology sufficiently oriented towards cross-cultural comparison (until much later) to permit thorough investigation of the assemblage. The forgotten objects retain, in almost all cases, labels written out in Portuguese in the late 1920s, and/or 1940s when they were transferred to another institution. These, when analysed alongside the 40 surviving German expedition labels and the inventory from Berlin, provide insight on the ethical and aesthetic considerations which contributed to this neglect. The half century which has elapsed since these labels were written out means that they themselves provide images of *Portuguese* alterity, for which the Melanesian objects were a sort of foil.

THE TEMPTING IMPERCEPTIBILITY OF LABELS

The notion that primitive art might raise an ethnical scandal is scarcely credible in the 1980s. Yet the Portuguese identificatory tags, which are supposedly “factual”, merely translating a nomenclature “inherited” from German, constitute a provocative source of evidence for Portuguese ethical qualms about their «Oceania» collection.

New Guinea was, at the time the Berlin collection arrived in Oporto, still beyond the frontiers of Portuguese knowledge and experience in a way that

Africa, India, Brazil or even Timor were not². New Guinea was in a sense *the* perfect imaginary place: a void with a name into which to project images of the savage concocted out of ingredients much closer to home. The German information accompanying the Melanesian artefacts was sometimes reproduced in Portuguese, but is elsewhere systematically distorted. The resulting discrepancies reveal the discriminatory basis of certain Portuguese categories. Two of these will be discussed: idols the dead.

There is an analogy between the Portuguese labels and the illustrations by M. Hoffman and A. von Roessler, for Otto Finsch's 1888 publication, *Samoafahrten*. Hoffman and von Roessler had surely never been to New Guinea. They followed Finsch's information and sketches to the point of showing babies in netbags; men with hairbaskets carrying or wearing decorated netbags; tabu-houses hung with images; preparations for a feast; trading canoes; and warriors with shields and basketry breastplates. But there is a distinctively romantic additive. The German illustrators slung the baby-filled netbag *over the shoulder* of the Bongu woman; the man fingers his shell-covered netbag with a glittering Gustave Doré eye; hair-basketed man suddenly appears in his canoe off Venushuk. There was a genre to hand for depicting the fascinating but unpredictable savage.

Between the imagery of the nineteenth century savage and the twentieth century primitive, there is an interlude filled by startling photographic images of men and women staring uneasily at the camera lens. Physical anthropologists, striving to measure skulls and bodies with scientific precision, ended up by constructing ethnological atlases far more shocking in their strained realism than the romantic engravings which preceded them. Details which interest us today were then a matter of almost accidental inclusion, by default: thus bodily adornments worn by the rigid subjects of Neuhauss' ethnographic atlas were only there because it would have been too difficult to have their wearers take them off.

The Portuguese labels belong to the same hybrid interlude: they combine a primitive scientism (derived from German information) with an imaginative projection which was almost certainly not intended. The choice of words on the

² Although the literature with regard to Timor was much more limited: «... embora o interesse despertado por esta ilha aos antropólogos portugueses se possa considerar bastante reduzido, talvez mesmo quase um esquecimento. Na realidade, é o já citado Mendes Corrêa o único que lhe dedica um livro. A esta constatação não estará muito provavelmente alheio o facto de nesta colónia não ter surgido resistência anti-colonial organizada» (Freitas Branco 1986: 89-90).

labels is at once mundane — such insignificant appendages are temptingly imperceptible — but also authoritative: how could they be other than correct?

GEOGRAPHICAL «RETRIEVAL» PROCESSES: FROM THE SEPIK TO ANTARCTICA

In some cases, objects appear simply geographically misplaced in their identification. German scientists sometimes complained in their reports about the way labels and objects became confused during shipment to Europe: Reche noted that many of the labels attaching to netbags were false — because of the number of hands through which they had to travel before reaching the museum. Such may have been the case with the magnificent Sepik netbag, decorated with feathers and a shell valuable. It is attributed to «Auglem, Nova Zealândia» (Auckland, New Zealand) on the Portuguese label. However, a Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss-Expedition label, marked «Angelman», still attaching to the object suggests otherwise. The original inventory made out in Berlin clearly identifies the netbag as originating from the Sepik.

