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‘Tibetan Treasures’ of the Weltmuseum Wien: A First Critical Approach to René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz’s Policy of Collecting

Introduction

In the 1950s historical artefacts from the colonial era filled the shelves of European museums. These ‘colonial cultural objects’ are of “cultural or historical importance acquired without just compensation or involuntarily lost during the European colonial era”.¹ In this article² we examine a small selection of artefacts purchased by the Austrian³ Tibetologist and ethnographer René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (*29.6.1923 Groß-Hoschütz, †9.7.1959 Vienna) during his journeys to Asia in the 1950s. Nebesky-Wojkowitz realised the importance of documenting the cultures of Tibet and Nepal and of disseminating this particular knowledge in Europe quite early in his career. He was one of the first Western scholars who combined ethnographic fieldwork with the philological study of the Tibetan language and texts. Having developed close contacts with the local populations, he documented their rituals and spread the knowledge he gathered not only in scientific journals and academic lectures but also in popular radio broadcasts, films and exhibitions. During his three expeditions in South Asia (1950-1953, 1956-1957 and 1958-1959) he became a collector of ethnographic and artistic artefacts especially for the Museum für Völkerkunde, (now Weltmuseum Wien)⁴.

In the Post-World-War-II era the whole Himalayan region experienced a period of significant political and social changes. The colonial hegemony of the British in South Asia was collapsing. India gained independence in 1947, the power of the long-standing autocratic Rana dynasty in Nepal was waning and the first waves of Tibetan diaspora were arriving in North India and Nepal culminating in the flight of the 14th Dalai Lama into Indian exile in 1959.

The paper intends to be the first critical approach to Nebesky-Wojkowitz’s method of collecting and acquiring art objects and material culture during a time of turmoil and political instability in South Asia. We will scrutinise whether his collecting activities were still dominated by the influence of colonial period thinking

(Austria was arguably never considered a colonial power) or, in other words, if there is any indication of a “colonial collecting practice”, which according to van Beurden lies in the degree of equality between the local stakeholder and the person who acquires the object.⁵ We will focus on two different examples, oddities and highlights of Nebesky-Wojkowitz’s Lepcha and Tibet material, to show the diversity of his collecting policy.

René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz

René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (fig. 1), famous for his indispensable book *Oracles and Demons of Tibet – The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*⁶, began his studies of Tibetan and Mongolian languages at the Oriental Institute of the University of Vienna just after the end of World War II. Nebesky-Wojkowitz was influenced by his teacher Robert Bleichsteiner – linguist, ethnographer and director of the Museum für Völkerkunde in 1945, where Nebesky-Wojkowitz worked as an intern since the beginning of his stay in Vienna.



Fig. 1: René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz

During his early work in the museum he developed a keen interest in ethnology, in which he later pursued a degree at the Institute for Ethnography⁷ mentored by Wilhelm Koppers and Josef Haekel. In 1949 he obtained a PhD with a dissertation on Tibetan writing, paper-making and printing⁸ at the Oriental Institute. He completed his habilitation with the above-mentioned monograph on Tibetan protective deities at the Institute of Ethnography in 1955. This book has since been the standard work of reference on the subject in the field of Tibetan studies.⁹ As a student he had already started writing scientific articles for the museum's journal *Archiv für Völkerkunde*.¹⁰ By the time of his unexpected death in 1959, he published a substantial number of diverse and groundbreaking texts which brought him the reputation as the founding father of Himalayan anthropology.

The Nebesky-Wojkowitz Collections at the Weltmuseum Wien

The Weltmuseum Wien owns about 840 objects¹¹ collected by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, either directly commissioned by the museum or later purchased from him. In 1961 another 78 objects from his estate were sold to the museum by his father Gottlieb who also handed over his son's notebooks, tape recordings, film material and photographs (negatives and slides)¹² to the museum. Approximately 12% of the Weltmuseum's South Asia, Southeast Asia, Himalayas collection was purchased by Nebesky-Wojkowitz and more than two-thirds of the museum's items from Nepal were collected by him. Only a few of these objects have been scientifically studied, exhibited or even published.

