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“Putting people first”.

Idea, concept and implementation of a collaborative anthropology project

Ai salsal - somebody who comes and goes - and might as well never return. That is the term the Sa of Bunlap in Pentecost, Vanuatu, use for us white Europeans. We, anthropologists Thorolf Lipp and Martina Kleinert, wanted to set out for another way. We've worked in Bunlap since 1997 and have taken the motto of the 2008 ESfO conference “Putting People First” seriously for a long time. Since our first stay we have not only been returning, again and again, in 2004 we started planning a collaborative anthropology project. Finally, in the summer of 2009, after five years of fundraising and preparations, we were able to invite some of our partners and friends from Bunlap as well as Jacob Kapere from the Vanuatu Cultural Center. They all came to Germany to realize the project *UrSprung in der Südsee* (www.ursprung-in-der-suedsee.de). During two months we worked together at three "places of encounter": the state museum of ethnography in Munich, the South Seas collection Obergünzburg and the Iwalewa Haus in Bayreuth. We cooperated in the design of three different exhibitions, realized a “Reverse Anthropology” photography project and collaborated in the production of a “Multivocal Anthropology” documentary film.

This paper critically examines our attempt of a reciprocal, counter-hegemonic endeavor. Is it at all possible to balance the academic debates about ethics, collaboration, empowerment, multivocality etc. with the down to earth questions of financing and organizing such a project within existing institutional frameworks and power structures in the Pacific and in Germany? Was this really a reciprocal affair? And how should one deal with the circumstance that an undertaking like this aims not only at stimulating further anthropological peer group discussion but also at having some impact on the cultural memory of a much wider, non-specialist audience. Hence, where is the line to be drawn between the necessity to attract public attention by building upon existing, often stereotypical knowledge on the one hand and issues of misrepresentation and misappropriation on the other?