

(Re)positioning Ethnological Museums through Pacific Lenses

Dr. Philipp Schorch, Marie Curie Research Fellow, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich

Since the 18th century, the discipline of ethnology has emerged through scientific exploration and colonial expansion beyond Europe, as well as the establishment of ethnological collections and museums in Europe. Ethnological objects thus influenced academic and public understandings of other cultural-geographic spaces. The often resulting Eurocentric projection of ethnological imaginations has come under severe pressure while (post)colonial renegotiations in former European colonies, such as many Pacific nations, have caused dramatic changes to ethnological practices through Indigenous curatorial practices. The project 'Assembling the Transpacific: Indigenous Curatorial Practices, Material Cultures and Source Communities' shapes a dialogue between both situations through a multi-sited, collaborative ethnographic investigation of contemporary Indigenous curatorial practices in three Pacific museums (Bishop Museum Hawai'i; Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; Museo Rapa Nui, Easter Island). It generates historically informed, ethnographic insights into 'the figure of the curator' as an agent of Indigenous knowledge production and community engagement across the Pacific. In doing so, the project presents Indigenous perspectives that assist in reframing the curatorship of Pacific collections in, and the production of public understandings through, ethnological museums in Europe.



The photo on the left depicts a makaloa mat, woven by a 80 years old woman, Kalaikamalino from the island of Kaua'i, and presented to King Kalākaua in 1874, with an inscribed petition asking the 'Heavenly One' to lift the 'burden' of the newly introduced animal tax at a time of dramatic change for the Hawaiian people. This remarkable woven protest inspired Marques Hanalei Marzan, cultural resources specialist at Bishop Museum, to weave the piece depicted in the photo on the bottom, incorporating the petition's final words, 'nau na kala', which he interprets as 'let forgiveness resound'. Both material expressions are neither 'artefacts' nor do they 'represent' external realities. Rather, both function as vessels through which Marques and Kalaikamalino converse through the language of weaving and the enactment of cultural skills, thereby mobilising underlying Hawaiian concepts and values for political ends. This materialised dialogue 'speaks', in Marques' words, 'to the evolutionary continuity of culture' and a sense of 'the past' as 'ka wa mamua' or 'the time in front', which firmly grounds a Hawaiian person in the present with the eyes fixed upon the knowledge of the past and the back facing the unknown future.



This materialised mo'olelo or story points to the ways in which contemporary Indigenous curatorial practices at Bishop Museum are aimed at, and informed by, the (re)development of Indigenous skills. These Indigenous skills are culturally embedded, politically enacted and historically orientated, and become meaningful through the personal investment of meaning. Thinking through variations in skill, then, facilitates an ethnographically grounded conflation of abstract dichotomies such as art versus craft, tradition versus modernity, and individual versus culture. These historically grounded ethnographic insights have significant implications for ethnological museums in Europe, which often produce and represent Hawaiian visual and material culture through the separation and imposition of alien categories such as 'art' and 'artefact'; calling for an analytical shift from the usual museological focus on exhibitionary productions and representations towards approaching curatorship as ongoing *conversations* which require various common *languages* and the translational power of cultural *skills*.