The most useful information on the collected items are two articles and one small museum catalogue written by Nebesky-Wojkowitz himself. The first essay is dedicated to his purchases made in Sikkim¹³ and the second deals with the general collection of Tibetan manuscripts in the Weltmuseum in the 1950s.¹⁴ The catalogue of a Nepal exhibition which was opened in November 1957 presents several collected objects from his first two journeys and shows the great religious and cultural variety of ethnic groups in Nepal and the

Himalayan borderlands.¹⁵ From 2009 to November 2014, a couple of Nebesky-Wojkowitz's collected artefacts were part of the permanent exhibition *Götterbilder* in the Weltmuseum.¹⁶ In 2013, a subset consisting of about 30 objects, mainly ritual objects and Tibetan painted scrolls (*thangkas*), were shown in the context of the exhibition *BÖN. Geister aus Butter – Kunst & Ritual des alten Tibet* also at the Weltmuseum.¹⁷ Since September 2017 about ten objects have been on display in the museum's new permanent exhibition *A Village in the Mountains*.¹⁸

Nebesky-Wojkowitz's First Field Research in North-East India

Nebesky-Wojkowitz's first three-year journey to Asia from July 1950 to February 1953, initially as the secretary of the botanist and linguist Joseph Franz Karl Rock, then as a member of the expedition of Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark and finally as an independent researcher, led him mainly to Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal. Both cities were vivid places of contact and exchange for numerous important researchers and persons sharing diverse interests in Buddhism and Tibet at that time. As one of the very few foreigners who had entered and travelled in the mountainous regions of the Eastern Himalayas, he had direct contact with the local people as well as Tibetan refugees.

Nebesky-Wojkowitz planned his first research trip for 1949, but he could not carry it out due to the lack of financial support.¹⁹ In the following summer of 1950, his original plan to reach Tibet via Sikkim was blocked due to numerous political conflicts across the Himalayas, making some regions inaccessible for foreigners. In the Western Himalayas there were severe tensions between India and Pakistan (which in some areas of Kashmir exist until today). King Tribhuvan of Nepal, aiming at ending the power of the Rana oligarchy, had to flee to India. He returned to Kathmandu a year later, but Nepal remained closed for foreign researchers until 1953 because of the tense political situation. When the People's Republic of China occupied Tibet, a wave of Tibetans sought refugee status in Nepal and India. Consequently, the border between India and the

autonomous Kingdom of Sikkim was impassable. Nebesky-Wojkowitz's only chance to carry out his research was therefore restricted to the areas adjacent to Sikkim. He finally took up residence in Kalimpong for several months. Rethinking his initial plans and goals scuppered by the unchangeable political circumstances, he commented on his current situation that in the end the town of Kalimpong became the "best starting point" for traveling to the neighbouring areas.²⁰ Although Nebesky-Wojkowitz never had another chance to travel to Tibet, he became fascinated by its culture, traditions and art. His attention focused on all aspects of Tibetan religious life, which would later form the basis for his habilitation thesis. He intended to obtain objects, photographs and audio material destined to supplement the Tibetan collection of the Weltmuseum. For his own research, he produced sound recordings, which were supposed to enrich his teaching activities at the University of Vienna.

The study of early Tibetan beliefs induced him to do research on the living traditions of the Lepcha people. Nebesky-Wojkowitz was interested in the theory that the original religious practices of the Lepcha had an alleged relation to the Bon faith of Tibet.²¹ Although the Lepcha consider themselves to be the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim, their real origin is unclear: they have been presumed to originate either from the Chinese-Tibetan borderlands, from Burma or even from Mongolia.²² In the 1950s the main settlements of the Lepchas were in the Dzongu region right in the heart of Sikkim (fig. 2, marked green). Since the border between India and the kingdom was hermetically closed, Nebesky-Wojkowitz could not carry out his research in the main living area of the Lepchas. In order to find alternative places for his studies, he visited the valleys between Kalimpong and the border of Bhutan, where he was able to identify a number of Lepcha settlements in the valley of Git (fig. 2, marked orange). During his research he realised that the traditional objects used by the Lepcha were about to vanish, gradually being replaced by modern products of Nepalese, Indian, Chinese or even European origin. This triggered the establishment of a considerable collection of Lepcha artefacts in the Weltmuseum Wien. We can assume that this was a necessary step undertaken by Nebesky-

Wojkowitz to preserve the cultural heritage of the Lepcha before it was lost forever.

