

Beatrice Voirol: “Winding Paths: Ethnography of the *Melo* shell in Papua/Indonesia”

Universitätsverlag Göttingen, Göttingen, 2011

Contents

- The *Melo* and I – a postmodern ethnography
- About the construction of maleness: the necklace and the male ideal of the war leader
- The memory of the power – the power of the memory
- “... like having a lot of money, today.” About the construction of value, using the example of the *Melo* shell
- Conversion of a shell: cultural appropriation of the *Melo* shell in the local and Catholic context
- Totally mobile: the *Melo* shell as a commodity
- The collection object, the collector, the museum and the collecting – reflections about complex relationship structures, using the example of a loin cloth
- Papua, the sea, the lake, the cardinal points, the mountain and the beach – cultural structuring of space, using the example of the *Melo* shell
- End and beginning of the paths: museums, ethnographical classification systems and the *Melo* as *Melo*

Abstract

The genus of the seashell *Melo* – to which various species might belong – inhabits the coastal waters of the island of New Guinea. The cultural forms of the *Melo* shell, or commonly named bailer shell, were found even in remote valleys of the highlands in the interior, as museum objects in European collections prove. This, despite the fact that to reach the interior of the island 300-400 km of almost impenetrable primeval forest has to be conquered. The island of New Guinea is inhabited by a multitude of locally organised small groups, each with their own language, and there were not traders in the sense of trans-regionally organised actors. Based on such museum objects made from the *Melo* shell, early colonial trade routes in New Guinea have been studied. Using theoretical and methodological findings from ethnological globalisation research, the dynamic processes of appropriation, transformation and assignation of meaning have been investigated and repeatedly complemented with links to current processes of change. As part of this approach the material characteristics of the

Melo shell were picked out afresh as a central theme: the attractiveness of the light-coloured shell, the size of the shell, the technical possibilities of workmanship and the cultural forms of appearance of the shell. The field research on the traces of the *Melo* shell was conducted in the Western part of New Guinea, in the Indonesian province “Papua”. Methodologically it was marked by a multi-site design. Through this multi-site research approach connections could be made between “immobile” museum objects in the “here” and dynamic cultural appropriation processes in the “there”. From a current perspective, early colonial conditions, trade routes, barter activities, forms of usage and workmanship of the shell were able to be traced and contrasted with present-day forms of appearance and use. Different theoretical approaches were applied in this process. The resulting ethnography of the *Melo* shell contains a number of essays, which highlight the different research approaches and the different use contexts of the shell. They allow insights into erstwhile exchange relations and the manner of trade in Papua in early colonial times, as an interface between tradition and scientific investigation. Nowadays, the shell has completely different meanings, as shown in the contexts of tourism or missionary activity. “Old” meanings have vanished. These “new” meanings point up the profound, dynamic processes of change that have taken place since the early 1960s. In this sense this doctoral thesis follows up the lively research activity of the 1960s and 1970s and helps to fill the gap caused by political caesura. It puts museum objects at the centre of the study and contributes to ongoing work with museum collections from Papua. Furthermore, it builds an interdisciplinary bridge to zoology and resumes the tradition of museum ethnology in a natural scientific framework of reference. Exemplarily embedded statements of some of the few still living contemporary witnesses give a fascinating insight into an early colonial era, direct links to which are about to be lost.