

Franz Strauch, “On the Question of Exporting Natives from the German Colonies for Exhibition Purposes” (1900)

Abstract

In this memorandum, which was printed in three installments in the *German Colonial Newspaper*, Executive Vice President of the German Colonial Society Franz Strauch (1846–1928) denounced human zoos. His paper was presented at the conference of the German Colonial Society in Coblenz in June 1900. Strauch argued that exhibiting “exotic peoples” [*exotische Völkerschaften*] served no scientific purposes and was only a matter of moneymaking. True ethnographic insights, he believed, were gained only by field observation. Moreover, he reported on the decision of the German Colonial Society of Metz to abolish the “export” of native peoples from the German colonies to Germany, a decision that triggered outrage from zoological gardens. Strauch condemned human zoos, not least because he believed that Europeans exerted a negative influence on exotic peoples. His attitude towards people from Africa and the South Seas was far from enlightened, however. He was possessed of a paternalistic and colonial mindset and wanted to maintain the rule of the “white man” over colonial subjects.

Source

By Rear Admiral Strauch (retired).

Exhibitions of members of exotic peoples in Germany, particularly in Berlin, are nothing new and are thus unrelated to the acquisition of colonies by the German Empire. Before 1878, such exhibitions took place only occasionally. In 1878, they not only became more frequent but also assumed a certain regularity, and today they are a permanent fixture among the “amusements” of Germany’s larger cities, especially Berlin. In former times, natives of our colonies were seldom recruited for such exhibitions. It is to be feared, however, that as soon as better connections are established to last year’s acquisitions in the South Seas, precisely those natives of our colonies will be used for exhibitions. That is bound to exert the most damaging influence on them, and the result will likely maximally diminish our reputation among the South Sea Islanders.

With a single exception, the entrepreneurs who exhibit troupes of exotic tribes have not been inclined to disseminate or increase anthropological knowledge. The purpose of such exhibitions is simply to make money. The German Colonial Society is not in a position to say how much this generally amounts to. Given the significant costs incurred in such undertakings, and in view of the great risk assumed by the entrepreneur, the revenues or profits must be quite considerable. Today, however, large profits cannot be achieved through the mere exhibition of exotic tribes alone. The allure of simply looking at natives in their traditional attire, in their customary jewelry, surrounded by their own weapons and tools, as they perform dances from their homeland, and so on, is no longer enough to attract sufficient spectators today. One thus grasps for suitable means to tempt the masses into attending. The natives are then dressed in a way that makes them laugh at themselves and at the gullible spectators; the natives learn dances that they have never performed before, etc., and so the public is deceived while the natives are debased.

There is no denying that such exhibitions have occasionally been of some limited use to science. Thus, for

example, all the exotic tribes exhibited in Berlin have been visited by members of the Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory at specially designated times, and specific individuals have been scientifically examined in different ways by experts of said society.

This was done so that no opportunity to promote science would be missed. For ethnology, however, only one opportunity, the 1896 Colonial Exhibition, has offered gains. Something more favorable may be said in the case of anthropology, but general speaking scientists no long consider such exhibitions to the extent that they did previously. Today, such scientific observations are better made on the spot, and with each passing day, this is done more frequently and more conveniently and above all more reliably.

[...]

By Rear Admiral Strauch (retired) [Continuation from No. 44]

[...]

The fear that natives of our colonies will subsequently become permanent members of such exhibitions, and concern over the consequences of the effects of these exhibitions on the natives prompted the Metz Division of the German Colonial Society to submit a motion at the last general assembly, held in Coblenz, to prohibit the export of natives from our colonies for exhibition purposes once and for all. This proposal received the general assembly's unanimous support. In other circles, however, the approved measure met with dissent. *The Comet* – “Organ for the Protection of the Interests of Owners of Attractions and Exhibitions of All Kinds” – declared, “the exhibition entrepreneur is the best cultural missionary in the homeland of foreign peoples,” and is indignant that these “cultural missionaries” should have their business interfered with. Since the *Comet* operates from this point of view, it will not be argued with here. Especially noteworthy, by contrast, is a pronouncement from another perspective. In complete ignorance of the actual course of the proceedings of the German Colonial Society, the management of the Zoological Garden in Berlin felt aggrieved by these negotiations and sent a letter to the daily newspapers, in which they justified the exhibition of Samoans in their zoo. This exhibition was only mentioned at the general assembly to correct one speaker's view that, “for Samoa, the export of natives is forbidden.” However, the German Colonial Society can only be grateful to the management of the Zoological Garden for their statement. After all, it shows just how poorly and inadequately the circumstances of half- or uncivilized tribes – meaning precisely the circumstances of the natives of our colonies – are often viewed from the “scientific perspective.”

[...]

By Rear Admiral Strauch (retired) [Continuation from No. 45]

[...]

As regrettable as it is to say, the poor civilizing influence that whites occasionally have on natives through exhibitions must be put forth as the primary argument against the exhibitions. Whoever has attended a majority of the aforementioned exhibitions cannot be in any doubt that the conduct of a disturbingly large number of whites at these exhibitions has the most pernicious influence on the natives and must damage the reputation of the whites, quite apart from the fact that by learning fake moves to perform for the spectators, most of the natives are already being made into liars. To go into details would be pointless and unnecessary. The natives also lack the ability to differentiate. At such exhibitions, they are not in a position to distinguish between the genuinely refined and the unrefined, and they project the behavior of the latter onto the whole. Respect for whites, as a whole, necessarily suffers as well. For the natives, the white man is still generally the master who stands high above them,

and we must ensure that he remains so, even if special measures are required. But even the truly refined often unconsciously make mistakes at such exhibitions. They spoil the natives. Even an indulgence made with the best intentions – that is, for a supposedly lasting beneficial effect on natives – harbors great risks. On returning to their homeland, such “spoiled” natives are generally ruined. They regard themselves as great lords and often become the most useless people. How often has it not already been emphasized that a simple native put on display has earned the special favor of the public, becoming a general favorite.

At the German Colonial Society’s general assembly in Coblenz, all the experts agreed on the adverse effects of the improper treatment of natives and were of the unanimous opinion that preventing such effects first required the elimination of exhibitions of natives and that prohibiting the export of natives for such purpose was not only desirable but necessary.

In this way, all other disadvantages associated with such exhibitions will also be eliminated.

Source: Rear Admiral Strauch (retired), “Zur Frage der Ausfuhr von Eingeborenen aus den deutschen Kolonien zum Zwecke der Schaustellung,” *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, No. 44, 17. Jahrgang. Berlin, 1. November 1900, p. 500; No. 45, 17. Jahrgang. Berlin, 8. November 1900, p. 512; No. 46, 17. Jahrgang. Berlin, 15. November 1900, p. 520. Available online at:

<http://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/kolonialbibliothek/periodical/titleinfo/7735735>

Translation: David Haney and GHI staff

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