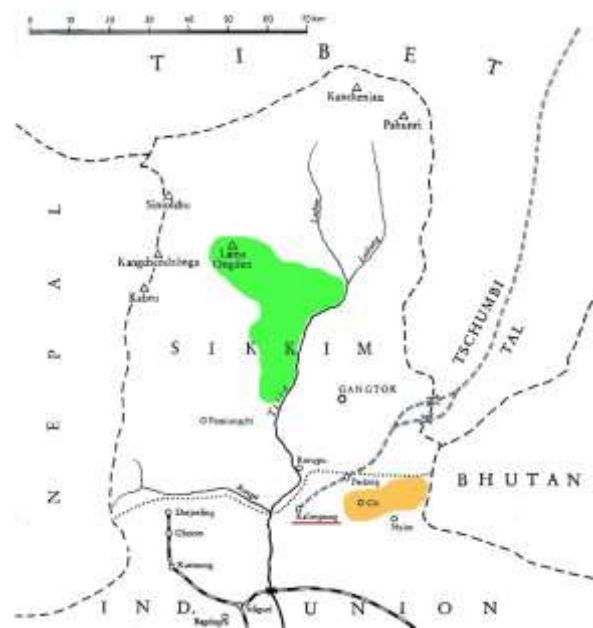


Fig. 2 Map of the Eastern Himalayas region and Lepcha settlements

Acquisition of Objects

During his first journey Nebesky-Wojkowitz purchased over 320 objects.²³ The highlights of the collection are some rare ritual objects and, above all, 73 texts, manuscripts and block-prints, some of which were cost-effectively copied or presented to him as gifts. Nebesky-Wojkowitz developed different strategies to obtain a great variety of objects for his collection and built up a wide network of intermediary dealers and local informants. Ritual objects and items of everyday life from the Lepcha community were acquired either by Nebesky-Wojkowitz himself during his travels on-site or through intermediate dealers. He obtained additional objects from Tibetan wool caravans while staying in Kalimpong during the winter months. Furthermore, he bought artefacts from Tibetan pilgrims, who sold these objects in order to finance their ways to the holy Buddhist places in India. And he also collected or purchased objects from Tibetan refugees in exile in Kalimpong. Nebesky-Wojkowitz describes this situation with the following words:

"The closest relatives of the Dalai Lama, most of the members of the Tibetan Government, members of prominent aristocratic families, and high dignitaries of

the Tibetan Buddhist church took refuge in Kalimpong. This provided a unique opportunity to establish close contacts with the ruling class of Tibet and to examine some of the treasures, especially ancient block-prints, manuscripts, and religious painted-scrolls [...] which the Tibetans had taken along on their flight".²⁴

More valuable artefacts that he found, such as the above mentioned precious Tibetan scroll paintings, were not purchased but only documented and photographed by him. In his field report from 1956, he declares that around 30 extraordinarily beautiful and rare Tibetan *thangkas* belonging to the Sikkimese noblemen were only photographed by him for archival purposes and in order to evaluate the Buddhist iconography.²⁵ The reason for not buying (or attempting to obtain) such precious objects, which were partly still in ritual use, was presumably not only because of ethical considerations but due to Nebesky-Wojkowitz's financial situation, which he mentioned in his letters and notes several times. Nebesky-Wojkowitz had to finance his journeys mainly on his own, expressing deep regret at his limited funds during his first trip:

"The fact that I had to finance my researches in the Himalayas myself and did not obtain any help from foundations, was unfortunately a considerable handicap for my work, since I had to devote a great part of my time to other activities – mainly the writing of popular articles – which provided the means for my stay. Under better financial circumstances the amount of material which I could have collected during this time would have certainly been by far greater".²⁶

Due to his limited financial resources, he was only able to buy objects of daily use with a relatively low artistic value. Nearly 50% of the objects are household items, material samples, potsherds, weapons and instruments of low quality and of inferior materials. Less than 5% are items of higher market value like paintings and jewellery, though these are not of the best quality. In March 1951 Nebesky-Wojkowitz got an advance payment of 1.826 Indian rupees from the Weltmuseum Wien for the acquisition of artefacts. A letter from Kalimpong addressed to the museum in December 1951 shows that he already spent more than half of the sum (1.000 rupees) for the purchase of several objects.

It also states that he used this sum as a first instalment for objects, which were specifically produced for him or to be bought by his middlemen in Sikkim. The money was for example needed for the production of a large "thread-cross" (fig. 3)²⁷, for the procurement of a complete garment of a Lepcha priestess, and for the fabrication of various Lepcha articles of daily use.



Fig. 3 Two Buddhist monks constructing a large "thread-cross"

Nebesky-Wojkowitz here clearly states that all further costs of these acquisitions had to be financed by his own private means.²⁸ A second letter addressed to the museum from April 1952 states that the first part of the purchased objects were to be sent to Vienna at the end of the month.²⁹ According to a handwritten note in the inventory book *Post XIII/1953*, the museum paid for Nebesky-Wojkowitz's collection from the first travel an amount of 10.000 Austrian Schillings in July 1953 after his return to Vienna.³⁰

'Tibetan Treasures' of the Weltmuseum Wien

Due to Nebesky-Wojkowitz's financial restrictions, his collection is not of great monetary value, but the selection of objects and the collected information concerning the context of the objects are rather unique. If we consider some items of low financial but high sentimental and ideological value, we can understand Nebesky-Wojkowitz's approach and his collecting method and also trace his sources of knowledge and contact persons.

