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

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Abstract: This article analyses two peculiar cases of ‘otherness’ (alterity), as witnessed on stage at an exhibition of Chinese and African cultures presented by the Finnish Missionary Society from 1926–1928. This exhibition consisted of a man-made figure (re)presenting the Ovambo (African) culture of South-West Africa, in concert with Chinese figures who were made to represent the contemporary culture of China. Of note is the fact that the Chinese part of the exhibition was not as contemporary as proposed. In fact, it had imperial qualities. Both sections of the exhibition were ‘made-in-Finland’ type artificial representations which bordered on total inauthenticity as the organizers did not have anything more indigenous or native to the lands presented at hand. In short, they had to be both inventive and resourceful. In any case, the public (urban middle- and high-class, schoolchildren, teachers, academic and educated people in general) did not seem to care about the ambiguous mixture of apparent (‘white’) identity and (‘black’, Chinese) alterities as they were – for the most part – satisfied with the exhibition, which served as a very rare attraction in Finland at that time.
Keywords: missionary, exhibition, identity, alterity, authenticity, artificiality

INTRODUCTION

This article delves into how the process of staging living and replicated ‘others’ panned out, using two case studies as examples. Moreover, this analysis will also touch on how ‘others’ interacted with and related to their spectators. In particular, the theme of ‘otherness’ will be explored through a comprehensive analysis of two ‘novelty’ cases in which the Finnish (Evangelic Protestant) Missionary Society (est. 1859) invented substitutes in place of genuine ‘native Others’ for its large-scale series of missionary exhibitions of African and Chinese cultures from 1926–1928 in Helsinki. These exhibitions travelled around the main cities of Turku, Tampere, Oulu and Viipuri (Viborg).[1] The substitutes consisted of one African and one Chinese mannequin. In both

[1] It can be pointed out that Finland lies in the wide corridor between the West and the East, in the region which stretches from Lapland via the Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria to the Dardanelles.

cases, the urge to imply authenticity was paramount. These mannequins were incarnated in a particular manner. The purpose of staging the 'Other' as realistically as possible was in both cases the key motif, although it eventuated quite differently in practice for both sections and, as this analysis indicates, quite deceptively. Philosophically speaking, staging these exhibitions was about the manipulative transformation of identities to that of mixed alterities (Halmesvirta 2004:passim).

In terms of the historical background, the Finnish Missionary Society had a long-standing tradition of missionary work in both Africa and China. They founded their first mission station in Amboland in South-West Africa (presently Northern Namibia) at the end of the 1860s (Koivunen 2011:14). In the late 19th century, this region was part of a colony of the German Empire. The Finnish authorities had close contacts with the German officers there. Following World War I, however, this land was transferred to British rule. The Society struggled to deal with this shift. Ovambo uprisings were being crushed by South African military powers. 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 a second station in the Hunan province of South-East China in the early 20th century. The Society's activities were successful in terms of proselytizing. Consequently, the first missionary exhibition of Asian culture in Finland opened in 1911 in Helsinki. Relations with the Chinese became politically grounded when Finland and China sealed a treaty of friendship in 1926 (Koivunen 2011:14–15, 113), which created a secure foundation for the 1926–1928 exhibitions.

THE 'AFRICAN' MAN AND THE 'CHINAMAN'

Figure 1. The African section of the Exhibition of the Finnish Missionary Society 1926–1928 (photo: Museovirasto [National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki])

In urgent need of satisfying the curiosity of the public towards Africans and in order to enhance the didactic utility of missionary collections, life size mannequins of an African man and woman were designed by an unknown artist working for the Missionary Society. They were designed, in all likelihood, on the model of the indigenous people of Amboland (Ovambo). These mannequins were set against a large, three-meter canvas painting depicting Amboland scenery with African people performing their daily activities. The exhibition, designed by the Society and set in the local YMCA's quarters, gave the visitors a chance to compare what the mannequins looked like to that of the persons depicted in the painting. However, a deceptive illusion was hidden behind this conglomerate. Despite the intended resemblance, the male mannequin's alterity was double-layered (Fig. 1), as it was originally a white mannequin. The artist painted him pitch black, attached black curly hair to the mannequin's head, and richly decorated the mannequin in an apparent Ovambo style. The mannequin's face was covered with flashy make-up, serving as an interesting addition to the backdrop of the Ovambo scenery. The result was a kind of pseudo-Ovambo milieu resembling later advertisements of liquorice showing 'funny Blacks'. The mannequin had thus taken on an artificial alterity as blackness was indiscriminately painted onto a 'white' identity (like when Afro-Americans powdered themselves white in order to hide their blackness). However, the transformation remained incomplete. For example, the head of the white mannequin was not formed into a black one according to the 'racial' standards of craniology at that time.[2] Nevertheless, the mannequins were made to represent *all* Africans. The second, enlarged alterity imposed on them was that the village reconstructed in front of them represented African societies in general.

