

THE SIBERIAN COLLECTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM IN CRACOW IN THE LIGHT OF FIELDWORK AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATIONS

Magdalena Zych

Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Cracow, Jagiellonian University

In Polish ethnographic collections, the Siberian Collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow (MEK) ranks among the most precious assets.¹ The objects that created it reached the Cracow collections at the turn of the 20th century thanks to some Poles who returned from Siberia. They had been either exiled there after the January Uprising or had stayed there as adventurers, scientists, administrators, tradesmen, or combining some of these roles. When donating the exhibits to the institutions operating then in Cracow, e.g. the Adrian Baraniecki Museum of Science and Industry, Polish Academy of Learning, National Museum, and as of 1911 also the Ethnographic Museum, the donors were willing to contribute to the development of Polish museum institutions, which from today's perspective looks as an extremely generous gesture. The MEK Siberian Collection contains the objects amassed by Benedykt Dybowski, Izydor Sobański, Konstanty Podhorski, Cecylia Chrzanowska, Maria Kulczykowska, Jan Żurkowski, Kazimierz Machniewicz, and others.

The Siberian contact zone yielded, among others, the material documentation of the life of the local population. During

their stay in Siberia, Poles communicated with the native inhabitants: the Nenets, the Selkup, the Evens, the Evenks, the Koryaks, the Chukchi people, the Aleuts, and other, as representatives of those groups say of the themselves, indigenous peoples of the North. The collection boasting 350 objects, contains e.g. tools, boat models, clothes, cult and ritual objects. It also encompasses items unique on a global scale, such as the Nenets wedding garment or the Aleut drum from the Commander Islands. Some objects from this collection became elements shaping the imaginary world of Siberian mythology in Polish culture: they can be recognized as props in Jacek Malczewski's Siberian cycle.

The MEK Siberian Collection was studied for the first time by Jerzy Czajkowski in 1954. The descriptions of the museum objects and fragments of the data from the old museum documentation became important reference points. The collection was completed through donations in the subsequent decades following WW II, until the late 20th century. The last transfer of Siberian objects from the National Museum in Cracow (NMK) was conducted by the then MEK Director

Maria Zachorowska, although NMK still has some items historically belonging to this ethnographic collection.

Anthropological reinterpretation

In 2016, MEK was awarded a grant of the National Programme for the Development of Humanities to conduct a more thorough research into the Siberian collection.² The Project was managed by Grażyna Kubica-Heller PhD, while the team included: Andrzej Dybczak, Jacek Kukuczka, and Magdalena Zych. The scientific museum Project was a two-track undertaking: as archival investigation and ethnographic in-field research at the locations from which the selected objects had reached the collections. A wide range of the conducted activities, namely preliminary researches, study visits to various centres, hosting experts in Cracow, ethnographic multi-sited in-field research enriched with audio-visual records, conservation and material expertise consultancy,³ all these steps constructed the knowledge of the Collection. What proved particularly fruitful was the in-field work involving local communities at precisely selected locations, ascertained through the analysis of the Siberian Collection. The real challenge could be found in the fact that the Collection, coming from different locations, directed our attention to the regions that were culturally distanced from each other. Thus the decision was made to concentrate on the areas placed in Western Siberia, around the Taz River, on the Barents Sea, and the north-eastern tip of the Russian Federation: Kamchatka and Chukotka. We combined the field penetration with researching into similar ethnographic collections in Russian museums as well as into the collection created by Maria Czaplicka for the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. It needs to be emphasized that the Project's scale and its logistics were extremely challenging, yet thanks to the openness of specialists from numerous museums the Project was being implemented as planned.

The team-implemented Project was based on several assumptions. The Collection was the main axis of the research. The goal was to acquire knowledge of both the objects and relations that were established through them, taking into account the local perspective of the source communities. Gaining such knowledge would not have been possible without a tight cooperation with many female participants and members of the research teams. Our intention was to inform our experts that there was such a collection of objects in Cracow. When extending the knowledge of the Collection, while initiating new relations around it, we followed the assumption that the Collection would not be developed in the traditional meaning, namely that we would not be acquiring objects to complement it. However, in some instances the participants of the research for some important reasons wanted to donate single objects to the MEK Collection, and obviously these were accepted. Of essential importance was the focus on different perspectives of the functioning of various Collection elements: single objects, and in some cases whole sets, both in the past and currently. We asked what importance for source communities could be found in the Cracow Collection. What did the presence of those elements in the heritage of Polish cultural assets consist in? These were the questions that we tried to find answers to in the subsequent stages of the fieldwork and archival research.

