

## **TRA 5 Past Worlds – Modern Questions: Cultures in Time and Space**

### **Communication and Heritage from Transdisciplinary Perspectives**

TRA 5 aims to analyze social processes in their transregional entanglement from the perspective of global history with the goal of responding to contemporary questions, such as those surrounding the prerequisites and consequences of globalization. A particular focus is interrelations between current challenges and how comparable phenomena were negotiated in the past. Knowledge about human societies that is obtained through a comparative historical approach can contribute to a better understanding of present-day constellations in culture, the economy, and politics. A framework that is geographically comprehensive and reaches far back into the past is essential for understanding current social processes.

Taking into account new perspectives that have been prompted by the cultural turn, TRA 5 moves beyond timelines that are discussed in Eurocentric historiography by bringing studies from Africa, South America, Central America, Europe and East Asia together and putting them into dialogue with one another. By doing so, we can understand the social functions and meanings of present and historical representations, practices, and objectifications of cultural memory, both in regionally specific context and as part of global entanglements. These phenomena have been and are still being shaped by the power relations entailed in cultural dominance or colonialism, as well as by cultures of hybridizing, anti-colonial or de-colonializing conflicts. We have selected *communication* and *heritage* as two significant points of entry to these problems. Both terms are intentionally broad because the transdisciplinary research discourse with which it is associated involves a wide field for interpretation, as well as different perspectives and challenges for scientific practice.

Communication across great distances represents a basic prerequisite for so-called globalization, and TRA 5 intends to contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon. *Communication* is often characterized as information exchange and defined as an expressive act. For Niklas Luhmann, however, “understanding” is the third and most important element of communication: the meaning of a message depends on its listeners, who interpret it in the context of past communications. This realization is by no means trivial for disciplines that work with texts and artifacts of every shape and form; in many cases, only a statement survives, not its outcome. Similarly, one must always bear in mind that communication is preconfigured by past communications. This “autopoiesis” of communication is a component of Luhmann’s theory of social systems that is based above all on expectations. Because globalization results in a world system, very different phenomena must be re-interpreted in the context of communication: stronger or weaker dependencies; social inequalities and dislocations; phenomena in migration and mobility; legitimation of

sovereignty and political participation; processes of social resilience, reform, and revolution; navigation of calamitous challenges; in short: power relations of every kind.

Whereas globalization is characterized by accelerated communication, communication in pre-modern times was comparatively slow, which today is equated with backwardness. This misassumption is based on the Eurocentric view that earlier times were less innovative and that, since the beginning of the so-called modern era, history has been defined by continual progress in human civilization. For this reason, pre-modern forms of communication should be investigated to better understand their current developments in the context of globalization as well. Even the question of how modern humans expanded across the world reaches toward the roots of modern globalization. From this perspective, the development of agriculture later propelled globalization by making sedentism the lifestyle of most of the world's population. A legitimate objection to this view, however, is that this classification is based on a very general understanding of globalization. More specific conceptions would include the development of widespread communication networks, which is particularly illustrated by the rise of wide-ranging trade relations. The earliest example may be contacts between Sumerians and the civilization of the Indus River Valley in the third millennium BC. In addition, trade relations between the Roman Empire, the Parthian Empire, and the Han dynasty in China could be viewed as an early form of globalization whose establishment allowed the Silk Road to take shape, reaching from western China across the Parthian Empire to Rome. Given its vast expansion from the Chinese Seas to Eastern Europe, the Mongolian Empire in the thirteenth century AD also produced several notable, globalizing effects: the creation of the first "international postal system," as well as the rapid spread of epidemics like the bubonic plague. These pre-modern eras of global exchange are described as "archaic globalization," but the largest intercontinental exchange systems were limited to Africa, Asia, and Europe until the sixteenth century—although a world systems perspective may also be applied to the pre-Hispanic Americas.

