

Dear Visitors,

Thank you for clicking on this page and on this article. I should actually be welcoming you in a room at the Ethnographic Museum in Zurich, having the honour to speak to you in person.

But I'm sitting in my home office trying to concentrate while my 4 year old son is interacting with his tablet next to me. "Let's go to the museum," a child's voice resounds from his comic: "there are many interesting things to see!"

"Lots of things to see..." So is that why you should go to a museum, I wonder? And sound, what about music and sound?

Sounds and museums? Do they belong together? Isn't a museum a place for peace and quiet? The place to see collected objects? And, when it comes to ethnographic museums, these objects collected from other cultures show us other perspectives on the world or, at least, I can imagine such other perspectives on the world, no matter how far this, my imagined world, differs from a whatever defined real world. No matter how much this is an historic or recent imagination of another world, or even worlds.

I go to a museum to let my eyes wander, to engage with the objects alone – or with my partner, or in a small group – to exchange ideas about what I see and feel and what I can possibly imagine.

And isn't it that true that, if I want to listen to music, I should go to a concert hall?

Fifteen years ago, after returning from a year of field research among the Pemón people in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil, a family of friends whom I had met there visited me in Berlin.

Susy, a Pemón-Arekuna indigenous woman and my friend's wife, who has unfortunately since passed away, finally wanted to know what this Ethnological Museum was all about. So we went to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin in Dahlem to see what an ethnological museum was supposed to be.

There were no Pemón objects on display at the time, meaning that there were no objects that would be attributed to her culture.

And so I thought it would be a good idea to start with the permanent exhibition of "Ancient America" and then, gradually, work our way through the entire building.

After "Ancient America" we arrived at the "South Pacific" exhibition. Susy just had passed through the first one very quickly. And now at the "South Pacific" section we gave up the tour and went straight to the cafeteria.

"All these spirits? What is that all about? What are they all doing here? What kind of place is this?" she asked.

So yes, she understood the motivation of ethnology, the "problems of representation", the problems with object-centrism – collecting, travelling, the good things about restoration and storage, etc.

She understood all the explanations I was trying to give, she also understood my concern, which was why I had gone to the Gran Sabana two years earlier, to listen to Theodor Koch-Grünberg's recordings with her and the others, trying to find out what the German linguist and ethnologist had recorded with the Pemón people a hundred years earlier.

The feeling of discomfort or uneasiness beset me years ago as a student in Berlin in the 1990s, combined with questions such as: What is the meaning of music recordings and all these things in the archives of German museums? Do the local people know about this, and what do they think about it?

Susy understood all of that, but maybe it was me who needed to understand, or first listen to her and try to understand what she was trying to say?

“You have the recordings?” she asked. I did not really understand, what would I be doing with Pemón recordings in the South Pacific or Ancient America displays? She insisted: “The recordings of this German man, who recorded our shamans and our spirits singing, right?”

“Yes, well...”. I tried to answer her but my lack of understanding was evident in my tone of voice.

“With these recordings...”. She repeated: “With these recordings you can try to talk to those in there, at least you can tell them that they are fine.”

This sentence produced a so-called “aha” combined with an Eureka effect. I realised that understanding these objects as entities meant that an interaction with them here in the museum should be no different to what is happening in the field. After all, these masks, costumes, feathers and stones have a soul, they have feelings and emotions and they feel alone. It would be at least an interesting experiment to try playing the Pemón shamans’ song to the objects in the South Pacific and Ancient America exhibition.

Shortly after this experience, I went back to Venezuela to live there. I got married and, until recent times, I worked at the Universidade de Brasília in the neighbouring country of Brazil.

In 2018, I was invited, along with other Brazilian anthropologists and indigenous people, to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin in Dahlem – the place where the scene with Susy had taken place.

The invitation was to an exhibition for the new Humboldt Forum, and more interesting than me was my Venezuelan neighbour Balbina Lambos, a Pemón indigenous woman like Susy. I had worked with Balbina about Pemón music for more than fifteen years as part of my university projects. So my centre of life was Santa Elena de Uairen, a Venezuelan village on the border with Brazil.

Balbina and I travelled to Berlin via Brasília. A few months before, she had already discovered a questionable object in the shared museum’s database, in which the objects of the planned exhibition were documented online. Balbina was startled by a small bag with a *pakara* stone. This stone is a shaman’s tool, she said, and was not always used for good. Under no circumstances should the stone be part of the exhibition.

After our arrival in Berlin, the stone quickly became a topic at the associated conference to which we were invited. Balbina explained that the stone not only did not belong in an exhibition, but also could not be restituted. She did not want to travel with the stone under any circumstances, i.e. when travelling by plane. Furthermore, nobody could handle those kind of stones these days.

The stone had reached the Berlin Museum in a mysterious way in the middle of the 19th century. It must be buried, Balbina said. While analysing the circumstances of the stones it turned out that they were used above all to interact with evil spirits, and nobody wants to deal with that. So a cemetery of objects in the museum had to be set up. Before that, it had to be explained to the stone and its interiorities – the souls – that from now on they should rest in peace and, if they ever were reactivated, they would only work for good.

Balbina realised the ritual, which was mainly carried out as a song establishing contact with the stone’s interiorities. She had learned this song from a female shaman during our joint studies. The song corresponded to the genre of the “old German” recordings. I now understood what Susy had told me that day. I understood clearly how transspecific communication works even outside “my field” and how we have to translate it for our work in ethnological museums.

Sound ontologies and transspecific communication, i.e. communicating with objects, is a certainty for many people, our notions of “aesthetics”, the “supernatural” and the definition of “beliefs” or “fetish” are often not enough. The task is to realise and to transmit that we need to be certain that people have the certainty to communicate with a wide variety of entities, and that these things or entities also communicate and interact in the human and non-human collective – and this interaction is audible and is practiced through music and sound! Furthermore, these interactions have to be translated from the archives into the exhibition rooms if decolonialisation is a serious intention engaged in at an equal level and beyond a sovereignty of

interpretation.

Of course, the first steps have already been taken – in fact, Swiss ethnological museums such as the Ethnographic Museum Zurich, the Ethnographic Museum in Geneva and the Museum of Cultures in Basel are pioneers. Ethnomusicology always plays an important role in these museums. Today, more than ever, sound is not only important for the perception and interaction of people with each other, but also with regards to the interaction between human and non-human actors and *vice versa*. Thus, this interaction resonates from tonight on in the exhibition KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE, realised by the photographer Samuel Schütz and the sound documentarist Thomas Kaiser – whether in the rooms of the museum, or initially in our heads via our connected boxes or headphones.

And maybe soon I will hear a child's voice from my son's child-friendly tablet next to me saying: "Let's go to the museum – there are many things to see and to hear and to smell and to play with, and much, much more!"

Thank you very much and enjoy the exhibition!