According to van Beurden, the value of a cultural object can be practical, spiritual, symbolic, aesthetic or commercial or even a combination of these attributes. He claims that an object “can cause passion or fear, evoke a memory and bring people together”.³¹ Igor Kopytoff in turn describes an object with a certain use and social potential as a vital source of information.³² Objects that come from a colonised place are in particular historical sources and are inalienable, in Annette Weiner's words, “through [their] exclusive and cumulative identity with a particular series of owners through times”.³³ As for collecting objects and transferring them from the original cultural context to the museum context, we have to consider how these objects were acquired, who were the local agents in these acquisition processes and what were their motivations for offering or selling certain artefacts. Especially in the context of the current debates on cultural property in museum collections, it is a legitimate concern to differentiate between objects of private use and ownership and artefacts of collective patrimony that had been withdrawn from the local community.

Garment of a Lepcha Priestess

In this respect we want to discuss an item from the Nebesky-Wojkowitz collection, the garment of a Lepcha priestess (figs. 4-6). According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz's own assessment it is “the most important specimen of this [Lepcha] collection”.³⁴ The main sorcerers of the Lepcha are the female *Mun* and her male counterpart *Bong-thing*. During his stay in Kalimpong Nebesky-Wojkowitz published an article on the ancient funeral ceremonies of the Lepcha,³⁵ in which he describes the main functions of a *Mun* priestess. He received all information on the rituals from local informants or from living *Mun* and *Bong-thing* on his travels to the Git area near the borders of Bhutan.³⁶ Traditionally the position of a *Mun* priestess is inherited within the family. Her task is to perform numerous ceremonies and to carry out all rites connected with the important events in a Lepcha life such as protection against evil spirits, curing illnesses, etc.³⁷ For Nebesky-Wojkowitz as a researcher it was not enough to document the rituals in every detail and to capture the whole performance in photographs, audio records and films. But it seems to have become

more and more important for him to apply a lot of effort in the systematic gathering of objects from the ritual context itself. He intended to obtain the ritual equipment and dress of a Lepcha priestess, and indeed he was able to acquire parts of such an outfit from the family of the so-called “Norkit Leptchani from the village of Sekep”, who passed away a few years before.³⁸ This special *Mun* played a pivotal role in an annual ritual at the Royal Palace at Gangtok, in which she acted as the medium of the original Lepcha faith.³⁹ According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz's Lepcha informants, only two such garments were preserved in the Kingdom of Sikkim at that time.⁴⁰ The ritual costume consists of a bag with a strap decorated with eagle claws, bird beaks, teeth of wild animals and cowrie shells (fig. 4), a headdress with a plume of feathers (fig. 5) and parts of a prayer chain with a bell (fig. 6).



Fig. 4 Bag of a Lepcha priestess



Fig. 5 A plume of feathers from a headdress of a Lepcha priestess; 30 cm



Fig. 6 Parts of a rosary with a bell of a Lepcha priestess; 7 cm

We might ask how Nebesky-Wojkowitz could acquire pieces of great symbolic and religious meaning that might be considered as inalienable and timeless for the Lepcha community. In his essay, Nebesky-Wojkowitz reveals that within the funeral rites of the Lepcha people "the personal belongings of the dead are distributed among [... the] closer relatives".⁴¹ Therefore there is no doubt about the legality of the purchase from the family. We can only speculate about the intention of the relatives in handing over the inherited objects to Nebesky-Wojkowitz or his intermediary, respectively. There might have been no female descendants to whom the tasks of a *Mun* could have been assigned and therefore no further usage for the pieces. The family might have also been in urgent need of money. However, considering the asserted age of the ritual garment, we must assume that the objects had been passed down within the family from generation to

generation for more than three centuries before being given away to a foreigner.⁴²

In the above-mentioned article, Nebesky-Wojkowitz also explains that after the death of a *Mun* priestess "all [...] magical instruments and drugs [...] are] laid in the grave".⁴³ This raises some concern over a group of ritual instruments which are also now part of the Viennese collection: two magical wands (fig. 7). According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz, they are used by the sorceress during her lifetime and are normally placed on either side of her dead body inside the grave including a small wooden ladder (fig. 8), a funeral object intended to help the soul of the deceased *Mun* to rise again.⁴⁴ Without anticipating the worst or suspecting a rather dubious history behind this acquisition, there could be different reasons why these items were not buried with the Lepcha priestess and instead obtained by Nebesky-Wojkowitz.