The research conducted in the Project allowed to gain more thorough knowledge of the selected elements of the collection causing that the objects forming the Collection revealed their past and contemporary contexts, at the same time opening up entirely new interpretative opportunities.

The Project's important achievement can be seen in the implementation of a new praxis combining cultural anthropology, ethnology, and ethnographic methods with multiple museology trends. In effect, the framework of a new pathway of analysing the relations of the museum with its neighbourhood through a collection has been outlined: it is called in-field museology. The undertaken re-interpretation of a collection based on the participatory aspect of fieldwork, seeking living contexts for historic objects which continue to carry meanings important within a given culture, all this allows us to cherish hope connected with the development of the new way of incorporating a museum collection into the circulation of modernity. Importantly, it is for the first time in the history of Polish museology and cultural anthropology that the interpretation of the contacts between the Polish exiles and explorers with the indigenous Siberian population of Russia took into account their material context expressed with the MEK Siberian Collection. The emphasis we put on the contact zone perceived as the museum space (1997 theoretical proposal of James Clifford), yet extended by the museum into source locations for the Collection, allowed to investigate the connections present in culture and to unveil their meanings. Four major thematic areas of the research demonstrate what these relations consisted in.

A successful attempt at relocating reindeer from Kamchatka⁵

Among the objects from Kamchatka in the MEK Collection there is an exquisite set of boat models, Even and Koryak clothing garments, a unique Aleut *camleys* (a type of raincoat) made of fish skins, a number of tools and objects belonging to an Aleut shaman: a drum and a shawl. The majority of the objects are unique ones from the Aleutian Islands, in total, 135 objects acquired thanks to the collector's passion of Benedykt Dybowski (1833–1930), a scientist of great achievements in natural sciences, professor at the University of Lvov, a committed social activist.⁶ One of the manifestations of the latter is the fact that in 1884, he donated the ethnographic collection from Kamchatka to the Museum of Science and Industry. In 1911, the collection reached the Ethnographic Museum that was being established, thus initiating the whole Siberian Collection. Dybowski presented the material at exhibitions organized in Lvov, Warsaw, and Cracow.

Accompanied by Jan Kalinowski, Benedykt Dybowski left for Kamchatka in 1879 on a four-year contract as a doctor.⁷ Earlier Dybowski had been exiled to the Zabaykalsky Krai, the sentence he received in exchange for the capital punishment he had first been sentenced to for an active participation in the January Uprising. During his stay in Kamchatka, he implemented e.g. the project of the relocation of reindeer from Kamchatka to one of the Aleutian Islands in the Bering Sea. The goal was to enhance the wellbeing of the local community who could improve their living conditions by breeding the animals. In the times of colonial exploitation this care for the indigenous population is impressive;

importantly, this social sensitivity was in Dybowski present daily in his doctor's practice, and is still remembered, for example, in the Milkovo settlement in Kamchatka where he founded a leper colony.

Naturally, in order to implement his goal, Dybowski needed a local partner: the Even Gavrylo Chulevoy (this is how Dybowski signed one of the photographs showing an Even herder) from whom he bought the reindeer and could carry out the whole operation. The collection was enriched with Gavrylo's clothing (as seen in the photo), as well as the clothes of his wife and daughter; also his *maut* (a kind of a lasso, serving to herd reindeer; damaged, as the contemporary herders taking part in the research observed, since nobody would rid themselves of a fully operational tool). Andrzej Dybczak kept asking around about Gavrylo Chulevoy in the Kamchatka settlements, and was finally successful. The photo taken by Dybowski and showing him was recognized. It had been spotted in the family album of Adukanov, as it turned out, a Gavrylov's relative; he fought in WW II as a Red Army soldier at the Baranów-Sandomierz bridgehead on the Vistula, for which he was honoured with medals, this testified to by local Kamchatka archival sources. Gavrylo's name was not Chulevoy; he came from a known herders' family which later assumed the name of Adukanov. 'Chulevoy' in the Even language means an unfriendly phrase equivalent to *get out of my face*, which was explained by embarrassed residents of Anavgi. This shows that the relations between the Even herder and the Polish scientist were not smooth. The ethnographic research conducted in the spring of 2018 in the Even settlements and the several weeks' stay in the mountains with reindeer herders yielded knowledge of the contemporary contexts of the life of reindeer herders in Kamchatka.