The mistake in itself could be written off as a simple error were it not for the fact that a number of other items suffered similar dislocations. The carved wooden canoe bailer from Lottin island, which also has its original label stating «Ins. Lottin Schoede 1910», becomes a «recipiente de madeira para tirar água Loltin Nova Zealândia». An engraved bone dagger from the Sepik, acquired in Dallmanhafen by the New Guinea Company in 1899 according to the original label still on it, is transported to the «Bafa de Dalmann, Arq. Palmer, O. Antártico». Was it that those responsible for labelling the Malanesian artefacts in Oporto, already familiar with Maori art, proceeded to perceive stylistic similarities with some of the objects before them? The reference to Antarctica is somewhat more obscure. An unconscious association with Eskimos, perhaps, who live of course in the Arctic circle, but are circumpolar anyway... New Guinea, Melanesia, the Pacific Ocean, Oceania — the names belonged to oceanic outer space in Oporto of the 1920s. It is possible to interpret the anchorage of one or two objects on the *terra firma* of New Zealand or Antarctica as part of an imaginative construction of meaning. The extent to which some kind of legitimacy procedure was also involved is open to speculation: Rook Island was re-christened “Cook Island” as the place of origin for a sago ladle. Captain Cook and his voyages provided another point of external reference — historical but with geographical implications.

CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS: BETWEEN IDOLS AND THE DEAD, CRÂNIO MELANÉSIO EMBELEZADO

Geographical “retrieval” processes in the identification of place of origin are paralleled by the imposition of a more obvious conceptual framework in describing the artefacts themselves. Nowhere do romantic imagination and scientific pretension more graphically intersect than in the over-modelled Sepik skull. Three phrases, “Cabeça mumificada” (mummified head), “Crânio melanésio embelezado com conchas de marisco” (Melanesian skull embellished with sea shells) and “Raça negroide do Pacífico” (negroid race of the Pacific), signal this juncture. The “mummified” head invokes Egypt, while totally ignoring (or ignorant of) the process of over-modelling which *builds* an image rather than drying one out. “Raça negroide do Pacífico” seems to be a statement of scientific authority in the domain of physical anthropology. “Crânio melanésio embelezado com conchas de marisco” has the flavour of one of Manuel Ferreira’s fantastic *Cozinha Ideal* creations. These were Portuguese additives to the German *Zierschädel*. Clearly fascinated by their “mummy”, specially printed Portuguese labels suggest that unlike its companions the head was on display.

There would certainly have been no shortage of properties to accompany this *crânio cozido* had anyone been interested in mounting an exhibition on the grisly practices of head-hunting and cannibalism. The clubs, for example, which were classified as *casse-têtes* (why the French term when several Portuguese alternatives — *clava* or *maça* — would have been closer to the German *Steinbeil*, *Steinkeule* or *Keule*?). Or the war-canoe shield, described in more than usual detail: “Ornato duma piroga de guerra. Serve para anunciar a fortuna dos guerreiros que conquistaram a cabeça dos inimigos” (“Decoration from a war canoe. It served to announce the fortunes of warriors who had taken enemy heads”). This was a translation of the German: “Kanuaufsatz. Zeichen einer erfolgreichen Schädeljagd”. There is a subtle sift of emphasis from a description of the object as a potential means of indicating the outcome of a head-hunting expedition (in German), to the accomplished act of having taken a head (in Portuguese). This sort of detail, taken together with the many other redoubtable properties of warfare to hand, makes the problem of why no exhibition was ever mounted an intriguing one.

The turmoil of two world wars meant that the Germans themselves took many years to publish catalogues of the Sepik material in Berlin. The limiting factors in Portugal were not identical, as the analysis of institutional conditions demonstrates. Meanwhile Portuguese conceptual distinctions, not all of which

are “direct translations” of German descriptions of the Melanesian artefacts, suggest an alternative reading.

