



Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie

Interim conference of the 'History of Anthropology' working group, March 2021

On 19 March 2021, the interim conference of the “History of Anthropology” working group (within the German Anthropological Association) took place online in Vienna, organised by Katja Geisenhainer and Peter Rohrbacher. The focus was on “The Interdisciplinary Orientation of German-Speaking Ethnology in the First Half of the 20th Century”.

More than a hundred years ago scholars from different disciplines were of great relevance for the establishment of “ethnology” as an academic discipline. Time and time again they built bridges between the natural sciences and the humanities – influenced by sometimes extreme political and social conditions. They discussed methods and theories as well as concrete topics, which in their diversity demonstrate then as now the interdisciplinarity so typical of the subject.

Volker Harms spoke about „Augustin Krämer (1865–1941) und Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow (1874-1945). Zusammenarbeit eines Ehepaares bei ethnographischen Forschungen in der Südsee am Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts [Augustin Krämer (1865–1941) and Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow (1874–1945). Cooperation of a married couple in ethnographic research in the South Seas at the beginning of the 20th century]”. Krämer, a naval doctor who was also trained in (marine) zoology and geology, found his way to ethnography through his five research trips to the South Seas. His wife Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow accompanied him on three journeys, made photographs and drawings during their stays, and both recorded information in close contact with local people. On the one hand, the Krämer-Bannow couple profited from colonial political institutions; on the other hand, they criticised the changes that resulted from colonialism and missionisation. Their ethnographic monographs, especially on the Samoa and Palau Islands, are in part still of great importance for the indigenous communities today.

Katja Geisenhainer's contribution „Die Verteidigung der sog. Kulturkreislehre gegen den Einfluss der 'Rassenlehre' im ersten Drittel des 20. Jahrhunderts [The defence of the so-called 'Kulturkreislehre' against the influence of the 'race doctrine' in the first third of the 20th century]” shed light on Fritz Graebner and his efforts as a historian to establish a method for ethnology to the exclusion of physical anthropology. In this he was supported by the ethnologist and linguist Father Wilhelm Schmidt, but eventually Schmidt saw potential opportunities to benefit from “racial studies”; whereas Paul Leser followed his teacher Graebner and in 1925 formulated a paper against the inclusion of “race theory” in ethnology.

In his lecture “‘Skulls, Dwarfs, Giants and Monkeys’: The first ethnological courses in Argentina, 1903-1930”, Diego Ballestro talked about Robert Lehmann-Nitsche (1872–1938) who received the first professorship in anthropology in Argentina in 1905. Lehmann-Nitsche pursued both anthropological and ethnological questions and, under the influence of theories and methods developed in German-speaking countries, established corresponding research and teaching in Argentina.

Another link to South America was established with the contribution by Markus Scholz on the “Mapuche im Wallfahrtsort Altötting: Geschichte einer Missionsammlung [Mapuche in the place of pilgrimage Altötting: history of a mission collection]”. Bavarian Capuchins, who were

active among the Mapuche in Chile from the end of the 19th century, presented the collection they had built up there in the newly-founded mission museum in Altötting. While they tried to push back phenomena that stood in the way of the missionary idea, they acted as defenders of indigenous rights and were significantly involved in the dissemination and preservation of ethnological knowledge about the Mapuche.

Vida Savoniakaitė explained “Eduards Volters’ ‘Völkerkunde’-Konzepte, 1926–1934 [Volters’ ‘Völkerkunde’ concepts, 1926–1934]” on the basis of unpublished manuscripts. Volters, an interdisciplinary linguist trained in Germany, was interested in Lithuanian ethnography, the “folk soul” and the “national character” without using a “race”-concept. Records of numerous oral traditions from Lithuania are due to him.

Lisa Gottschall spoke about the Viennese anthropologist Elfriede Fliethmann and her „Versuch einer angewandten ‚Rassenpsychologie‘ am Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit in Krakau (1942) [Attempt at an applied 'racial psychology' at the ‚Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit‘ in Krakow (1942)]“. On her own initiative, Fliethmann put herself at the service of the National Socialists and took part in “folk-politically oriented anthropological-psychological investigations” in German-occupied Poland. These investigations of the Polish population were ultimately intended to provide information about their “ability to be Germanised”.

The contributions reflected the early interdisciplinarity and impact of our discipline far beyond the German-speaking borders in its positive, contradictory, and also negative manifestations.