The Kamchatka contacts established during the field research allowed the May 2018 visit to the Ethnographic Museum of Lidia Innokientievna Chichulina with her some-dozen people ensemble from Petropavlovsk. Their visit to the storage studio let them become acquainted with the garments of old Koryak clothing collected by Dybowski, and today serving as an important source of knowledge to Koryak women.

A girl from a land in the North

How did it happen that a Nenets woman's wedding outfit reach Cracow? It was brought by Izydor Sobański (1835–1906); together with the man's outfit (his own?) and a reindeer harness they form a set. We are unaware who owned the female costume, but we know who the donor was. He was an exile returning to Galicia after many years of life in the Tobolsk Governorate. Izydor Sobański was son of Aleksander Udalyk Sobański who had distinguished himself in the fights during the November Uprising in Podolia. Izydor followed in his father's footsteps. Having become involved in helping the January insurgents, he was sentenced to exile, as recorded by Michał Sobański, a donor's contemporary relative.

The most mysterious element of the whole set donated by Izydor Sobański is a *kapor* (a type of a fur hood, in this case of wolverine, dog, and reindeer fur) featuring copper rings.



1. Reindeer around the Anavgay settlement, Kamchatka



2. Reindeer herders, vicinity of the Anavgay settlement, Kamchatka

When work on this Collection fragment started, it was not even known that the above-described objects formed a set, nor that a part of them were a wedding outfit. The old museum label on the *kapor* read that it was a 'Samoyedic hat' (the Nenets were then called the Samoyeds). The resolving of the puzzle required a certain set of coincidences and consultation with Yuriy Kvashnin PhD, a specialist in Nenets culture from Tobolsk who, having visited the Cracow studio storage, pointed to certain trace: a lithograph of the 19th-century artist Vladimir Svierchakov presenting a scene of a Nenets wedding, following which he contacted MEK with the Naryan-Mar museum which had come across a similar *kapor* on one of the women in the Oma settlement on the Barents Sea. The picture sent to Cracow presented a woman in an identical headgear. So there was nothing else left to do but set off for the Nenets Autonomous Okrug to meet with the owner of the *kapor* visible in the 2004 photo. Extensive consultations in situ allowed Andrzej Dybczak and Jacek Kukuczka to ascertain that in Cracow we are in the possession of a rare specimen of an object of great impact for the Nenets' cultural identity, and also for the former owner of the *kapor*. According to the female residents of the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the wedding set belonged to the Nenets wife of Izydor Sobański. In their view no woman would sell such objects to anyone. Neither in the past, nor presently. The garments of this kind, inherited in the female family line, were no longer in use, while the *kapor*



3. Visit to the study collection storage of the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow, Lidia Innokientievna Chichulina together with an ensemble from Petropavlovsk-Kamtchatsky

seen in the photo from several years back was annihilated in the fire of its owner's house. As it turned out that kind of a ritual garment ranked within the shamanic context of women's spiritual practices, banned in the Soviet Union in the 20th century, therefore objects related to them stood very meagre chances of surviving. This astounding story has been presented in the digital repository in which Andrzej Dybczak has described and presented with videos and recordings the course of the above-outlined investigation.