IDOLS

The Portuguese tendency to see “idols” (*ídolos*) in the New Guinean representational figures is not adequately explained as simply translation from the German. It is true that the term *Götze* (idol) appears twice in the Berlin inventory. But *Ahnenfigur* (ancestor figure) is much more frequently used. Certainly *Ahnenfigur*, *Idol* are mentioned on two occasions. But there are three *Ahnenfiguren* and one *Ahnenmaske* with no reference whatsoever to idolatry. Two ancestral figures according to the German list, became *ídolo masculino* and *ídolo feminino* respectively in Portuguese. The ancestral mask from Watam, which was an *Ahnenmaske* in Berlin, became an *ídolo máscara* in Oporto. The small stone image from New Britain was turned into an *ídolo de pedra*, a stone idol. The superb Sepik crocodile, described as a *Krokodil aus Holz*, was transformed into an *ídolo-crocodilo em madeira*. The word *antepasado*, ancestor, never appears in Portuguese.

Why should various carvings of men and animals have been regarded as images of false gods worshipped by the autochthones? Out of conceptual reach, the images become “vacant” symbols which can be taken over for whatever purpose is at hand. One might speculate on a notion of sacrifice, a familiar theme in the gory experience of Iberian Christianity, as the lynch-pin relating back to the evident interest in head-hunting. Blood-thirsty idols were perhaps to blame for the relentless quest for heads? The “*ídolo feminino*” conforms to an almost classical (European) notion of the grotesque and sinister in primitive representation. But the adjectival use of “European” must at once be qualified since, as we have seen, this artefact was classified as an ancestral figure in Berlin, only becoming a female in Oporto.

Unlike “idols”, which float on a sea of “European” fears and superstitions, the masks were very firmly re-contextualised in dancing (“*para dançar*”) or festivals (“*nas festas*”), or both at once - with the exception of the large Watam mask already mentioned. The long-nosed (masculine) Ramu mask, for example, was “*usada nas festas*”, while its flat-nosed (feminine) companion was “*para dançar*”. There was no hint at the impersonation of spirits by wearing masks which were part of an assemblage. But “dancing” and “festivities” are categories with quite a different ideological colouring to “idolatry”. The fact that images and masks were interconnected in Melanesian thinking was un-

known and hence irrelevant to the process of Portuguese classification. This was not the case with the German framework of reference, as *Ahnenmaske* suggests.

Just as spirit impersonation seems to have been literally unthinkable to the Portuguese, so too was the notion of representing ancestors and drawing on their powers. Only the long-nosed Yimar rush mask worn, unlike the profile masks, over the head, was labelled “máscara de demónio” - recalling the kind of creature inhabiting Purgatory in Portuguese medieval paintings. It was simply a *Maske* in Berlin.

But even “dancing” had its own set of confusions. The copy of a sailor’s cutlass from New Britain (*Keule* in the German list) became an “oar” (*remo*) supposedly “usado nas festas onde há danças” (“used in festivals where there is dancing”). Masks and dancing clearly fitted into an image of primitive society, not too distant perhaps from the masks and *festas* of rural Portugal (cf. Dias 1964: 72-73).

THE DEAD

If ancestral power and totemic identification were difficult to conceive of, the idea of a cult of the dead presented far fewer problems. A second group of Melanesian artefacts was more positively accommodated in the Portuguese conceptual matrix where the dead constitute a significant social presence (Mattos 1943), and their remembrance is the motor for a series of activities connected with the upkeep of graves and tombs (Goldey 1983; O’Neil 1983; Pina-Cabral & Feijó 1983; Pina-Cabral n.d.). Significantly, *os mortos* (the dead) were *not* classified as ancestors (*antepassados*), thus underwriting a dichotomy between idols and the dead which, interestingly enough, did not transpire in German.

Some things were considered to be *relacionado* with the *culto dos mortos* in an unspecified way: this was the case with the sago bark paintings from the Sepik estuary, merely described in German as painted bark wallcoverings (*Bemalte Rinde. Wandverkleidung*). Two of the *malangans* are described as *esculturas de madeira* related to the cult of the dead. The third is described as a painted, wooden sculpture with no reference at all to the dead. What might be the distinction? Did the third New Ireland figure more closely resemble the Portuguese idea of what a sculpture might be? Calling the post and plank forms *malangan* and associating them with a cult of the dead brought them within a

certain limit of cognisance — from which the *ídolos*, for example, were already excluded for ethical reasons. The aesthetic impact of the *malangans* overruled ethical perplexities. The effect of the small images from northern coastal New Guinea cult or ceremonial houses was totally different. Here ethical categorisation seems to preclude aesthetic appreciation. And on the same grounds the Yimar mask and the Angelman crocodile fall beyond the pale.

