



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 19
Issue 2 December 1992

Article 4

January 1992

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Recommended Citation

Vermeulen, Han F. (1992) "The Emergence of "Ethnography" ca. 1770 in Göttingen," *History of Anthropology Newsletter*. Vol. 19 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

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FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

The Emergence of "Ethnography" ca. 1770 in Göttingen

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[Because of space limitations and time constraints, this article has been somewhat shortened without consultation with the author-- hopefully, without compromising either fact or argument--G.W.S.]

If disciplines may be said to exist when they are named, then ethnography emerged as early as 1771, when the term "Ethnographie" was introduced in a publication by the German historian, linguist and political scientist August Ludwig Schläzer (1735-1809), who worked at the newly established university of Göttingen in the kingdom of Hannover in northern Germany. Schläzer used the term and its equivalent "Völkerkunde" in a book he had worked on since 1766, the Allgemeine Nordische Geschichte, or "General History of the North," which was published in Halle in 1771. The book offered a new outlook on the history and languages of northern Europe and northern Asia, from Iceland in the west to Kamchatka in the east, and from Lappland and the Samoyeds in the north to the Southern Slavs and the Kirguz, Kalmuks, and Mongols in the south. Although Schläzer was not in this book concerned with the Middle East (an area which had occupied him from 1759-61), he did mention the old problem of the "vagina gentium"--the area around the Black Sea which Leibniz and others had considered the migration tunnel of numerous nations.

Supplanting earlier "myths" with fresh new ideas on the origin, kinship, and migration of nations, Schläzer's work succeeded in destroying ancient views on the origin and relationships of numerous peoples, both in Europe and in Asia (which he suggested should begin with the Urals). He insisted that the history of peoples could only be reconstructed by the careful study of the relationships of languages and language groups, instead of mere etymologies and/or uncertain passages in obscure chronicles. In the course of his argument, Schläzer introduced, as if in passing, the concepts "Völkerkunde," "Ethnographie," "Ethnographisch," and even that of "Ethnograph" (i.e., ethnographer). The effect of this discovery is two fold: to push back by several years the introduction of these concepts, and to suggest the importance of different intellectual influences than have previously been argued.

In 1970, Hans Fischer suggested that the earliest appearance of the terms "Völkerkunde" and "Ethnographie" was in 1775 in a book by Schläzer's elder colleague Johann Christoph Gatterer (1727-99) entitled Abriss de Geographie; this was followed in 1787 by the

term "Ethnologie," in a book by the Swiss theologian Alexandre-César Chavannes (as in fact Paul Topinard had pointed out in 1891). Fischer emphasized that the concepts emerged within a geographical context, suggesting that they were probably coined after the German words "Erdkunde" and "Geographie," and that they were used extensively in the 1780s and 90s in German-language textbooks on geography, as well as in compilations of travel accounts.

In 1974, Justin Stagl pointed out that the concepts had already been used in an earlier publication by Gatterer's younger colleague Schlözer, in a textbook on general history entitled Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie (1772, second vol. 1773). Stagl also proposed a widening of the framework in which the formation of the discipline is to be interpreted: from geography to world history and the discipline called "Statistik" or "Statenkunde"--i.e. a comparative study of states. Stagl suggested that the occurrence of the new concepts was related to Schlözer's general historical and statistical program, in which an "ethnographical method" was one of the four methods of world history.