Gold of Alaska, gold of Chukotka

Konstanty Podhorski (1859–1907) reached Chukotka on business. Born in Mikołajówka in the Kiev Governorate, he sold his estate, choosing an adventurous life away from his native land.⁸ In 1906, he donated almost 80 items of Chukchi applied art to the National Museum, which in their majority were allocated to MEK in 1964. The collection stands out with decorative qualities of the objects, since they were the main ones the collector bore in mind when amassing them. The State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw boasts almost a hundred figurines of walrus tusk that came from the Podhorski collection. His adventurous biography includes gold mining in Alaska and Chukotka, serving as the Governor of the Chukotka Peninsula, formally the administrator of the Northeast Siberia Company reporting to the Tsar, finally the tragic death (shot in Goldfield, Nevada, by a jealous husband of his sweetheart). In his preserved memoirs, Podhorski

reflects the colonial exploitation he was actively participating in. The picture of Chukotka his writing renders suggested our team to conduct a research at Uelen, a locality on the Chukchi coast bordering with the United States.⁹ The indigenous population there continues until today whaling and creating art pieces in walrus tusk, these coming directly from the source that small amulets attributed magic properties once were.¹⁰

The Yupik people, the Eskimo inhabiting the Chukotka coast, have relatives on the Alaska coast, however owing to geopolitics they have not been in touch with them for a long time. What we found important during the Chukotka fieldwork was the motif of spiritual praxis interpenetrating the relations with the sea and nature. The interviewees frequently emphasized how important it was to sustainably derive from the natural resources that renewed so slowly. In Podhorski's time the view in this respect was similar, however the local perspective, neither then, nor now, has been given any consideration. The photographs and descriptions by Konstanty Podhorski have become the departure point for the story of the Chukchi realities of the period; the material elaborated by Andrzej Dybczak is available at the digital repository.

Forest of phantoms

Two figurines whose inventory cards were the first to slip out of the Catalogue drawer became the inspiration to some

deepened research into the Collection. The mysterious character of those objects described as 'dolls' in the museum document intrigued us to the extent of willing to investigate to find out what these objects really were. Peculiar wooden creatures colourfully clad, also in threadbare furs, did not seem to be dolls, as could be read in their museum description. It was found out that they were cult figurines, donated to the collection of the National Museum in Cracow, which may have come from the Selkup people from around the Taz River. Donation of Jan Żurawski: this was the information contained on the museum card of those objects. The figurines really posed the greatest difficulties in trying to get through the lack of information. What enabled the undertaking of the field research with regard to those figurines was the preliminary research in Russian ethnographic collections, as well as the material brought to Oxford in 1915 by Maria Czaplicka. It is a long story in which one of the roles is played by the motif of violence of colonial undertone. The fact¹¹ that the objects were acquired for ethnographic collections of imperial museum institutions under pressure, taken without permission, stolen, that the created collections hid in the background dramatic vicissitudes of people stripped off the material elements of their culture, has been well identified in anthropology.¹² However, was this what Jan Żurawski did? It does not seem so.

Representations of the figurines were taken to the settlements on the Taz River, to Ratta and the localities around. That was the region where the Selkups lived in the forest with reindeer herds. The whole story of the research has been described by their author Andrzej Dybczak. Its presentation in the digital repository has been enriched with videos, e.g. the conversation with Pavel Kuboliev, an elderly



4. Element of a Nenet female wedding outfit, Izydor Sobański's donation, collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow



5. Female residents of Oma, Nenets Autonomous Okrug



6. Residents of Uelen in Chukotka divide the grey whale they have hunted

resident of Ratta who decided to help identify the objects, and told us about their properties. The role of the forest, the interpenetration of the daily life with shamanic praxes, all this was revealed in the course of in-field research. If we want to stay faithful to the Selkup interpretation, the figurines have never become museum objects, since shaman figures belong to the shaman forever. Can the local ontology of this kind make presence in the contemporary museum context? This is one of the most intriguing questions that came to the researchers' mind.

