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Author(s): Halmesvirta, Anssi

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‘Africans’ and the ‘Chinese’ Exhibited in Finland in the years 1926–1928

Abstract: This article analyses two peculiar cases of Others (Alterity) on stage in the exhibition of Chinese and African cultures by the Finnish Missionary Society in 1926–1928. They are a black dummy presenting the Ovambo (African) culture of South-West Africa and a Chinaman made to represent contemporary culture of China although it was the imperial (period not dated) one, not at all as contemporary as proposed. Both were made-in-Finland type artificial representations which bordered to total inauthenticity for the organizers did not have anything more aboriginal at hand and they had to be inventive. In any case, the public (urban middle- and high-class, schoolchildren, teachers, academic and educated people in general) did not care of the ambiguous mixtures of (‘White’) Identity and (‘Black’, Chinese) Alterities and they were mostly very satisfied with the exhibition, a very rare attraction in Finland at the time.

Keywords: missionary exhibition, Identity, Alterity, authenticity, artificiality

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Introduction

In this article the process of staging living and replicated Others and their relations to spectators will be explored by analyzing two peculiar ‘novelty’ cases in which the Finnish (Evangelic Protestant) Missionary Society (est. 1859) invented substitutes for the genuine, ‘aboriginal’ Others, for its large-scale series of missionary exhibitions of African and Chinese cultures in 1926–1928 in Helsinki, from where it travelled around the main cities of Turku, Tampere, Oulu and Viipuri (Viborg).¹ The substitutes were one African dummy and one Chinese man, and in both cases the urge to imply authenticity was paramount and incarnated in a particular manner. The purpose of staging the Other as realistically as possible was in both cases the key motif, although it was played out quite differently and, as the analysis shows, quite deceptively. More philosophically speaking the entire staging was about manipulative transformation of Identity to mixed Alterity in general

¹ What comes to Finland’s belonging to Eastern Central Europe, it can be pointed out that it lies in the wide corridor between West and East which stretches from Lapland via the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria to the Dardanelles.

(HALMESVIRTA 2004: passim).

The Finnish Missionary Society cherished a long-standing tradition of missionary work in Africa and China as it had founded its first mission station in Amboland in South-West Africa (presently Northern Namibia) in the end of the 1860s (KOIVUNEN 2011: 14). In the late 19th century it was a part of a colony of the German Empire with the officers of which Finnish authorities had close contacts. After the World War I, however, it was under the British rule with which the Society had troubles to cope, while Ovambo uprisings were being crushed by South African military power. The Ovambo became isolated from the rest of the world and no 'Black' Africans could be transported to Finland. The Amboland station was followed by the second one in Hunan province in South-East China in the early 20th century. Society's activities did not bore fruit only in proselytizing there but also in the form of the first missionary exhibition of Asian culture in Finland in 1911 in Helsinki. Relations with the Chinese were politically sealed when Finland and China stroke a treaty of friendship in 1926 (KOIVUNEN 2011: 14-15, 113), which created a secure foundation to the organization of the 1926–1928 exhibitions.

'African' and 'Chinaman'

In the first case under scrutiny here, in urgent need of satisfying the curiosity of the public towards Africans and in order to enhance the didactic utility of missionary collections, dummies of natural size of an African man and a woman were designed by an unknown artist working for the Missionary Society, in all likelihood on the model of indigenous people of Amboland (Ovambo). They were set against a large, three-meter canvas-painting showing Amboland scenery with some Africans minding their daily affairs. The exhibition, designed by the Society and set in local YMCA's quarters, gave the visitors a chance to compare the looks of the dummies to the looks of the persons depicted in it. Here was hidden the deceptive illusion. Despite the intended family resemblance, it should be realized that the male dummy's Alterity was double-layered (Fig. 1): it was originally white dummy, then the artist painted him pitch black, attached black curly hair to its head and richly decorated it in supposedly Ovambo style. This black dummy was by all means all too black for the Amboland setting and its face was covered with flashy make-up. The result was a sort of pseudo-Ovambo resembling some later advertisements of liquorice showing 'funny Blacks'. In consequence, the dummy had finally taken on artificial Alterity as blackness was indiscriminately painted onto white Identity (cf. when Afro-Americans powdered themselves White in order to hide their blackness). The transformation remained, however, incomplete because, for example, the head of the white dummy was not deformed into a black one according to the 'racial'

standards of craniology the time.² Nevertheless, the dummies were made to represent *all* Africans – the second, enlarged Alterity imposed on them – in as much as the village reconstructed in front of them represented African aboriginal societies in general.