Fig. 7 Magical wands of a Lepcha priestess; bamboo; 47 cm



Fig. 8 Small ladder serving as burial object; wood; 53 cm

One possible explanation is given by the scholar himself:

"Today, in consequence of Tibetan influence, the dead are burnt on pyres and the ashes immersed in a river. The Sikkimese [Buddhist] lamas, who introduced this custom, claim that by burning a dead one certainly avoids his soul becoming the victim of a malignant spirit and thus the old rites of freeing a soul from the power of a demon [...], which were formerly performed by a Mun, became unnecessary".⁴⁵

The influence and effect of Buddhism on the belief system of the Lepcha is also discussed by Jenny Bentley in an article about the vanishing culture and traditions of their community.⁴⁶ The mutual coexistence of the indigenous Lepcha practices and Tibetan Buddhism, which had been introduced to Sikkim already in the 16th century, became imbalanced when Tibetan Lamas of the Nyingma and Kagyü order fled from the Chinese invasion to Sikkim in the 1950s. They imposed their interpretations and spiritual ideas of Buddhism onto important rituals of the Lepcha such as healing and funeral rites, encroaching on the meaning and function of the *Mun* and *Bong-thing* at these occasions. Furthermore, by burning the body of a deceased Lepcha sorcerer instead of burying the corpse, the soul is prevented from coming back and possessing the descendants – which in the end terminates the lineage of the priests.⁴⁷ While Buddhism was predominantly adopted in the North of Sikkim, Christianity was spreading among the Lepcha in the South and in West Bengal. Nebesky-Wojkowitz accompanied monks of the Swiss Catholic mission on their travels to the Lepchas, and possibly also got in touch with evangelised inhabitants.⁴⁸ By taking advantage of the social situation and the conversion of local people to a new faith, Nebesky-Wojkowitz might have been able to gather such obsolete objects, to which the personal and spiritual relationship got lost. Alternatively, Nebesky-Wojkowitz commissioned the manufacture of copies of the objects he could not obtain because they were either too expensive or still in ritual or daily use or were beyond his reach due to the inaccessibility of certain areas for foreign researchers. For art historians and anthropologists this policy naturally raises the issue of authenticity and originality

of an artefact. It seems that for Nebesky-Wojkowitz the crucial point was neither the age of an object, nor its history-charged past nor its artistic value, but rather to convey its function, its meaning and its cultural context to the Western audience.

Thangka Paintings

This priority is indicated by his acquisition of four textile paintings with the representation of protective deities, now also kept at the Weltmuseum Wien. All of them are labelled as of Tibetan origin by Nebesky-Wojkowitz himself. In fact, he bought only one of them from refugees coming directly from Tibet: a 19th century *thangka*, depicting the mountain deity Nyenchen Thanglha (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Tibetan painted scroll of mountain deity Nyenchen Thanglha; Tibet; 19th century CE; pigments with a water miscible binder on cloth; 103x63 cm



Fig. 10 Painting of the Dharmapāla Dorje Setrab; 36x27 cm

The other three paintings are dedicated to the, according to Nebesky-Wojkowitz, “rarely depicted Tibetan protective deities” Dorje Setrab (fig. 10), Tshangpa Karpo, and Dorje Shugden. This set was commissioned by him to be “painted on [his] special orders” by the court-painter of the 9th Panchen Lama, who also was seeking refuge in Kalimpong.⁴⁹ On all four images, the central deities are shown frontally seated on their horses, each of them framed by a cloudy or flaming *mandorla* and surrounded by a mountainous landscape and smaller attending figures or animals. Offerings are placed in front of all of them. Apart from the same composition and distinctive stylistic features, the differences between the scroll imported from Tibet and the set produced in Kalimpong are evident at first glance. While the first one clearly shows traces of use referring to its historical background and religious function as a *rten*, a support for accomplishing Buddhist practices, the three others, bright and colourful, were never exposed to incense sticks or the soot of butter lamps. The missing textile frames, a major element of a finished and consecrated Tibetan scroll, reveal that the three images were never supposed to be used ritually. By employing a highly acknowledged Tibetan painter and Lama, well-trained during his religious education in a monastery, Nebesky-Wojkowitz could be sure that all

iconographic details were authentic and correctly depicted. We know nothing about the production process or the reasons for the selection of this topic. We may assume that the painter conducted all the necessary rites normally connected to the elaborated artistic and spiritual genesis of a *thangka*. However, the rare depictions of these three Buddhist figures also lies in the complex mystic nature of these deities, partly considered as ‘dangerous’ and therefore not supposed to be displayed in public.

