



# Boas Talks.

## Scientific colloquium commemorating the 140th anniversary of Franz Boas' doctorate at Kiel University



### BOAS AND GERMANY

#### FRANZ BOAS: BETWEEN ANTI-RACISM AND REIFICATION

**Susan Pollock (Freie Universität Berlin / Berlin, Germany)**  
**Reinhard Bernbeck (Freie Universität Berlin / Berlin, Germany)**

Franz Boas has often been hailed for his anti-racist scholarship. This is particularly clear when viewed against the developments in (physical/biological) anthropology in Germany around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the context of U.S. anthropology, Boas pointed out such problematic equations as those of culture and "race". At the same time, however, he was not averse to undertaking or sponsoring "collecting expeditions" that aimed at the acquisition of artefacts and body parts under ethically questionable circumstances. We consider these contradictions in light of Axel Honneth's distinctions among *Anerkennung* (recognition), objectification, and reification.

#### THE MIXED FATE OF FRANZ BOAS' CULTURAL RELATIVISM: NOTES ON THE ITINERARY OF A GERMAN-AMERICAN CONCEPT

**Hans Peter Hahn (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt / Frankfurt, Germany)**

In several respects, Franz Boas can be considered the founding father of US-American cultural anthropology, although there were already significant authors in the USA before his work. His special achievement is a new concept for the study of cultures that stands in clear contrast to his predecessors.

Originating in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his concepts have had a substantial impact on the development of anthropology. The appreciation of Historical Particularism and Cultural Relativism has been crucial for the rise and recognition of the discipline far beyond the US. The core idea of Cultural Relativism, according to which any evaluation of a culture by standards not peculiar to that culture is faulty, was revolutionary at that time. Nevertheless, precursors can be found. In particular, Johann Gottfried Herder defined "happiness" according to any people's own standards as the fundamental criterion for what he called "human history" in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. For Herder and Boas alike, it was not the measurability of certain cultural features but their meaning in their inner contexts that was the starting point for any study of culture.

However, this concept was not without criticism. If every evaluation of a culture is subjected to the principle of relativity, which culture is then the legitimate starting point of a description? Thus, it needs to be acknowledged that Cultural Relativism has implications that remain a difficult legacy for anthropology today.

**AT THE CROSSROADS OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGY***BETWEEN THE UNIQUE AND THE GENERAL:  
THE CONTRIBUTION OF HISTORICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
ARCHAEOLOGY TO THE WIDER FIELD OF ANTHROPOLOGY***Charlotte Damm (The Arctic University of Norway / Tromsø, Norway)**

In both anthropology and archaeology, it is possible to distinguish between research that addresses particular contextual questions and that which attempts to address issues that may be more generally applicable. The distinction is not necessarily one of scale, but refers to the aims of our research. In this short presentation, I will outline the differences between (pre-)historic archaeology, which seeks to describe, analyse and interpret a particular region and historical trajectory, and anthropological archaeology that investigates being and knowing in human communities within more general perspectives. Both can be argued to be necessary contributions to our understanding of the diversity of human societies. Taking this one step further, we may acknowledge the importance of the diversity of research questions, approaches, methods and interpretative frameworks. In the spirit of Boas, it is the combination of information and perspectives from a wide range of disciplines that will let us grasp the complexity of human beings in the world.

*DEATH AND THE HUMAN BODY:  
FINDING A COMMON GROUND FOR  
ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY***Alexander Gramsch (Römisch-Germanische Kommission des  
Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts / Frankfurt, Germany)**

Franz Boas was a trained natural scientist and one of the founders of modern, integrative anthropology, comprised of cultural and social anthropology as well as archaeology. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an ever-increasing specialisation in these fields and various fractures between archaeology, physical anthropology and social or cultural anthropology. The so-called "Third Science Revolution" of recent decades has revealed both the possibilities of an intensified interdisciplinary exchange and the need to re-learn each other's disciplinary languages and modes of thinking. Starting from considerations on a new (sub-) field of research, focusing on the historicity and sociality of the human body and on body 'itineraries', this presentation aims to explain why and how such a field can bring together archaeology, physical anthropology, bioarchaeology, and natural sciences, as well as social / cultural anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy. It is suggested to approach both the thanatology of the bodily remains encountered in archaeological contexts and body-related practices as they can be reconstructed from archaeological and anthropological evidence. From an archaeologist's point of view, the study of human remains and the practices associated with them is discussed as a new starting point that makes it possible to find a new common ground for the various specialised fields in archaeology and anthropology.

*TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY:  
REMARKS FROM A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE***Stefanie Samida (Heidelberg University / Heidelberg,  
Germany; Zürich University / Zürich, Switzerland)**

The Bologna Process opened a new chapter in the German higher education system. Countless new degree programs have been implemented since then. It is nearly impossible to obtain an overview of the content of the individual programs thus far. Twenty-five years ago, this diverse offer of degree programs would have been unthinkable. At that time, students studied archaeology, German studies, or musicol-

ogy; today, the degree programs are called comparative cultural and religious studies, health and society in South Asia or literary and cultural theory. However, not only the degree programs are becoming increasingly diverse. The groups of students sitting in the courses are also increasingly heterogeneous. Future archaeologists sit next to students of transcultural studies, and students who pass the teaching degree program sit next to students of global history. This raises questions such as "What does anthropology stand for and how is it conceptualised today?" or "What does 'teaching anthropology' mean?"

In my presentation, I will not only touch on these questions but I would also like to give a general idea of my understanding of "teaching anthropology" which is closely linked with my own academic biography.

## ***NARRATIVES, CONCEPTS AND DATA: THE RELEVANCE OF FRANZ BOAS FOR EUROPEAN ARCHAEOLOGY***

**Martin Furholt (University of Oslo / Oslo, Norway;  
University of Kiel / Kiel, Germany)**

The work of Franz Boas impressively demonstrates the impact that a critical scrutiny of established wisdom can have on public discourse and opinion, leading away from the racist, exceptionalist, and cultural Darwinist status quo of his time. He and his students achieved this partly by privileging the empirical data in the face of the often chauvinist and evolutionist deductive models dominating anthropology and accounts of world history. Without advocating for a purely inductive or empiricist approach, Social Archaeology, as I understand it, should take its lesson from Boas' stance of bringing the empirical world to play a more decisive position in our models. A lot of what goes for Social Archaeology today mainly delivers tales of becoming, and justification of our current social conditions, cementing the innovation-stifling, no-alternative doctrine, which plagues much of the current political discourse. Social Archaeology should, in my view, take an explorative perspective on our archaeological and anthropological datasets. We need to critically evaluate our premises of what we consider to constitute and drive the social worlds by taking the data and their contexts more seriously, and by applying a more open view on the variety of possibilities for social creativity and political imagination that the archaeological and anthropological records have in store. In this lecture, I will illustrate this approach using examples from European Prehistory.

### **"BOAS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY": CASE STUDIES**

## ***THE COHABITATION OF RICH VILLAGES AND POOR VILLAGES IN EGALITARIAN AND ACEPHALOUS AGRARIAN SOCIETIES. HOW TO UNDERSTAND THIS PARADOX? THE CASE OF FAUNAL ASSEMBLAGES IN THE LBK***

**Christian Jeunesse (University of Strasbourg / Strasbourg, France)**

LBK communities are generally considered to belong to egalitarian societies. However, there are significant differences in the wealth of burials within cemeteries, from one cemetery to another, and also from one village to another. We will deal with the latter aspect in this paper through the example of the quantities of faunal remains in two Alsatian LBK settlements. Explaining the differences in wealth between villages using purely economic arguments (degree of prosperity) without taking social factors into account is obviously insufficient. A diversion through an ethnographic model inspired by our work on the island of Sumba (Indonesia) leads us to propose a more nuanced interpretation.

## *BOAS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: IN PURSUIT OF CONTEXT AND HISTORY IN NORTHWEST COAST ARCHAEOLOGY*

**Colin Grier (Washington State University / Vancouver, USA)**

From its inception, Euro-American studies of Indigenous Peoples of the Northwest Coast of North America have involved tensions concerning how these societies should be understood. Boas advanced relativism and context, while social evolutionists applied unilinear models of social change. These tensions have persisted through 150 years of research in anthropology and archaeology on the Northwest Coast. I examine these dynamics in order to build a way forward, drawing on some essentials of Boasian thought while integrating notions of history, change, complexity and diversity. If appropriately situated in Indigenous ontologies, the history of Northwest Coast research provides a useful diversity of ideas to advance our work.

## *FORGING NETWORKS AND IDENTITIES IN NON-LITERATE SOCIETIES: SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIAN KONSO SMITHS*

**Engdawok Assefa (Addis Ababa University / Addis Ababa, Ethiopia)**  
**Johannes Müller (University of Kiel / Kiel, Germany)**

Fieldwork on Konso smiths was used to map the material resources and production processes of workshops. Within the social system of different Konso groups, complex networks exist that restrict the development of social inequalities. The role of blacksmiths, who unlike farmers have non-local networks, is significant in these contexts.