Digital repository

The whole Siberian Collection has been shared in the form of a digital database at www.etnomuzeum.eu/syberia, namely the website of the Cracow Ethnographic Museum. Its presentation has been highlighted with numerous multimedia elements created on the basis of the source materials from fieldwork: audio and video recordings. There, we will find information on particular Collection elements derived from inventory cards, visual documentation, and in many a case, also the content enriched with the materials from the recently conducted research. A search engine is a useful tool allowing to move through all this material. The digital repository is continuously developed, since the fieldwork material is worth presenting all of its content.¹³

Some particularly interesting exhibits are accompanied by an especially extensive video context from the in-field research. This part can be found in the 'Voices from the

Field' Tab. What can be seen in the videos are the contemporary realities in which people from the areas live; the material additionally sheds some light on the interpretation of the Collection objects. An interesting example in this respect is the Chukchi ball, a popular, though a mysterious object from the Konstanty Podhorski collection. The presentation allows us to see and hear voices of several female users of this kind of a ball; we will find out what games and plays are connected with the Chukchi mythology and spiritual practices, what kind of relations between man and nature the ball reveals. As for the story of the Aleut drum from the Benedykt Dybowski collection, we can see contexts of the contemporary use of drums, a more extensive story of the role that their sound and definite practices play, and how important reunions are during which the songs of the Chukchi coast unite the local community of Uelen.

The place at the repository which in the most exhaustive manner renders the experimental character of the knowledge at the point where museum resources and ethnographic and anthropological practices meet is the part in which we find longer stories about the puzzles contained in the Collection. The above-given four areas of research, thus the Kamchatka collection of Benedykt Dybowski, the Nenets wedding garments from Izydor Sobański's collection, the Chukchi collection of Konstanty Podhorski, as well as two Selkup cult figurines most thoroughly present the story of the work with the Collection. They show what emerged during the wandering in search of its traces, which is at the same time a trip into the past and



7. Vitaliy Boyakin, vicinity of Ratta, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug

(Photos: 1, 2, 5-7 – A. Dybczak; 3, 4 – M. Wąsik)

the present. This perspective outlines the horizon of the impact of old ethnographic collections, their profoundly anthropological character which allows to treat them as a tool to create and discover interpersonal relations.

A shared place

The MEK Siberian Collection is a challenge as the domain of work with Polish culture heritage. Anthropological reinterpretation of the ethnographic collection allows to shed more light on their importance as enlivening and establishing relations, showing how much can connect people involved in the circulation of this collection: inhabitants of the places from which the collections come, donors, guardians of the collections, contemporary public. Thanks to the retackled interpretative work, we can demonstrate the kinds of these connections. Many today's ethnographic museums launch the reinterpretation of the collections that form their core; the colonial conditionings and historical contexts are then often considered. What is appreciated in these practices is the direct contact with the people whom the collection concerns; its elements had been generally related to their

identity before they became anchored in the museum reality. The described work with MEK's Siberian Collection remains in line with the practices aimed at incorporating this kind of a perspective into the narrative of the collection.

To conclude the analysis of the experience drawn from the implementation of the research into the Siberian Collection, let us emphasize that this type of immersing in the reality to which collection objects are the key, allows to document our contemporary time, and reveals what connects people living in different places. Discovering images and voices from the past by today's inhabitants of Siberia descending from the Collections' source communities, and who through our cooperation came into contact with its objects, constitutes an important aspect of the heritage impact. Our contacts demonstrated that for many of them the heritage was a living value. The interpersonal connections shown by the unobvious thread of the Collection causes that an ethnographic museum becomes a shared place in the broadest meaning of the word.

Abstract: The paper presents the results of the academic museum Project called *Anthropological reinterpretation of the Siberian collections from the Ethnographic Museum*

in Cracow that came from Polish 19th-century explorers of Siberia financed by the National Programme for the Development of Humanities (2016–2019). Four major topics

of investigation among the collections' source communities have been presented: Benedykt Dybowski's collection from Kamchatka, Konstanty Podhorski's collection from Chukotka, Nenets' clothing donated by Izidor Sobański, and two cult figurines which reached the Cracow Museum from Jan Żurakowski. The presentation reveals the assumptions of the in-field museology: the method combining the

anthropological perspective with museology elements. Furthermore, the digital repository www.etnomuzeum.eu/syberia is discussed; it is the one that makes the collections and research results available online. The paper may prove of interest to professionals curating collections, culture researchers, historians, cultural anthropologists, art historian, conservation services, museology theoreticians.

Keywords: collection, Siberia, ethnographic museum, research, museology.

