

Zeitschrift: Swiss Journal of Sociocultural Anthropology = Revue suisse d'anthropologie sociale et culturelle = Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Ethnologie

Band: 28 (2022)

Vorwort: Editorial

Autor: Affolter, Laura / Loher, David / Zinn, Isabelle

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.05.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

EDITORIAL

This is the first issue of *the Swiss Journal of Sociocultural Anthropology* / *Revue suisse d'anthropologie sociale et culturelle* / *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie*.

It continues the publication activity of the Swiss Anthropological Association SAA, which started in 1979 with the first issue of *Ethnologica Helvetica*. After 20 issues, *Ethnologica Helvetica* was relaunched under the name *TSANTSA* in 1996. Since then, the SAA has published an annual issue. With *TSANTSA* 27 (2022), the first online-only issue in the journal's history, the editorial team concluded this chapter last spring. Starting with this autumn issue, the journal sets sail with its new name and with a new crew of responsible editors.

Why this name change at all? The name *TSANTSA* has triggered controversial debates time and again. While our editorial team understands the original motivation for choosing this name – the valuation and emphasis of cultural diversity and the rejection of (US-)imperialism – we do not think that it captures the journal's mission anymore (if it ever did), nor do we think it is an appropriate name for an anthropological journal today. The name *TSANTSA* carries too much of a burden of the multi-cultural ideology of the early 1990s. Since then, the world has changed, and it seems particularly odd that, of all things, an anthropological journal still makes explicit reference in its title to a debate that has become worn out in the discipline.

Shrunken Heads and the Burden of Colonial Anthropology

Tsantsa is the name for a severed fist-sized, dissected human head used as a trophy and for ritual as well as trade purposes by some Jivaroan peoples in parts of Peru and Ecuador. In colonial times, it was fashionable to display tsantsa as souvenirs from the tropics in upper class homes alongside other artifacts brought back from the colonies – often acquired by violent means and traded under dubious circumstances. The tsantsa was a symbol of the household's cosmopolitanism, gazed at by the observer with a mixture of fascination and disgust.¹ With this, tsantsa were transformed from ritual objects serving as containers for the avenging spirits of Jivaroan warfare victims to decontextualized trophies of colonial expansion on the shelves of the European upper-class Bourgeoisie.

Quite often, the artifacts that reached Europe were forged. Inventive craftsmen somewhere along the colonial supply chain filled the gap between the scarce supply in Latin America and the high demand for these artifacts in Europe with more or less well-made counterfeits (Bennett Ross 1984, 89–90). Some of these forged shrunken heads even found their way into renowned ethnographic institutions such as the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford

¹ Rubinstein (2004, 16) cites the travelogs of Up de Graff (1923) as an example of the colonial gaze on Jivaroan warfare practices, characterized by the mixture of fascination and disgust, switching between true admiration for the craftsmanship behind each tsantsa and contempt for the “uncivilized” indigenous customs.

University, where observant ethnographers occasionally uncovered the forgery (e. g. Turner 1944).²

During the early days of professional anthropology, tsantsa gained attraction as a symbol of a “distant” and “exotic” culture, expressed in the practice of preparing artifacts from human remains, and representing the fascinating result of fine craftsmanship at the same time. They were thus the perfect object to represent the dichotomy of the early anthropological project. Tsantsa depicted the exotic Other as a human being with appalling and uncivilized practices far from one’s own culture. Simultaneously, anthropology admired the Other’s skillful practices and craftsmanship that relied on rich and detailed cultural and material knowledge (Rubinstein 2004, 16). Arguably this mixture of fascination and repulsion is the reason why tsantsa remained the source of legends and myths to be found not only amongst the broader public, but even in professional anthropological literature (see Harner 1962).

Today, the remaining tsantsa in the collections of ethnographic museums are often stowed away in the archive, as they raise two fundamental ethical questions: How should museums deal with the display of human remains? And how should ethnographic museums deal with artifacts acquired under colonial rule and often under unknown circumstances?

In short, tsantsa remind us of the highly controversial and problematic position anthropology has occupied in the context of the colonial project.

Erase or Acknowledge the Dark Side of Anthropology?

The use of “Tsantsa” as the title for an anthropological journal unavoidably evokes the discipline’s colonial entanglements sketched above. But how does the journal position itself against this historical background? The journal’s initial mission statement remains surprisingly silent on this issue. “Enigmatic for the broader public”, the journal’s name should “provoke irritations and initiate debates”. As such a source of irritation, “Tsantsa” as the title of an anthropological journal could indeed serve as a reminder of anthropology’s complicity in the colonial project. Yet the question remains whether the critique of anthropology’s complicity can be made explicit enough through a title.