## *STRATEGIES OF STEPPE NOMADS FACING CLIMATE CHANGES AND VARIABILITY – ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATION*

**Francesca Lugli (Italian Association for Ethnoarchaeology / Rome, Italy)**

Serious climate change is occurring all over the world and Mongolia is recognised as a region that is vulnerable to climate change impacts, ranked 67th out of 181 countries in the 2020 ND-GAIN Index.

In earlier times, climate change was supposed to be one of the reasons for the success of Mongolian steppe pastoralism, which apparently began after the Neolithic during the Bronze Age.

In 2005, the Italian Association for Ethnoarchaeology with the support of MAECI started the mission "Camps of Mongolian Nomads – An Ethnoarchaeological Perspective". Within this research, a diachronic perspective is crucial to understand the past, present and future of steppe nomadism. In fact, it allows us to understand the keywords of Central Asiatic pastoralism and to obtain interpretative models in an archaeological perspective.

Since 2007, camps of the cold months became the focus of the research, mainly conducted in Bulgan, Arkhangai and Dundgovi. The author has had the chance to document changes in the life of Mongolian nomads and to observe their strategies to face micro and macro climate changes. In fact, current climate change forces nomads to alter their roaming strategies and the location of their camps and even to migrate to different regions.

## ***UNDERSTANDING NAGA POTTERY USE AND MEANING: A CASE STUDY OF THE PHOMS OF NAGALAND***

**Vasa Ditamulü (Nagaland University / Kohima, India)**

The most remarkable feature about pot making in the Naga communities is the absolute simplicity of raw materials and tools involved. In this sense, it is also a genuine and an honest assumption that since the impact of modern changes is so widespread and dominant, the indigenous habits and culture cannot be considered pristine once their tribal way of life merges or changes through contacts and assimilation with a modern mode of living. This paper presents recent ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the Phom Naga community and provides an insight into the beliefs, taboos and rituals encountered in the pottery production. Observations concerning the entire manufacturing process also highlight an essential step in the comparison of past and present pottery traditions in the area.

## ***DECOLONISING ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE IN NORTHEAST INDIA: VIEWS FROM COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY INITIATIVES IN NAGALAND***

**Tiatoshi Jamir (Nagaland University / Kohima, India)**

In Nagaland, oral tradition central to ancestral sites is immensely rich for the obvious reason that they are sites of an ancestral past where descent communities continue to inhabit the region. Such 'ancestral sites' are places of a precolonial indigenous occupation associated with a plethora of traditional accounts. Such sites of memory are associated with the collective memory of descent group(s) and the oral tradition linked to group migration from prominent sites of dispersal. In spite of such direct historical continuity, the participatory role and involvement of local communities in archaeological research in India is largely peripheral. Hence, whether it is the case with other parts of India or the Northeast region, a decolonising approach, such as community-based participatory research (CBPR) involving descendant and non-descendant communities residing within the proximity of archaeological sites, should be considered as essential to open new challenges and potential within the disciplinary practice in the Northeast region. Against this backdrop, I present a few case studies from Nagaland that demonstrate the potential of such an approach for the study of Naga ancestral sites.

### **FROM CULTURAL RELATIVISM TO POST-COLONIAL IMPERATIVE**

## ***FRANZ BOAS REFRACTED THROUGH HIS LOCAL COLLABORATORS (JAMES TEIT, GEORGE HUNT, AND WILLIAM BEYNON): IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION, COLLABORATION, AND DECOLONISATION***

**Bill Angelbeck (Douglas College / New Westminster, Canada)**

In the last few decades, collaborative ethnographies and community-based archaeologies have become more commonplace throughout anthropology. Yet, this type of fieldwork is not recent at all. It is well-represented by the well-trodden example of Franz Boas. Since the late 1800s, Boas worked closely with Indigenous informants, some of whom became recognised scholars themselves, such as George Hunt (Tlingit/Kwakwaka'wakw) and William Beynon (Tsimshian). He also involved James Teit, a settler from the Shetlands, who married a Nlaka'pamux woman and became an exemplary anthropologist and advocate for Indigenous rights. Here, I will discuss how these close collaborations transformed Boas' thinking, with ramifications throughout the field. In these examples, we find a dialectical interplay whereby Indigenous groups actively sought to use the anthropological medium to their needs; in turn, anthropologists like Boas and Teit recognise the scholarly need for activism to aid Indigenous groups under the constraints of colonial rule. These partnerships from over a century ago still have implications for contemporary collaborations as instructive histories for both theory in the expansion of interpretative potential and range, and for anthropological praxis in the context of settler-colonial relationships.