One of many intersections between the thematic areas *communication* and *heritage* as phenomena of globalization is the examination of global processes during the colonial period and their consequences. This phase of globalization was defined by the rise of European maritime empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A result of this development was wide-ranging trade in plants, animals, foodstuffs, and humans across the Atlantic. This fundamental expansion of communication was part of one of the most significant, transformative events in history that feeds into modern processes of globalization. Art, culture-historical, and ethnographic collections and museums in their postcolonial negotiations represent places and objects of these encounters, which cross the boundaries of related research disciplines.

University collections as a form of heritage represent TRA 5's subject of research; they encompass current and past negotiations surrounding objects, related practices, forms of knowledge, as well as temporal, spatial, social, cultural, and political contexts of origin. In its broadest sense, *heritage* is a concept whose development and institutionalization originate from the modern era and the founding of nation-states in the eighteenth century, and thus draw heavily on European value systems. Through research on provenance and restitution of collections, including university collections, in particular, TRA 5 undertakes to deconstruct this official heritage discourse, to permit communities of origins and other groups to actively help shape these processes and thus to discover new ways of dealing with heritage. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which was ratified in 2003, differed from the 1972 convention by centering community participation in their activities for the first time. Furthermore, it expanded the definition of material world heritage, which had previously been static and represented primarily by Europe, to include cultural practices, forms of knowledge, and presentations from the so-called Global South. With the Faro Convention, the Council of Europe foregrounds the importance of heritage for society and views it as an instrument of democracy and respect for human rights.

Many objects in museum collections are inextricably bound with immaterial forms of cultural expression. In particular, objects from the so-called Global South often entered collections without understanding or experience of their meaning or function. Instruments for protecting and preserving heritage rely on the assumption that one is dealing with "authentic" cultural phenomena that represent original manifestations of the past in the present and that thus must be preserved for the future. But this goal deserves critical evaluation because these cultural manifestations, like culture itself, are subject to a performative and dynamic character. In this context, TRA 5 poses the following five

questions: To whom does heritage belong, and who has access to it and the right to use and interact with it? Who commands the authority to interpret the representation, interpretation, form, and modification of heritage's context? How does one account for the groups whose (cultural) heritage is controlled by institutions like UNESCO or museum collections with practices based on a hegemony of Western-based knowledge?

Since the participatory turn, museum collections are increasingly engaging with their constructedness and self-critically examining the history of their collections and museum practices, especially with respect to collections that took shape during the colonial period and Eurocentric representations that construct a cultural "other." Provenance research in the museum's own collections, results from critical postcolonial research, application of de-colonial practices, the concrete recognition of repatriation claims and, in some cases, restitution of objects acquired under problematic circumstances (including human remains)—these are some of the topics that, in the context of the collections at the University of Bonn, are part of self-critical discussions in TRA 5. Through the "University Collections as Heritage" initiative, these topics will be integrated into new debates and into diverse collaborations, including with communities from the so-called Global South. A particular emphasis is to recruit equal cooperative partners for research from communities considered heirs to the heritage in question.

TRA 5 considers itself a platform for coordinating debates and research projects along the two main streams *communication* and *heritage* for university museums and collections. In addition, for the nearly thirty projects across all schools at the University of Bonn that address the topic *heritage*, it offers a network of synergetic research in which relations between *communication* and *heritage* will be explored and operationalized. Collaborations with internationally leading institutions in the realm of *heritage* will also be developed and strengthened. With this foundation and one of its central cooperative partners, the cluster of excellence "Beyond Slavery and Freedom," TRA 5 will be able to become a research center for the fields described here.

TRA 5 aims, in short, to critically describe communicative forms of interaction and heritage practices to reveal the dependency between both concepts and their perception, representation, and interpretation, as well as historically grounded relations of power. In order to overcome or at least diminish the dominant, Eurocentric approaches to studying forms of communication and heritage, we want to question and redefine the boundaries of existing disciplinary traditions, which are largely dictated by European fields of research. We will thus be able to address the dynamic interchange between past and present in innovative ways.