

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS: THE GREAT ROBBERY: HOW SKELETONS AND GODS ENDED UP IN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS*

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A few years ago, some scholarly enthusiasts together with our Indigenous friends gathered in INALCO, Paris, to celebrate Khanty Days. The event involved a scientific conference as well as other initiatives highlighting the Khanty culture and creative mind. As the programme was not particularly intense, we had also time to visit beautiful places around the city.

Apparently, several of the participants independently chose to visit the Quai Branly Museum. Although the intentions of curators were noble and the permanent exhibition stood as a powerful manifestation of Indigenous creativity and dialogues between cultures (Shelton 2009), the display still left us somehow hesitant. One evening, we consulted our Khanty companion regarding our non-Indigenous impressions. The Khanty man was rather resolute, although smiling while making his point: “They have stolen a lot.”

This remark was not surprising. The museum has provoked serious discussions regarding post-colonial treatment of museum collections and the discourses behind ethnographic displays. The Quai Branly Museum has been criticised for promoting Western (more particularly French) supremacy over the other parts of the world, and exoticising and dehumanising the Other (Martin 2011; Khrebtan-Hörhager 2018).

Most of this controversy appears around the museum’s overall strategy and curating principles. Not much has been discussed concerning the way these objects were obtained (although there is some, see Shelton 2009: 11) but colonial encounter frames the history of the Quai Branly Museum collections by default. As Anthony Alan Shelton (*ibid.*: 13) remarks: “There are no native voices or colonial histories in the quai Branly.”

If we come back to the French–Khanty ethnographic connection, we can recall Charles Rabot (1856–1944), who collected ethnographic material among the Finno-Ugrians on Volga River, the Komi region and Western Siberia in 1890. In his travelogue (Rabot 2021), the French scholar describes abundantly local natural conditions and cultural appearances, but touches upon collecting episodes just briefly and in a neutral mode. However, other contemporary authors remember Rabot’s trip in a much more critical way.

An artist, Boris Bessonov, participated in a later ethnographic trip to the Russian North and met a Komi policeman, Evlampi Arsenevich Popov, who had assisted Rabot during his expedition. In his travelogue, Bessonov describes some episodes of Rabot’s work, as heard from Popov. On the Lyamin River, Rabot found a Khanty sacred site with a storehouse. Rabot allowed his crew extract from the storehouse three big,

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human-size figures of gods, a shaman drum and several other sacred items. Soon, the Khanty discovered the robbery and pursued the expedition team, demanding their gods back, even threatening the expedition team with their shotguns. But Rabot and Popov refused to give up their 'catch', even after the Khanty stopped threatening and started to beg that their gods should not be taken away. Later, Rabot posted his collection from Beryozovo to Paris. (Bessonov 1909: 42, 44, 87, 88)

So far nobody knows where the figures of these gods are today, although the evidence leads us to France.¹ Rabot's trip earned contradictory attention in contemporary media publications. In *Novoye Vremya* newspaper, published in St Petersburg, Rabot's field trip was touched upon a couple of times. It was noted that he disassembled one Khanty shrine for shipping to Paris (Tyumentsev 1890: 3). Although Tyumentsev's remark is not completely correct, Rabot's interest in the Khanty sacred objects was indicated adequately. Shortly afterwards Rabot was accused of stealing three god figures from a Khanty shrine. Rabot did not deny the fact of stealing but considered this method quite ordinary and widespread, especially among the Russian Orthodox clerics (Peterburzhets 1891: 2).² On the day after the last note in *Novoye Vremya*, the case was also reported in *La Revue Scientifique* in Paris in the review of an exhibition of Rabot's collection:

At the back of the exhibition hall, in the middle of a clump of green trees, you see four or five stakes covered with rags and an almost shapeless doll made of rolled up pieces of cloth. These are the Ostiak divinities that a Russian newspaper, the *Novoye Vremia*, reproached Mr Rabot, with some bad faith, for "having stolen [them] from a temple." (Blaziot 1891)

As we can see, newspapers both in France and Russia discussed the Rabot case soon after his expedition to Russia ended. Rabot did not deny the robbery but did not see how his collecting method could be extraordinary or immoral. Rabot was right in claiming he was following an approach commonly used by contemporary ethnographers, although his mode of treating the Indigenous cultural heritage and spiritual well-being was still questioned by journalists.