Endnotes

- ¹ A. Nadolska-Styczyńska, *Pośród zabytków z odległych stron. Muzealnicy i polskie etnograficzne kolekcje pozaeuropejskie* [Among Historic Monuments from Distant Corners of the World. Museum Curators and Polish Ethnographic Non-European Collections], Toruń 2011, pp. 141-156.
- ² The Project *Anthropological reinterpretation of the Siberian collections from the Ethnographic Museum in Cracow that came from Polish 19th-century explorers of Siberia* ranked among 18 projects awarded in the category: 'Innovatory research project that proposes a genuine solution to important and topical problems of Polish Culture' as part of the 'Development' Contest of the National Programme of the Development of Humanities of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.
- ³ The example can be found in the examination of the Aleut parka from the Benedykt Dybowski collection consisting in the metagenomic analysis and the assessment of the biodiversity of the microflora, along with conservation recommendations by Tomasz Lech PhD.
- ⁴ The concept used by James Clifford after Mary Louis Pratt, critically analysed by Robin Boast in the paper *Neo-colonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited*, 'Museum Anthropology' 2011, 34 (1) [Accessed: 17 March 2020].
- ⁵ This is a fragment of the title of the essay published by Benedykt Dybowski, *Próba pomyślna przesiedlenia renów z Kamchatki na wyspę Behringa morza Kamczackiego* [A Successful Attempt at Relocating Reindeer from Kamchatka to the Bering Island in the Kamchatka Sea], 'Pamiętnik Fizjograficzny' 1915, Vol. XXV.
- ⁶ G. Brzęk, *Benedykt Dybowski. Życie i dzieło* [Benedykt Dybowski. Life and Work], Warszawa-Wrocław 1994.
- ⁷ *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* [Polish Biographic Dictionary], Vol. 11, Wrocław 1964-1965, pp. 456-7.
- ⁸ G. Kubica-Heller, *Polskie spojrzenie kolonialne? Księżę Podhorski po obu stronach Cieśniny Beringa* [A Polish Colonial Perspective? Prince Podhorski on Both Sides of the Bering Strait]; MS in the Project's archive (MEK); T. Epsztejn, *Z piórem i paletą. Zainteresowania intelektualne i artystyczne ziemiaństwa polskiego na Ukrainie w II połowie XIX wieku* [With a Pen and a Palette. Intellectual and Artistic Interests of Polish Landed Gentry in the Ukraine in the Second Half of the 19th Century], Warszawa 2005.
- ⁹ On the rich contexts of the cultural circulation of this borderland e.g. in: *Crossroads of Continents. Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*, W. Wiliam (ed.), Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell, Washington 1988.
- ¹⁰ M. Bronhstein, I. Karakhan, J. Shirokov, *Bone carving in Uelen. The folk art of Chukchi Peninsula*, Anadyr-Moscow 2002.
- ¹¹ See more on the context of the Siberian Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford: G. Kubica, *Maria Czaplicka: Płec, Szamanizm, Rasa. Biografia Antropologiczna* [Maria Czaplicka: Sex, Shamanism, Race. Anthropological Biography], Kraków 2015.
- ¹² See. *Ishi in Three Centuries*, K. Kroeber, C. Kroeber (ed.), Nebraska-London 2003; T. Kroeber, *Ishi człowiek dwóch światów* [Ishi, Man of Two Worlds], J. Mroczkowska (transl.), Kraków 1978.
- ¹³ The results of the research will be presented as temporary Exhibition: 'Siberia. The Voice from the North' at MEK; the launch is planned for autumn 2020.

Magdalena Zych

Curator at the Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Cracow, (since 2009) she e.g. has been coordinating research projects and mounting exhibitions; in the MEK Project (2016–2020) on the Siberian Collection she has been responsible for the museological aspect within a proprietary programme of in-field museology, she initiates and runs projects related to cultural anthropology and museology; she headed research teams: of 'dzieło-działka' (allotment research project, 2009–2012), 'Weddings 21' (2009–15); (2016–2019) participant of the TRACES consortium, co-author of the Exhibition 'Terribly Close. Polish Vernacular Artists Face the Holocaust'; e-mail: zych@etnomuzeum.eu

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