In comparison with most ethnic shows or ethnological exhibitions where living people in their everyday attire were displayed in front of the public, the organizers of the missionary exhibition substituted living people (i.e., models of the real African 'otherness'; 'black' identity) with replicas. These replicas were equipped with proper African cultural paraphernalia to be viewed and examined in detail by ordinary visitors. One might wonder whether physical anthropologists or other experts in human studies who visited the exhibition ever noticed the various shades of fake alterities present in these exhibitions. At some point, the public might have seen 'Black' people in real life. Here, they only had the replica of the 'black' man to be studied, since, as the photo of the African section of the exhibition shows (Fig. 1), the black woman went missing at some point. It is not known where she was taken. It is, however, known that the black male mannequin was stored for a few decades. It was held at the Missionary Museum, which was established in 1929 in Helsinki following the exhibition.

[2] The contemporary racial classification of the human species into 'White, Yellow and Black' 'races' was largely accepted in scholarly circles at that time. In Finland, this was also the case. This left Finns themselves between the Yellow and White categories, 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 were 'inferior' and 'superior' races in the world. Nevertheless, the 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.


LASTEN LÄHETYS LEHTI

N:o 2. | Helmikuu 1926. | 27 vuosik.

Kiinalainen pastori Ho.

Täällä Suomessa on joulunaikana ja tammikuun alkupuolella vierailut kaukainen vieras, kiinalainen pastori Ho. Hänen kuvansa näette tässä. Hän on tullut kaukaa, siitä maasta, jota raamatussamme sanotaan Siniimmaaksi.

Hän on nuorena poikasena ollut kaukana Jumalasta pakanuudessa. Lähetyssaarnaajien kautta hän on päässyt läheille Jeesusta Kristusta, rakasta Vapahtajaamme. Nyt hän puhuu mielellään Jeesuksesta.

Figure 2. Lasten lähetyslehti [Children's Missionary News], 1926, 27 (2), front cover

Notwithstanding all the deficiencies and duplicities created in the composition of the 'black' alterity, the replica of the 'black' man was evidently just as exciting an exhibit in the eyes of the spectators as a real 'black' man would have been. The replica gained much praise for its supposed resemblance to the people of Ovambo in the local press. It was such a rarity that it was – in and of itself – enough to satisfy Finnish curiosity. The rest was left up to one's imagination. For instance, one could envision the 'Black man' working in his village the same way the figures were represented on the painted canvas. This gave him a familiar, humanized exhibitory role, irrespective of how much he was detached from his original context and how static he was as a mannequin. It was as if visitors did not want to doubt that this 'Black man' was a fake. Moreover, 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 apparent alterity fulfilled its mission (see below: reception).

In the second case, a Christian, Evangelic pastor, Mr. Ho-Ye-Sen from China who visited Finland in January 1926 was persuaded, along with another Chinese person, to play the role of the Chinese 'other' in the exhibition. He also served as a guide and a greeter at the exhibition.