In comparison to most ethnological exhibitions of the day, where living people in their everyday attire were displayed, organizers of the missionary exhibition, for want of anything better, substituted living specimens, the real African Otherness ('Black' Identity) with replicas which were equipped with proper African cultural paraphernalia to look at and to be examined in detail by ordinary visitors. One may ask whether physical anthropologists or other experts in human studies who visited the exhibition ever noticed the various shades of fake Alterities. They may have seen a living 'Black', but here they had only the replica of the 'Black' man to be inspected since, as the photo of the African section of the exhibition shows (Fig. 1); the Black woman was missing at some point and we do not know where she vanished. Instead, it is known that the black male dummy was stored for a couple of decades in the Missionary Museum established in 1929 in Helsinki after the exhibition.

Notwithstanding all the deficiencies and duplicities in the composition of the 'Black' Alterity, the replica of the 'Black' man was not evidently much worse as an exhibit in the eyes of the spectators than a real 'Black' would have been since it gained so much praise for its supposed resemblance of the aboriginal in the local press. It was such a rarity that it was in itself enough to satisfy Finnish curiosity – rest could be imagined, for instance, one could make the 'Black man' work in his village the same way as the figures on the painted canvas thus giving him a familiar, humanized exhibitory role, irrespective how much he was detached from his original context and how static he as a dummy was. It was as if visitors would have never liked to doubt that this 'Black man' was a fake; the public was so impressed by both the African and the Chinese scenes that the proportionate artificial and made-in-Finland aspect of them was overlooked. The spectacle of Alterity fulfilled its mission (see below: reception).

In the second case, one Christian, Evangelic pastor, Mr. Ho-Ye-sen from China who visited Finland in January 1926, was persuaded with another Chinese person to play the role of the Chinese Other in the exhibition. He also served as a guide and a welcome speaker to the exhibition.

As one can see in the photo above (Fig. 2), although he normally wore Western, gentlemanly attire (suit, white collar, tie, glasses, etc.), for the exhibition he was clad as an imperial

² The contemporary racial classification of the human species into 'White, Yellow and Black' 'races' was largely accepted in scholarly circles also in Finland leaving Finns themselves between Yellow and White, representing the East-Baltic 'type'. There were very few hardline racists in Finland at the time, rather one can find racialists among physical anthropologists, meaning that they thought and wrote in terms of 'race' without directly implying that there are 'inferior' and 'superior' races in the world. Nevertheless, nationalist-conservative and right-wing educated public saw two looming threats to their national culture, i.e. the Eastern bolshevism and the Western, American 'negro' culture (jazz, half-nudity etc.). For details, see: HALMESVIRTA 1993: introduction; KEMILÄINEN 1985: chapter II; MATIKAINEN 2013:206.

Chinaman in order to guarantee authenticity and credibility. Insofar as the black dummy at least showed contemporaneity, the whole Chinese section showed the Chinese in the age of Empire (the age not specified and the costumes brought by the Society from China were not uniform), not in their 1920s westernized composure. In addition to this anachronistic appearance of Mr. Ho in the exhibition, a touching description for Finnish children of the converted and westernized him was given in the *Children's Missionary News*:

“In Christmas time and in the beginning of January [1926] a distant guest visited Finland, namely a Chinese pastor, Ho. His picture you see here. He has arrived from a faraway land, from the land of Sinimi, as it is called in Finnish in our Holy Bible. As a young child he was totally alienated from God living in paganism. Thanks to the work of missionaries he has approached Christ, our beloved Redeemer. Now he talks about Jesus with pleasure.” (KIINALAINEN PASTORI HO 1926: cover).