## ***FROM CULTURAL TRAITS TO INHERITED SOCIAL TRADITIONS: "RE-ACTIVATING" THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL LEGACY OF FRANZ BOAS***

**Peter Jordan (University of Groningen / Groningen, Netherlands)**

With deeper roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and a sustained period of maturation in North America and the North Pacific, the 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual legacy of Franz Boas and his first generation of students was immense. More importantly, this legacy – academic, empirical and also ethical – continues to be of profound significance today as humanity hurtles deeper into the 21st century and is confronted by new existential challenges. This paper explores the continued legacy of Boasian thinking via three interlocking themes. First, we look back at the commitment of Boas and colleagues to a combination of empiricism and historical particularism. These interests led to a systematic documentation of the lifeways, material traditions and beliefs of indigenous communities across Western North America. Central to this endeavour was the notion of cultural "traits", but these were never formally embedded within a deeper theory of cultural inheritance. Second, the early 21st century has witnessed renewed interest in these vast legacy datasets, which had lain dormant for half a century. The application of new ideas and methods seeks to understand how cultural traditions are inherited and shared, generating cultural diversity and change. While this new work has been insightful, the results have remained squarely academic and perhaps somewhat esoteric. Finally, we gauge the wider societal relevance of these ideas and approaches by highlighting how many northern indigenous communities are being confronted by accelerating climate change. Alongside the growing calls to deploy more "Traditional Knowledge" (TEK) within future planning and mitigation strategies, a Boasian approach to culture reminds us that all ideas, technologies and practices are inherently dynamic, and come with deep and complex cultural histories that need to be properly investigated and understood.

## ***NATURE, CULTURE, HUMAN NATURE: REFLECTIONS ON FRANZ BOAS' "ANTHROPOLOGY AND MODERN LIFE"***

**Martin Porr (The University of Western Australia / Perth, Australia)**

The book *Anthropology and Modern Life* was originally published in 1932. The end of Franz Boas' long career stood under the immense shadow of the rise of Nazism, Fascism, Stalinism, and other authoritarian regimes. Boas saw the position of an anthropologist as an advocate for reason, critical inquiry, free speech, and a protector of the diversity of human lifeways and cultural expressions. His life project was a fundamentally ethical and moral undertaking. In recent times, commentators have often drawn comparisons between the current state of the world with the historical period between the two world wars. The world is similarly in a new global downward spiral towards catastrophe and public discourses are eerily dominated by nationalism, national populism, and racism. Despite historical contingencies, key aspects of *Anthropology and Modern Life* remain relevant and almost timeless. Boas' book had a clear educational aim and was written for the broader public. He predicted that it would not be popular because it questioned too many strongly held beliefs and convictions. Given recent developments, it is hard to avoid the impression that the book would still be controversial in some sections of society. The book's key themes of race, nationalism, and the impact of culture on human actions remain significant aspects of current discourses. Their ongoing relevance in the public sphere not only points towards ongoing legacies of the understanding of nature, culture, and human nature but they also show that an engaged and reflexive anthropology needs to continue to conceptualise and comment on current issues in a Boasian spirit beyond disciplinary boundaries.

**KEYNOTE LECTURE**

***A HISTORIAN CONTENDS WITH HAGIOGRAPHY:  
PERCEPTIONS OF FRANZ BOAS AND HIS RELEVANCE TODAY***

**Tracy Teslow (University of Cincinnati / Cincinnati, USA)**

Nearly 80 years after his death, Franz Boas continues to be a foundational character in American anthropology, as well as a recurring figure in historical narratives of twentieth century anti-racism. The way Boas has been perceived and misperceived, how his contributions to cultural anthropology and anti-racism are heralded (or sometimes rejected) while his work on race was quietly forgotten, reflects not only his disciplinary and social impact but also the perils of constructing historical narratives. Franz Boas tackled fundamental methodological, epistemological, and ontological questions that still animate and vex anthropology and society. This talk reflects on the ongoing popular and professional interest in Franz Boas, the nuances of his thought, and what relevance his work might have for us today.

**Organising team:**

(all Cluster of Excellence ROOTS)

/ Henny Piezonka  
Division of Anthropological Archaeology /  
Ethnoarchaeology Kiel University  
Johanna-Mestorf-Strasse 2-6, 24118 Kiel

/ Vesa Arponen  
/ Nils Müller-Scheeßel  
/ Jens Schneeweiß  
/ Maria Wunderlich

**coordination and contact:**

/ Anastasia Khramtsova  
Cluster of Excellence ROOTS, Kiel University  
Leibnizstrasse 3, 24118 Kiel  
Email: akhramtsova@roots.uni-kiel.de