Indeed, Rabot's style of work was not exceptional. Our heroes of Finno-Ugric ethnography did the same without shame. Scientific and patriotic effort justified any suitable practice.

For example, János Jankó, the first director of the Hungarian Ethnographic Museum, travelled among the Khanty in 1898 and collected ethnographic objects. The most peculiar part of his task was to gather skulls and skeletons to prove anthropological connection between the Khanty and Hungarians. To us this may appear as something extreme but back then it was a common dream of ethnographers to obtain some Indigenous bones. I will provide a few extracts from Jankó's field diary to illustrate his enthusiasm and full devotion to the scientific cause.

Jankó experienced how the Khanty were not particularly cooperative when he attempted to dig up their graveyards in search of bone material. The Indigenous men feared their gods and ancestral spirits too much and undermined the scholarly project in different ways, mainly by avoiding digging up the bones or refusing to carry them to the researcher's boat. The Khanty sabotaged Jankó's efforts by digging in the wrong parts of the graves so that bones could not be found. However, Jankó was able to enforce his study plan by presenting himself as a foreign official whose actions were sanctioned by the Russian government. (Jankó 2000: 126, 212)

So, Jankó used forceful pressure to engage the Khanty in collecting human remains from their graveyards. Sometimes even Jankó felt that he was pushing his Indigenous companions too far. For example, in Tsingala village he noticed that the Khanty were really panicking and therefore limited his collecting effort to only one skull. Jankó did not want to hurt Khanty feelings and tried to maintain their collaborative mood: “I have to work here for two more days, and I don’t want to turn this kind people against me” (ibid.: 159).

But Jankó was a very determined bone collector and usually did not give up so easily. When visiting Yuganskoye village for the first time, Jankó (ibid.: 178) avoided the cemetery in order to maintain good relations with the locals. But on his way back, he obtained ten skulls from the graveyard (ibid.: 217). In another village Jankó made a very straightforward entry in his diary: “In the morning, we arrived in Kayukovo, and I decided that I would take ten skulls from here, no matter what” (ibid.: 212).

As a result of his research trip, Jankó collected 30 skulls and two full skeletons (Kerecsi 2007: 100), which was very much appreciated by later scholars, who used his collection to study the peculiarities of Hungarian prehistory (see, for example, Lipták 1954). Physical anthropology was believed to provide a valuable support to investigations into Finno-Ugric languages (the Khanty are very close language relatives of the Hungarians).

Rabot’s and Jankó’s collection work was facilitated by money, fear, deception, vodka and luck. They attempted to investigate the Finno-Ugric anthropological and cultural relationships and ethnographic culture by all available means. With such a methodological attitude, the goals of European scholars were set much higher than the worldview of ‘savages’, the concepts of the soul and death, life after the grave, and more generally, any consideration of Indigenous culture. Scientific reasoning was the priority or the cover for any ethnographic action.

Scholars have robbed not only objects and bones but also Indigenous dignity. Regina Bendix (2022) claims regarding such sensitive collections that “wrongs cannot be undone and the danger of new wrongs [is] ever present”. It has been claimed that the Quai Branly Museum endorses the dehumanisation of non-European peoples (Khrebtan-Hörhager 2018: 331). Apparently, our Khanty friend hit on the truth. Scholars may argue that the museum is intriguing, but if the Indigenous people are not happy about it, the museological scheme does not really count. While many criticise the Quai Branly Museum for troublesome curating, the Khanty saw it as a monument to the Great Robbery.

There are a multitude of such stories of ethnographic robbery, although not all of them as explicit as the cases of Rabot or Jankó. Today, we try to be more caring, at least a little bit. Instead of theft, we aim to conduct collaboration with Indigenous partners (see Leete and Lipin 2015; Dudeck 2022; Leete 2022; Toulouze et al. 2022; Sadikov and Toulouze 2024). But we need to keep in mind that we must go by Indigenous perceptions because they are the pathfinders and our independent knowledge about Indigenous cognition appears just as an illusion (see Leete 2021: i). We should follow the lead and try to avoid new wrongs.

NOTES

¹ I thank colleague Stephan Dudeck for pointing to the media discussion concerning Rabot’s collection and acknowledge his efforts in tracing the current location of the Khanty god figures (although this has so far been unsuccessful).

2 Interestingly, the note about Rabot's ethnographic robbery was placed next to news about Jack the Ripper (see Peterburzhets 1891).

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