Objects like these can hardly be derived from a specific cultural context or seen as active cult objects used by certain religious communities. Can these objects be authentic and sacred considering their iconography, devoted authors and their traditional manufacture process, although they were never meant to be used ritually and were mainly directed at the Western non-Buddhist audience? Or should they rather be regarded as unique pieces of art and the product of artistic expression commissioned and paid for by a European patron?

Nebesky-Wojkowitz's interest was most likely directed to getting visually-stunning pictorial depictions of these guardian deities, like the three illustrations of the sacred textual descriptions, that later should be published by him in *Oracles and Demons in Tibet*.⁵⁰ It is also worth noting that he did not keep the paintings for his personal collection but sold them to the museum just like most of the material that he purchased on his first journey to Asia.

Conclusion

The data and artefacts gathered by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz during his first field trip represent his invaluable knowledge of local traditions, rites and customs at a time of great political change in the Eastern Himalayas. They mainly document the daily life of different ethnic groups and their social and religious customs that were about to change or even vanish due to external impetus. While other European researchers such as the Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci often longed to acquire historically important and/or aesthetically pleasing antiquities, Nebesky-Wojkowitz was searching for authentic pieces that told a story and

revealed culturally relevant information. What was important to him was to extend the Viennese museum's collection with typical and significant objects that would contribute to enriching the Western imagination of the Himalayan communities. On his first research trip he either purchased them himself while getting in direct contact with the communities and documenting their rituals or with the help of intermediary dealers when access to the area of interest was restricted. The set of commissioned paintings was certainly an exception among his collection and does not reflect his usual acquisition practice. In various publications he repeatedly expressed his worries about the preservation of the endangered Himalayan heritage, but he certainly also profited from the difficult political circumstances and new religious tendencies which enabled him to obtain several objects of great spiritual and cultural value.

Can his concern for foreign cultures and the fear of the possible loss or destruction justify the removing of objects from their traditional context by bringing them to Europe? Or should it rather be seen as an act of cultural appropriation in the spirit of colonialism, believing that certain things are better preserved in European museums (often in dark storage rooms)?

It is difficult to judge the situation by modern standards, especially in the Wikipedia era when the role of the ethnographic museum as the conveyor of knowledge about ethnic groups is being reconsidered. However, one should not forget that Nebesky-Wojkowitz's research and journeys to faraway and 'exotic countries' received a lot of attention from the Austrian press in the 1950s. He became widely popular and was invited for interviews and radio broadcasts in Austria and Germany. Certainly proud of his collection – and perhaps also peering at other institutions – he was aiming at building the largest Eastern Himalayas collection of its kind. Unfortunately, in the last 60 years the fame of Nebesky-Wojkowitz and his extensive Sherpa, Lepcha and Newar collections in the Weltmuseum has faded and they do not get the attention they deserve. Nebesky-Wojkowitz's interdisciplinary approach to collecting artefacts and data which cuts across anthropology, history, religion, art history,

philology and social studies remains exceptional and it is a legacy which is yet to be explored by future generations.