Without denying the importance of these influences, it can now be suggested that the concepts "Völkerkunde" and "Ethnographie" occurred originally in a somewhat different context, in which the central problem was the origin, descent and migration of diverse nations in the Nordic world. Using a theory of comparative linguistics that goes back as far as Leibniz, Schlözer sought the solution to this problem through a critique of the Mosaic interpretations that had previously been suggested by generations of "etymologists." His enterprise was biblical-historical insofar as the Bible placed a constraint on history (cf. Stocking 1989 on the "biblical/ethnological" and other paradigmatic traditions). Schlözer, however, argued that the peoples discovered in the remote parts of the Russian empire (as well as the users of the ancient Runic script) were not included in the genealogical tables in the tenth chapter of Genesis, and that Moses, their presumed author, had "no concrete knowledge of the peoples of the European and Asiatic North"--thereby rendering senseless any speculation on the historical relationships of these peoples in the four thousand years allowed by the biblical chronology. Drawing on ideas propounded by his teacher Johann David Michaelis, Professor of Hebrew and Oriental languages in Göttingen, and on Leibniz's insistence that linguistic comparison was "the only certain means of reconstructing the unknown early history of the world's nations," Schlözer offered a classification of the languages of the peoples of the north which, judged by modern standards is still in essence correct.

Although Schlözer did not offer a definition of "Völkerkunde" or "Ethnographie," it is worth noting that he used the new terms

in connection with the concepts of "Völkerhistorie" and "Völkersystem" (or Systema Populorum, which seems a clear reference to Linnaeus), as well as with "Weltkund" and "Erdekunde" (or "Kosmographie" and "Geographie"). This suggests that he felt a conceptual gap, the filling of which opened a field which in Germany and surrounding countries was to be exploited intensively in the years that followed. During the next two decades forty references have been traced. As early as 1772 the concept was criticized and amended by Herder; in 1782 the related concept "Volks-Kunde" appeared in Göttingen; in 1787, the concept "Ethnologie" appeared in Lausanne and in Halle. In 1781, also in Halle, Johann Reinhold Forster and Matthias Christian Sprengel launched the field's first journal, Beiträge zur Völker- und Länderkunde (27 vols., 1781-93 [cf. Vermeulin, forthcoming]).

By coining the term "Ethnographie" (i.e., nation-description) as the Greek equivalent to "Völkerkunde," it seems clear that Schlözer conceived them as referring to a generalized descriptive discipline of peoples or nations, and his books make clear that no peoples of the world were excluded from it. However, as Gatterer indicated as early as 1773, this inclusiveness was a problem insofar as some peoples had no written history at all, and could not therefore be handled by the mother discipline of history. It is perhaps for this reason that Gatterer, in his Abriss der Geographie, proposed a classification of the geographical sciences in which, for the first time, the subject of "Menschen- und Völkerkunde (Anthropographia und Ethnographia)" was suggested as one of the subjects in need of development. Gatterer thus saw these two inquiries as a subfield of geography, which was itself an auxiliary discipline of history--in contrast to Schlözer, who regarded Völkerkunde as a subfield of history, and saw the "ethnographical method" as a means of revolutionizing history in general and the history of nations in particular. Whereas Gatterer was influential in originating the trend of "Länder-, Völker- und Statenkunde" described by Fischer, Schlözer was influential in stimulating research on the ethnic or national bases of historiography--in an historical and descriptive manner which contrasted with the comparative approach of Démeunier and Goguet.

In seeking the origins of the discipline which eventually was to become cultural or social anthropology, this moment in the 1770s and 80s takes on great significance. "Anthropologie" (in a philosophical/theological sense) had been around as a concept since the sixteenth century; "Ethnologie" was yet to be born as an adaptation of "Ethnographie." Prior to the nowadays frequently discussed period of "institutionalization" of anthropology in the nineteenth century, there was an earlier eighteenth century moment of conceptualization and classification. Retrospectively, it might be argued that the discipline started off in the second half of the eighteenth century, was established in learned

societies and museums in the first half of the nineteenth, underwent a terminological transformation in the 1870s (when the "ethnological" societies were rebaptized as "anthropological") and emerged in its modern form only in the twentieth.

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This article is based on research carried out in 1984-88 as part of a masters thesis in cultural anthropology at the University of Leiden (Vermeulen 1988) as well as further research in Göttingen in 1991. The work is currently being continued with a doctoral grant from the Centre of Non-Western Studies at Leiden University.

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