In this way the exhibition and news description gave contradictory meanings to the Chinese Alterity: the exhibition situating Mr. Ho back (perhaps playfully) to ‘pagan’, already lost age, the *Children's Missionary News* transferring him to the modern times, close to western, gentlemanly Identity. To nail this message down the humanely moving image of proselytizing the Chinese and Africans was printed in the cover of the *Children's Missionary News* where children from the ‘West’ (i.e. Finnish girl and boy) offer the font to their pagan sister and brother who eagerly and joyfully receive it – an image enhancing the innocence of the encounter with the connotation that they all basically are children of ‘God’ bringing ‘Glory’ but leaving out ‘Gold’, the ideological aspect of blatant imperialism that Finnish missionary work wanted to avoid. The image makes the contemporary Identification of ‘White’ and ‘Yellow’ almost complete, leaving to the ‘Whites’ the educational role to pursue (see note 1).

Occasionally also organizers of the exhibition put on imperial Chinese clothes to add up to the illusion but they never tried to assume the attire of the ‘Black’. The Society invested a lot more effort and money in the Chinese impression than in the African one. This was evidently to emphasize the huge cultural gap between the ‘civilized but stagnated’ Chinese and the ‘primitive, savage’ Africans presented in contemporary ethnological/anthropological literature and travel books (for details, see HALMESVIRTA 1993: *passim*; KEMILÄINEN 1985: chapter II) as well as in Finnish local press (AFRIKKALAIS-KIINALAINEN NÄYTTELY 1927). And, in view of comparison the Chinese section of the exhibition was mobile with living, sometimes even singing, humans whereas the African dummy remained static without any signs of life (KOIVUNEN 2011: 17).

Also this impression was prone to valorize the dogma of the gradation of creation for the Evangelic missionaries, namely the Biblical division of human races; Ham, Seem and Japheth. And, it has to be highlighted that western missionaries had proselytized all over the world already before travelling became common and they had played a significant role in formulating and

disseminating ideas concerning foreign lands and peoples to the wider European public (COOMBES 1994; THORNE 1999). It was through the artifacts collected and pictorial material and accounts produced by the Finnish Missionary Society that also the Finns got acquainted with the foreign cultures in the first place (KOIVUNEN 2011: 14). This role of the Society was all the more important because in late 1920s all ethnographic collections of the Finnish National Museum stayed closed to the public. And anyhow, Finland was geographically in disadvantageous position to acquire as much material from foreign cultures as, for instance, their Soviet (Finno-Ugric shows) or Swedish neighbors, and the caravans transporting exotic specimens and curiosities of alien 'races' very rarely traversed through Finland.

Had there been a close-range face to face encounter with a living African, it might have been frightening for a Finnish high-middle-class lady or even a gentleman but as the dummy black did not make any wild gestures remaining harmless and speechless, they could easily retain their posture of superiority (HALMESVIRTA 2006: 11–23). Instead of being upset, they had been fascinated by the 'close encounter' with this ornamentally colorful object. Notice also the difference between a photo (here Fig. 1) and a replica; a photo may have been more accurate whereas the dummy stood almost in a handshake distance and appeared to be a concrete look-alike with at least roughly the same costume as the aboriginal in Amboland. On the other hand, a photo (i.e. Fig. 1) could not lie whereas the black dummy as replica inescapably lied, the likeness being an approximate depending on the skills and intentions of the artist.

It is a commonplace nowadays to point out that the organizers of the exhibitions took and take actively part in mediating and composing interpretations of the exhibits – this was surely the case of the 1926–1928 exhibition as it had recourse to its own inventions (dummy, photos) and adaptations to exhibit two foreign cultures.

The Reception

The Missionary Society's exhibition was a great success and it helped it to recover from economic difficulties faced in the 1920s and early 1930s. From the educational point of view of the missionaries and their supporters it gave self-assurance of the value of their work abroad. It was easy to see how it boosted the missionary propaganda. One of the Society's clever novelties was that the exhibition was open in the morning for groups of schoolchildren and during afternoons for all the other visitors (KOIVUNEN: 2011, 28).