Endnotes

1. Jos van Beurden, *Treasures in Trusted Hands – Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects*, Leiden 2017, p. 39.
2. The paper was first presented at the *2nd Conference of the European Association for Asian Art and Archaeology (EAAA)* at Zurich (Switzerland) in August 2017. We thank Regina Höfer for kindly organising and accepting our paper for the panel "Colonial Collecting Practices of Tibetan Art and Material Culture" and her patient encouragement. The research upon which this essay is based is part of a research project on the scientific legacy of the Austrian Tibetologist and ethnographer René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (FWF P-31570), that started in October 2018. We would also like to take the opportunity to express our gratitude to Dr. Christian Schicklgruber (director of the Weltmuseum Wien) for his kind support. We are equally indebted to Martin Gaenszle, Jan Korbelik, Marija Grujovska, Sarah Teetor, Natasha Kimmet and especially Regina Höfer for many useful observations and corrections.
3. Czechoslovakian-born René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz was granted the Austrian citizenship in 1948 on the basis of the State Interests Declaration issued by the Federal Ministry for Education (René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Schriftwesen, Papierherstellung und Buchdruck bei den Tibetern*, doctoral dissertation, University of Vienna 1949, p. 110).
4. In April 2013 the former Museum für Völkerkunde was renamed Weltmuseum Wien.
5. van Beurden 2017, *Treasures in Trusted Hands – Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects*, p. 40.
6. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Der Kult und die Ikonographie der tibetischen Schutzgottheiten*, habilitation, University of Vienna 1955; René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet. The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*, The Hague 1956.
7. Today's Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna.
8. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Schriftwesen, Papierherstellung und Buchdruck bei den Tibetern*.
9. Per Kvaerne, *Introduction*, in: *Oracles and Demons of Tibet. The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*, René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, The Hague 1956 (Graz repr. 1975), p. III*–XIX*.
10. The series started in 1946 and was from the beginning sponsored and published by the Verein der Freunde der Völkerkunde and the Museum für Völkerkunde.
11. According to the annual inventory books of the South Asia, Southeast Asia, Himalayas collection of the Weltmuseum Wien one finds the following written records about his collected objects: 1953 (Post XIII, inv. nos. 134.272-134.483), 1957 (Post XI, inv. nos. 136.744-136.983), 1959 (Post III, inv. nos. 138.498-138.802), and 1961 (Post XII, inv. nos. 140.775-140.852).
12. 116 slides (inv. nos. 31.271-31.385, format 8x8 cm) and 116 negatives (inv. nos. 25.756, 27.903, 27.904, 28.474-28.563, 29.019) from 1950-1953; 305 slides from 1956-1957 and 610 slides from 1958-1959 (inv. no. 32.000-32.908, format 5x5 cm).

13. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Neuerwerbungen aus Sikkim und Tibet*, in: Archiv für Völkerkunde, no. IIX, 1953, p. 269-272.
14. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Block Prints and Manuscripts in Possession of the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna*, in: Archiv für Völkerkunde, no. XII, 1958, p. 174-209.
15. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz and Hans Fürst, *Nepal – Sonderausstellung im Museum für Völkerkunde*, Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna 1957.
16. Christian Schicklgruber, *Götterbilder: Südasiens, Südostasiens, Himalayaländer*, Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna 2009, p. 54.
17. The one-month exhibition was accompanied by daily live Bon rituals especially for the New Year celebration and was co-curated by Uwe Niebuhr in his position as research associate in a project on the Bon religion. The research and the exhibition were generously funded by the Austrian Science Fund. See also: Text, Art and Performance in Bon Ritual (FWF-P 24701-G21; 12/2012-6/2016); cf. Deborah Klimburg-Salter et al., *BÖN. Geister aus Butter – Kunst & Ritual des alten Tibet*, Vienna 2013.
18. www.weltmuseumwien.at/schausammlung/#ein-dorf-in-den-bergen, 01-02-2018.
19. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Wo Berge Götter sind*, Stuttgart 1955, p. 94-95.
20. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *A report on ethnographical research in the Sikkim Himalayas 1950 to 1953*, in: Wiener Völkerkundliche Mitteilungen, vol. 2, no. 1, 1954, p. 33-38.
21. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1954, *A report on ethnographical research in the Sikkim Himalayas 1950 to 1953*, p. 36.
22. Barbara A. West, *Encyclopedia of the peoples of Asia and Oceania*, New York 2009.
23. In the inventory books, however, only 220 numbers are listed, since groups of block-prints and manuscripts were combined into bundles.
24. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1954, *A report on ethnographical research in the Sikkim Himalayas 1950 to 1953*, p. 34.
25. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Ergebnisse der 2. Forschungsreise nach Nepal und Sikkim 1956/57*, in: Wiener Völkerkundliche Mitteilungen, vol. 4, no. 2, 1956, p. 214.
26. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1954, *A report on ethnographical research in the Sikkim Himalayas 1950 to 1953*, p. 38.
27. These "thread-crosses" or *dö* (Tib. *mdos*) are dedicated to a special class of deities or "demons", and they can serve as a kind of trap for respective evil spirits. But they can also symbolise a temporary legendary heaven, in which the deity is supposed to reside.
28. Letter from Kalimpong, 15.12.1951, Sammlerakt of the Museum für Völkerkunde.
29. Letter from Kalimpong, 15.04.1952, Sammlerakt of the Museum für Völkerkunde.
30. Converted into today's currency and considering the inflation, the sum of 10.000 Schillings seems to be an appropriate amount probably covering most of the costs of acquisition but certainly not the travel expenses of Nebesky-Wojkowitz.
31. van Beurden 2017, *Treasures in Trusted Hands – Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects*, p. 35.
32. Igor Kopytoff, *The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process*, in: *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai (ed.). Cambridge 1986, p. 64-91.
33. Annette B. Weiner, *Inalienable possessions – The paradox of keeping while giving*, Berkeley 1992, p. 33.
34. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1954, *A report on ethnographical research in the Sikkim Himalayas 1950 to 1953*, p. 37.
35. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas*, in: *The Eastern Anthropologist*, vol. V, no. 1, 1952, p. 27-40.
36. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1954, *A report on ethnographical research in the Sikkim Himalayas 1950 to 1953*, p. 37.
37. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1952, *Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas*, p. 30.
38. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1953, *Neuerwerbungen aus Sikkim und Tibet*, p. 270.
39. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (ed. by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf), *Tibetan religious dances: Tibetan text and annotated translation of the 'Chams yig*, The Hague 1976, p. 21-22.
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41. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1952, *Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas*, p. 34.
42. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1953, *Neuerwerbungen aus Sikkim und Tibet*, p. 270.
43. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1952, *Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas*, p. 35-36.
44. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1952, *Ancient Funeral Ceremonies of the Lepchas*, p. 36.
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46. Jenny Bentley, *Change and cultural revival in a mountain community of Sikkim*, in: *Bulletin of Tibetology*, vol. 43, no. 1 and 2, 2007, p. 59-80.
47. Bentley 2007, *Change and cultural revival in a mountain community of Sikkim*, p. 63-64.
48. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1954, *A report on ethnographical research in the Sikkim Himalayas 1950 to 1953*, p. 37.
49. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1954, *A report on ethnographical research in the Sikkim Himalayas 1950 to 1953*, p. 35.
50. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet. The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*, The Hague 1956 (Kathmandu repr. 1993), pl. IV-VI.