At a time when anthropology as a discipline prefers to highlight its anti-racist, empowering, and critical potential, the name reminds readers of anthropology’s dark side: its racist and oppressive acts during the colonial era. It is of course important to acknowledge the discipline’s intellectual and moral baggage, and we agree that anthropology is only at the beginning of its own decolonialization. However, we think that a journal’s name and a short mission statement is the wrong place to conduct this debate. The supposedly thought-provoking and ambiguous journal title and accompanying mission statement rather provoke further confusion than bring clarification. There is just too thin a line between acknowledging the dark side of anthropology’s history and affirming appropriation as the guiding principle of the discipline. We firmly reject the idea that appropriation in any way should form the vision of anthropology today – even if “only” as a “metaphorical description”. The intention of our

² The museum recently moved their collection of tsantsa as well as “a group of Naga trophy heads and the mummy of an Egyptian child” to storage (McGreevy 2020).

name change is thus in no way to erase this dark side of our discipline, but rather to acknowledge and go beyond it.

Finding a new name was not easy and took us almost two years during which our editorial board held many stimulating workshop-like discussions. Amongst other things, our aim was to find a brand name that worked in the three languages of the journal as *TSANTSA* had. This revealed much more complicated than we initially thought, and the decision was taken by the board that a descriptive name that causes no confusion was more fitting and in line with our journal's vision. We are now very happy to publish this issue under the name of *SJSCA—the Swiss Journal of Sociocultural Anthropology / Revue suisse d'anthropologie sociale et culturelle / Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie*.

Acknowledgments

With this issue, time was not only ripe for a new name, but also for us to leave as editors-in-chief after four years and to hand over to a new trio who will set out for new shores and navigate SJSCA throughout the upcoming years. We wish them all the best and look forward to seeing how they will continue to shape the journal's (new) identity.

Finally, we would like to thank the editorial board for their collaboration and stimulating discussions over the past four years. Thanks to our editorial assistant, Nathalie Garbely, her dedication and careful eye, our journal has improved in many ways. Merci Nathalie! Our job as responsible editors was also tremendously facilitated by Christiane Girardin, the secretary of the Swiss Anthropological Association, who always made sure that all administrative processes ran smoothly. Thank you for that! A last big thank you goes to Ellen Hertz, the president of the Swiss Anthropological Society, who supported us with conviction. She welcomed our ideas regarding the journal's development with open arms, always lending us a helping hand if needed and encouraging us to push further. Merci Ellen for your support and insight!

Laura Affolter, David Loher, Isabelle Zinn

After a quarter-century as *Tsantsa*, this issue marks the first appearance of the new Swiss Journal of Socio-Cultural Anthropology (SJSCA). The transition to a brand new visual identity and team of editors will be completed with the next issue. For now, we carry the legacy of *Tsantsa* and an ambitious plan to bring the journal to a new generation of readers and scholars. To mark this rite of passage – and the liminal stage we are left in – we wish to express our deepest gratitude to the departing editors and all the remaining members of the editorial team who have been unwavering in their critical guidance throughout this transition. With their support, we will be able to successfully launch the new SJSCA as a forum for debate that can help define the future agenda of socio-cultural anthropological research.

Matthieu Bolay, Filipe Calvão, Joanna Menet

References

- Bennett Ross, Jane.** 1984. "Effects of Contact on Revenge Hostilities among the Achuara Jivaro." In *Warfare, Culture, and Environment*, edited by R. Brian Ferguson, 83–124. Orlando: Academic Press.
- Harner, Michael J.** 1962. "Jivaro Souls." *American Anthropologist* 64 (2): 258–72. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1962.64.2.02a00020>
- McGreevy, Nora.** 2020. "Oxford Museum Permanently Removes Controversial Display of Shrunken Heads." *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 16, 2020. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/oxford-museum-moves-controversial-human-remains-storage-180975805/>
- Rubinstein, Steven L.** 2004. "Shuar Migrants and Shrunken Heads Face to Face in a New York Museum." *Anthropology Today* 20(3): 15–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0268-540X.2004.00268.x>
- Turner, Geoffrey E. S.** 1944. "53. Counterfeit 'Tsantsas' in the Pitt Rivers Museum." *Man* 44(May): 57. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2792098>
- Up de Graff, F. W.** 1923. *Head Hunters of the Amazon: Seven Years of Exploration and Adventure*. Garden City, N. Y.: Garden City Pub. Co.