It has been estimated that in Helsinki which had c. 200.000 inhabitants in late 1920s some 14.000 people saw the exhibition in twenty days, and if we add to that the number of visitors in other cities (from Oulu and Viipuri numbers are missing) altogether c. 30.000 saw it (KOIVUNEN 2011: 114–115) despite the fact that there were all other kinds of entertainment available (movies,

sport, art exhibitions, markets, music halls etc.). For one reason or another the African section attracted men and the Chinese women. Nevertheless, the Chinese section was more interesting for the public because it contained a lot of Chinese cultural paraphernalia – in comparison the African one appeared too modest. This may have been because there was one handicap in the tour: neither the black dummy nor Mr. Ho travelled outside Helsinki.

Evidently, there was a demand for this kind of exotic exhibition as it was more illustrative of the foreign Others than any educational literature or journal could be. To meet it, the Society had advertised and informed about the tour with posters and exhibition catalogues. Not to miss the attendance of the minority, it sold entrance tickets also in Swedish language. The Society ensured wide press coverage by sending to newspapers press releases whose texts were reflected in the reviews of the exhibition (KOIVUNEN 2011: 29).

Most of the reviews of the exhibition were praising it for giving unforgettable experiences. A sensation it does not seem to have been. For example, for *Kaleva*, a newspaper in Oulu it was a rarity not to be seen in many years hence (MIELENKIINTOINEN NÄYTTELY N.M.K.Y:N HUONEISTOSSA 1927). But there appeared at least one review venting vociferous critical comments, not actually so much of the exhibition itself but of the modern life-style. A certain 'J.K.' writing for the missionary paper *Herättäjä* in Turku castigated the Chinese (imperial) culture as "over-civilized acting up and theatrical play" and complained that these features could be found in the vanities of Western people, too. The African section of the exhibition in particular aroused in the reviewer thoughts of raw, simple life in which man "was what he was" but could show signs of development when brought under the influence of Christianity ('J. K.' 1927). Surprisingly enough, the reviewer found roots of Western cult of nudity in the artifacts and pictures of African culture (although the black dummy was not present) – they had somehow inspired the culture of night-café's and jazz-clubs, which threatened Christian chastity. It seemed that the Western man was sinking to the level of wild aboriginals of nature ('J. K.' 1927). In the context of the layout of the exhibition this judgment sounds exaggerated; the exhibition did not have anything to do with the 1930s popular culture, rather it stayed within the limits of traditional ideas and prejudices about the African culture (KOIVUNEN 2011: 129). In this respect the Alterity of foreign cultures put forward by the exhibition was closed and did not match the one(s) encountered in the real world outside exhibition walls.

Conclusion

Although the Missionary Society's exhibition was nothing like the huge enterprises in the Western world (e.g. *Africa and the East* organized by the British Church Missionary Society in 1922 and held in Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington, London), it was an achievement in itself if we take into account the recourses and possibilities of a Finnish operator which was not primarily business-

oriented. Evidently, the organizers were happy enough with what they had been able to gather, design and show. They were not running any big troupes of aboriginals performing their culture, only one dummy and a couple of Chinese natives, an array of artifacts, some of which could even be compared with the Finnish ones (KOIVUNEN 2011: 130). The success of the 1926–1928 exhibition series motivated the Society to found its own missionary museum, which deposited its materials (still operating). It is not known what finally happened to the black male dummy there.

Seen from the angle of the Identity/Alterity dichotomy, one must conclude that artificiality – overtly made-in-Finland aspect – damaged the intended authenticity of the exhibition. The Alterity to be shown could not comply with the standards of aboriginality demanded and seen in exhibitions abroad, for example in Hagenbeck's ethnic shows in Hamburg. Identity (Westernness, Finnishness) was mixed with (confused) Alterity in certain important aspects which could not have been hidden had there been present a foreign specialist eye to closely look at them. The Chinese impression was more convincing but not up-to-date, the African one authentic only in its artifacts which were dispersed around the scene. It is hard to tell how aware the organizers themselves were of the illusionary side of the whole. Nevertheless, they did their best, and at least they themselves did not openly complain of any mistakes or falsity (fakeness). Visitors obviously did not pay attention to the somewhat haphazard interpretation of invented Alterities imposed on the exhibition by the organizers, so extraordinary it in their wondering eyes was. One final question begs an answer: when was a genuine, living 'Black' African first seen in Finland, one can guess that maybe as late as during the 1952 Olympic Games!?

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