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Fig. 1 Bildarchiv der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, photo by Hertha Schulda-Müller, inv. no. 226.496, (Deborah Klimburg-Salter et al., *BÖN. Geister aus Butter – Kunst & Ritual des alten Tibet*. Vienna 2013, p. 101)

Fig. 2 René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Wo Berge Götter sind*. Stuttgart 1955. With modifications by Niebuhr

Fig. 3 KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien, inv. no. 31.383. (René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Wo Berge Götter sind*. Stuttgart 1955, p. 160-161)

Fig. 4 KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien, inv. no. 134.398

Fig. 5, KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien, photo by Karl Pani, inv. no. 134.378, (Deborah Klimburg-Salter et al. 2013, *BÖN. Geister aus Butter – Kunst & Ritual des alten Tibet*, p. 92)

Fig. 6 KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien, inv. no. 134.399

Fig. 7 KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien, photo by Karl Pani, inv. no. 134.383 and 134.384, (Deborah Klimburg-Salter et al. 2013, *BÖN. Geister aus Butter – Kunst & Ritual des alten Tibet*, p. 94)

Fig. 8 KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien, inv. no. 134.385, (Deborah Klimburg-Salter et al. 2013, *BÖN. Geister aus Butter – Kunst & Ritual des alten Tibet*, p. 91)

Fig. 9 KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien, inv. no.

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Fig. 10 KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien, photo by Karl Pani, inv. no. 134.450, (Deborah Klimburg-Salter et al. 2013, *BÖN. Geister aus Butter – Kunst & Ritual des alten Tibet*, p. 103)

Summary

The Austrian tibetologist and ethnographer René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz purchased a significant part of the Tibetan collection at the Weltmuseum Wien during his three field trips to South Asia in the 1950s. Famous for his indispensable book *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* (1956), Nebesky-Wojkowitz started his studies at the University of Vienna right after World War II, at a time when a paradigm shift took place in the field of ethnology, bringing in a new historic-empirical orientation to the discipline. The initial phase of his first journey to Kalimpong between 1950 and 1953 was characterised by his membership in the expedition of Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark. Kalimpong (West Bengal) was a meeting place for numerous important researchers sharing diverse interests in Buddhism and the Tibetan culture. Although Nebesky-Wojkowitz never had the chance to enter Tibet, he became fascinated with Tibetan culture, religion and art. As one of the very few foreigners who travelled in the mountainous regions of the Eastern Himalayas he came in direct contact with the local population and Tibetan refugees, collecting large numbers of objects and artefacts of ethnological, ritual and art historical relevance. This essay is the first critical analysis of Nebesky-Wojkowitz's method of collecting Tibetan objects and data (outside of Tibet).

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Title

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