Two other items assigned to the service of the dead were the Sepik dance staff and the sago-vessel from Kararau. Neuhauss and Reche had already clashed in their reports over the interpretation of Sepik sago bowls. While Neuhauss believed them to be pot lids because he had seen them used for this purpose, Reche could find as many reasons for regarding them as hats if they were once encountered covering a head. Some of the German ethnologists fretted over the mentality behind the material culture they were amassing in such quantities. But by the time the stray examples reached Portugal, Malinowski was already transforming the study of primitive culture with long-term fieldwork, diverting attention away from material culture towards Culture, with a capital “C”.

The picture that emerges from the labels is less a Portuguese description of certain Melanesian artefacts than a petrified image of alterity, partially refracted through German categories. Conditioning the discrepancies between the German words and the Melanesian images they saw before them were, perhaps, Iberian Catholic notions of the sacred, and a sense of transgression arising from images which fell outside that framework.

Caught between the parameters of idolatry and cults of the dead the objects dropped into quiet oblivion. Ethics and aesthetics *were* bound together in the 1920s — as of course they still are in a different guise. But what this meant in the 1920s was that there was no vocabulary for exhibition. We may hazard a guess that this situation was perpetrated subsequently by a surfeit of respect for these intractable classifications and the sense of confusion they engendered in those who may from time to time have tried to study them. The anthropological vocabulary which has developed since that time does more than permit the construction of *an* order and *an* itinerary within the limitations of another age. It imposes its own imperatives.

THE PRINCIPLE OF APPARENT CONFUSION

After more than 60 years it was necessary to recover the numerical sequence of Berlin in order to establish the *European* origin of the pieces, and

to disclose the chronological order of what appeared to be a jumbled assortment. But more than an abstraction, the numerical code showed confusion itself to be more apparent than real. The Melanesian artefacts in Portugal were effectively put on ice, thus acquiring a dimension of alterity oddly coincident with the moment in which functionalism «put on ice the problem of Time» (Fabian 1983: 20). The Portuguese labels are really only the tip of an iceberg: remnants of half a century's inertia, or vital clues as to how to plumb the depths of amnesia, depending on perspective. «Factual» and routine exercises, like attaching descriptive labels to things, are easily overlooked beside the visual impact of the artefacts themselves. What the Portuguese labels serve to illustrate is the fragility of our own linguistic tools, by no means limited, in my opinion, to a unique example from the 1920s. The techniques of ethnographic fieldwork, which largely replaced the study of material culture in Anglo-American anthropology from the 1920s onwards, are very much concerned with the production of textual artefacts. Until rather recently little or no attention was given to the process of writing. But is there *so* much difference between approaching Portuguese conceptual parameters *via* discrepancies with German descriptions of Melanesian objects «frozen» in the 1920s, and «defrosting» the cultural notions embedded in the scientific artefacts of successive generations of anthropologists?

Apparently confusing (or confused) the question is in fact apposite as anthropologists begin to mull over the simple accumulation of their own disciplinary legacy from which time inevitably estranges them. Part of this unexploded time bomb is the emergent alterity of our own western conceptual apparatus, which march behind us in the collected writings of our anthropological forebears, and haunt us whenever we try to write. Another portion comprises the mute accumulation of objects, familiar and exotic, amassed by individuals and institutions. We seem to have reached a point of intersection between textual and material artefacts. Both seem to require new readings to counter the accretions of amnesia.

The mechanisms of amnesia are undoubtedly easier to grasp retrospectively; but it is sobering to recognise that we not only live with the effects of such historical processes, but sometimes unwittingly collaborate in their reproduction. More heartening is the realisation that we ourselves are the instruments of memory which we can actively recover and fashion anew. Artefacts, familiar or exotic, can be pretexts, *aides – mémoires* or stimuli to the imagination which is critical to the process of reappropriating history and culture (cf. Raphaël & Herberich-Marx op. cit.). The torturous routes of human relationships embodied in artefacts of all kinds are the touchstone to that memory by which mankind can rediscover humanity in a «runaway world».

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