

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ann Fienup-Riordan.** *Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Fieldwork Turned on Its Head.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005. xv + 337 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98464-3.

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## Reconnections

In September 1997 anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan, in the company of a delegation of Yup'ik elders, flew from Alaska to Germany to spend two weeks examining the collection of Yup'ik artifacts housed at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin collected by Adrian Jacobsen in 1882-83. The result is a remarkable story and one of "firsts": the first delegation of native people (eight in all) to a European museum to systematically examine an entire collection of objects from their culture; the first critical biography of the collector, Adrian Jacobsen; and, the first systematic study of his Yup'ik collection. It is all put together in this handsomely illustrated, very readable 337-page volume published by the University of Washington Press.

The cyclical leitmotif of the story is inescapable: the European collector of artifacts in a strange land (Alaska) collecting material to bring back to Europe; the dispersal of these artifacts along with the museum's collection during World War II and their eventual return after the fall of the Berlin Wall; and, finally, the journey of the Yup'ik elders to Germany to reconnect with the objects that had left their homeland more than a century ago. Fienup-Riordan highlights this motif, drawing upon the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss's discussion of the role of reciprocity and gift-giving in social relations for the overarching framework of the volume. Accordingly, the book is divided into three sections. "The Gift" focuses on Jacobsen, his travels and collections, "The Gift-Givers" on the culture of the Yup'ik then and now, and "The Return Gift," comprising the bulk of the book, covers the

fifteen days of the elders' study of Jacobsen's collection.

Adrian Jacobsen (1853-1947) was a Norwegian sailor and adventurer who came to ethnographic collecting when he fell in with a German dealer in the business of staging exhibitions. At age twenty-three he traveled to Greenland and convinced six Greenlandic Inuit to come to Europe as a living exhibit bearing appropriate accoutrements of their culture (including dogs, sleds, and skin boats). The exhibit was a success despite the unfortunate deaths of all the Inuit from smallpox and it launched Jacobsen's collecting life. In 1878 Adolf Bastian, director of Berlin's Royal Museum of Anthropology, who was seeking Eskimo objects for the museum, contacted Jacobsen. Fienup-Riordan tracks Jacobsen's collecting expeditions, including those to the northwest coast of America and his expeditions to Siberia, East Asia, and Indonesia that preceded and succeeded his visit to Yup'ik country in 1882-83. Jacobsen's encounters with natives and his collecting endeavors are traced through his exchange of letters with Bastian, his journals, and his popular publications. Like other ethnographic collectors of his era, Jacobsen not only purchased artifacts from native people but also robbed the occasional grave for skeletal material and grave goods. His letters to Bastian note his awareness of the gaps in his collection—clothing in particular. "[It] is hardly to be obtained in one piece, for all go about with torn clothing" (p. 19). In all, Jacobsen collected more than 7000 artifacts during his two and a half years in North America, and composed accession records for most but not all of them (this total includes artifacts

from his travels along the northwest coast; it is not clear from the text how many of them are Yup'ik). The bottom line to Jacobsen's "grab-and-go" collecting, Fienup-Riordan notes, is that today "Yup'ik patrimony remains in German hands" (p. 35). The reader follows Jacobsen through marriage and multiple careers to his return to his native Norway and his death in 1947.

The fifteen days of the examination of the Yup'ik collection is best read as narrative, following the elders as they make their way through tools for hunting and war, various kinds of containers, women's sewing equipment, ceremonial regalia and masks, toys and more. Their study of the objects not only amplifies Jacobsen's catalogue data but equally importantly it stimulates memory and triggers stories, reminding us of the deep and abiding cultural connection between these ancient objects and their makers' descendants. Outside the museum walls, Fienup-Riordan gives us a glimpse of the delegation's leisure time activities and their adjustment to German culture: they take saunas, cook soup at their pension, play card games, call home, and tour the botanic gardens.

For the reader who wants to know about a particular artifact or artifact type, rather than read the volume as a fifteen-day expedition, it is easy enough to find the information. The artifact types are listed in the table of contents and are accessible through the index; the endnotes give accession numbers for all artifacts discussed in the text along with their Yup'ik terminology. As a test, I tried to locate an ingenious pair of wooden ice skates carved in the shape of elongated puffins. Memorable and unique, they are described, discussed, and illustrated in color in the text as well as shown on the inside back flap of the book jacket. Scanning the table of contents I lo-

cated the puffin skates on the "Twelfth Day Toys and Clothing" under the artifact entry, "Ice Skates and Snowshoes 266." A pass through the index turns up the following two-page references under "Ice: ... skates; 266, 284" but there is no index entry for puffin. Objects shown in photographs are referenced by catalogue number, although no dimensions are given. Following the endnotes is a welcome glossary of the many Yup'ik terms scattered throughout the text. The color portraits of the objects, taken by University of Alaska Museum of the North photographer Barry McWayne and generously sprinkled throughout each chapter, are sumptuous. Quite a few of these artifact photos are supplemented with close-up detail shots. Informal photographs in each chapter show the elders at work in the museum, studying and handling the objects and tape recording (in Yup'ik) their commentary. Jacobsen's life story and collecting history are illustrated with historic black-and-white photos.

Happily, this unusual expedition was a positive experience both for a nervous museum staff who opened its doors and collection and for the Yup'ik people who came to a foreign land to see the objects of their culture. As elder Paul John thoughtfully noted after returning home: "As I consider our Yup'ik culture, I'm hopeful that we can continue to strengthen our knowledge through the objects that are housed in museums. If we used those objects as our statutes, we will gain knowledge and our cultural identity will get stronger." It is fitting that, in testimony to the wealth of knowledge held by these Yup'ik elders, the royalties from publication of *Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin*, have been directed to the Calista Elders Council to support the elders' continuing documentation of Yup'ik culture.

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