As one can see in the photo above (Fig. 2), he wore Western, gentlemanly attire (suit, white collar, tie, glasses, etc.). Insofar as the black mannequin at least showed contemporaneity, the entire Chinese section depicted the Chinese in the Imperial age. The age was not specified, and the costumes brought by the Society from China were not uniform (i.e., not in their 1920s westernized composure). In addition to the anachronistic appearance of Mr. Ho in the exhibition, a touching description of the converted and westernized Chinaman was given in the Children's Missionary News, directed at Finnish children:

> "At 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 the description provided contradictory meanings of the Chinese alterity: the exhibition situated Mr. Ho back (perhaps playfully) in a non-Christian, lost age. Meanwhile, the Children's Missionary News 'transported' him in a sense to the modern times. They rendered him in a western way, giving him a gentlemanly identity. To nail this message down even more, a moving image of proselytizing among the Chinese and Africans was printed on the cover of the Children's Missionary News, in which children from the 'West' (i.e., a Finnish girl and boy) offer the font to their pagan sister and brother who eagerly and joyfully receive it. This was an image that enhanced the innocence of the encounter with the implication that they were all children of 'God' bringing 'Glory' but leaving out 'Gold' – the ideological aspect of blatant imperialism that Finnish missionary work sought to avoid. The image makes the contemporary identification of 'White' and 'Yellow' almost complete, leaving to the 'Whites' the educational role to pursue it (see note 1).

Occasionally, organizers of the exhibition also put on imperial Chinese clothes to add to the illusionary aspect of the scenes, but they never tried to don the attire of the 'Blacks'. The Society invested a lot more effort and money in the Chinese impression than in the African one. This was likely done in order to emphasize the alleged cultural gap between the 'civilized but stagnated' Chinese and the 'primitive, savage' Africans, who were presented as such in contemporary ethnological/anthropological literature and travel books (for details, see Halmesvirta 1993:passim; Kemiläinen 1985:chapter II) as well as in the Finnish local press (Afrikkalais-kiinalainen näyttely 1927). Evidently, these viewings were a product of the times. From a comparative perspective, the Chinese section of the exhibition was mobile, as it sometimes staged living humans who would occasionally sing, whereas the African mannequin remained static without any signs of life (Koivunen 2011:17).

Also, this impression was prone to valorizing the dogma of the gradation of creation for the Evangelic missionaries, namely the Biblical division of human races: Ham, Seem, and Japheth. It is also of note that the western missionaries had proselytized all over the world before travelling became common. Thus, they played a significant role in formulating and disseminating ideas to foreign lands and to various spheres of the wider European public (Coombes 1994; Thorne 1999). It was through the artifacts collected, as well as the pictorial material and accounts produced by the Finnish Missionary Society, that the Finns got acquainted with these foreign cultures in the first place (Koivunen 2011:14). The role of the Society was a prominent step in this process because during the late 1920s, all the ethnographic collections at the Finnish National Museum stayed closed to the public. Finland was in a disadvantageous position, geographically speaking. It did not acquire as much material from foreign cultures as other countries did. This was on account of distance. For example, their Soviet (Finno-Ugric shows) or Swedish neighbors, along with their caravans transporting exotic specimens and curiosities of alien 'races', very rarely traversed through Finland.

Considering the climate of the times, members of the Finnish high-middle class, ladies and even gentlemen, might have been slightly 'frightened' at meeting someone different from themselves; this is evidently a time-specific suggestion. Ever still, the 'black' mannequin did not make any wild gestures, remaining harmless and speechless; thus, they could easily retain their posture of superiority (Halmesvirta 2006:11–23). Instead of being upset, they were fascinated by a 'close encounter' with this ornamentally

colorful object. Notice also the difference between a photo (here Fig. 1) and a replica; a photo might have been more accurate, whereas the mannequin stood at a very short distance from the viewer and appeared to be a concrete look-alike. The mannequin wore roughly the same costume as the men native to Amboland. A photo (i.e., Fig. 1) could not lie, whereas the black mannequin as replica inescapably lied, the likeness being an approximate, depending on the skills and intentions of the artist.

The organizers of the exhibitions actively took part in mediating and composing interpretations of the exhibits. This was surely the case within the context of the 1926–1928 exhibition as it had recourse to its own inventions (mannequins, photos) and adaptations, all set in place, in order to exhibit two foreign cultures.

THE RECEPTION

The Missionary Society's exhibition was a great success. The exhibition helped the Missionary Society recover from the economic difficulties they faced in the 1920s and early 1930s. From an educational point of view, the missionaries, their supporters, and the success they incurred, were testament to 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 so that it might be accessible for groups of schoolchildren, and additionally, during the afternoons for all the other visitors (Koivunen 2011:28).

It has been estimated that in Helsinki, which had cca. 200,000 inhabitants during the late 1920s, some 14,000 people saw the exhibition in just twenty days (Koivunen 2011:114–115). Along with visitors in other cities (the numbers from Oulu and Viipuri are missing), altogether approximately 30,000 people saw the exhibition (Koivunen 2011:114–115). This was indeed a great number of visitors, considering there were many other kinds of entertainment available (movies, sports, art exhibitions, markets, music halls, etc.) at that time. Specifically, the African section attracted men and the Chinese section attracted women. Nevertheless, the Chinese section was, at the very least, outwardly more interesting to the public as it contained a plethora of Chinese cultural paraphernalia. In comparison, the African exhibition was likely deemed too modest. This may have been the case because there was one issue with regards to the tour: neither the black mannequin nor Mr. Ho travelled outside Helsinki.

Evidently, there was a demand for this kind of exotic exhibition as it was more illustrative than educational forms of literature or journals. Moreover, it was tangible. The Society had advertised and informed the public about the tour using posters and exhibition catalogues. In order to ensure the attendance of the minority, it also sold entrance tickets in the Swedish language. The Society ensured wide press coverage of the event by sending newspapers press releases whose texts were reflected in the reviews of the exhibition (Koivunen 2011:29).

Most of the reviews of the exhibition were filled with praise as it provided viewers with unforgettable experiences. For example, in terms of *Kaleva,* a newspaper in Oulu, this exhibition was viewed and recorded as a rarity not to be seen in many years (Mielenkiintoinen näyttely N.M.K.Y:n huoneistossa 1927). There was at least one review containing vociferous critical comments. The comments were not exactly about the

exhibition itself but were rather indirectly critical of the modern lifestyle. A certain 'J.K.' writing for the missionary paper *Herättäjä* in Turku castigated the Chinese (imperial) culture. 'J.K' critiqued them as the "over-civilized acting up" and that what they were doing was "theatrical play". 'J.K' complained that these features could be found in the vanities of Western people as well. The African section of the exhibition aroused in this reviewer thoughts of a 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 the roots of the Western cult of nudity in the artifacts and pictures of African culture (although the black mannequin was not present). For 'J.K', they had somehow inspired the culture of night cafés and jazz clubs which threatened Christian chastity. It seemed that the Western man was sinking to the level of wild natives of nature ('J. K.' 1927). In the context of the layout of the exhibition, this judgment sounds exaggerated; the exhibition had nothing to do with 1930s popular culture and stayed within the limits of traditional ideas and prejudices about 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 the 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 Church Missionary Society in 1922 and held in the Royal Agricultural Hall in Islington, London), it was an achievement in and of itself if we take into account the recourses and possibilities of a Finnish operator, one who was not primarily business-oriented. Evidently, the organizers were pleased with what they had been able to gather, design and show. They were not running any large troupes of natives 'performing' or acting the part of their respective cultures. The exhibition purely consisted of only one mannequin and a couple of Chinese natives, an array of artifacts, some of which could even be compared with Finnish examples (Koivunen 2011:130). The success of the 1926–1928 exhibition series motivated the Society to establish its own missionary museum where their materials were deposited (still operating today). It is not known what ultimately happened to the black male mannequin.

Seen from the perspective of the identity/alterity dichotomy, one might conclude that artificiality – the made-in-Finland aspect – damaged the intended authenticity of the exhibition. The alterity to be shown did not comply with the standards of authenticity demanded and seen in exhibitions abroad, like Hagenbeck's ethnic shows in Hamburg. Identity (westernness, Finnishness) was mixed (confused) with alterity in certain important aspects, which could not have been hidden had there been a foreign specialist eye to closely examine them. The Chinese impression was more convincing but not up-to-date, while the African exhibition was authentic only in its artifacts dispersed around the scene. It is hard to tell how aware the organizers themselves were of the illusionary side of this exhibition. Nevertheless, they did their best, and at least they themselves did not openly complain of any mistakes they had made or falsity (fakeness) as a whole. Visitors did not pay attention to the somewhat haphazard interpretation of the invented

alterities imposed upon the exhibition by the organizers. Everything was extraordinary in their eyes. One final question begs an answer: when was a living 'Black' African individual first seen in Finland? Perhaps as late as the 1952 Olympic Games!?

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