

Nachgefragt: Interview mit Prof. Dr. Ana Margarita Valdovinos Alba

Margarita Valdovinos ist Professorin am Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas der Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México und hat u.a. als Gastwissenschaftlerin der Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung am Ibero-Amerikanischen Institut Berlin und am Ethnologischen Museum Berlin (Dahlem) geforscht.

Frau Valdovinos, nach einem B.A. in Ethnologie an der Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH) in Mexico City haben Sie ein M.A.-Studium in Ethnologie, Vergleichender Soziologie, Musikethnologie und Vorgeschichte an der Université Paris Nanterre in Frankreich abgeschlossen. In ihrer Masterarbeit und Doktorarbeit haben Sie die Gesänge und rituellen Tänze der Cora (Náayeri) in West-Mexiko untersucht. Was genau haben Sie gemacht?

My research about Náayeri ritual songs and dances was a method to try to understand what was the importance of the context of initiation for the ritual songs. The Náayeri people perform still nowadays a series of rituals, in which ritual specialists will perform very long and complex ritual songs. I wanted to understand how this tradition can be passed through time without the use of writing. In this context, rituals become the object that allows this transmission. In order to understand these Amerindian traditions, I realized through my research that even if there is not a written text that serves as support of memory, all the elements of ritual offer the ritual specialists a support to guide them through their performances and remind them about how these songs must be chanted.

Dafür haben Sie vermutlich Felduntersuchungen durchgeführt. Wie muss man sich die vorstellen?



Foto: privat

In this context, fieldwork is a very complex activity. People having been doing these rituals for centuries, but at the same time they have been the object of discrimination since the Colonial period. In order to research about these rituals, we have to establish a more personal relationship with people and that takes a long, long time. So, I started studying these chants after ten years working with the Náayeri people and after that I was able to know more the people and the people knew me, so that I can start visiting them to see the rituals and to talk to them about these performances. At this point they were friends, so that I could have a different relationship, from which I established my research. It was also very intense because they live in very isolated places in the mountains. In order to get there, I used a lot of time travelling and, once I was there, I normally stayed several months; once I stayed a whole year. So, the interaction is very intense.

Während erster Postdoc-Aufenthalte an der Universität von Texas in Austin haben Sie sich mit Anthropologischer Linguistik beschäftigt. Kann man das als Fortsetzung Ihrer vorhergehenden Forschungen verstehen oder eher als einen fachlichen Wechsel? Was hat Sie an die Universität von Texas gebracht?

At the University of Texas, actually, I did my first postdoc and I went there because I was working with William Hanks, a professor in Linguistic Anthropology, who worked with Maya people and worked a lot about rituals. So, I was interested in trying to understand language from a different perspective. But I was also able to follow linguistic classes and to deepen into the linguistic analysis and that served me a lot because I could do a better transcription of my materials and analyse some linguistic aspects that I wasn't able to understand before. And this is an important part of my work because afterwards I was trying to compare how rituals were transcribed and translated at the beginning of the 20th century as I was studying the Náayeri materials that a German ethnologist, Konrad Theodor Preuss, gathered in 1905. I tried to compare how he analysed his materials and how my materials were influenced by the way I was transcribing and analysing the text. So, it was a very important step in my research. I think that at this point it is important to say that one of my main goals in this research, that was not at the beginning but became very important as much as I was working with this particular subject, was that I needed different perspectives that were given to me by different disciplines. So, I was dealing with ethnology, of course, but also linguistics, history and epistemology. And so, it was the complexity of the interaction of all these phenomena that I was seeing that demanded me to go and see what was going on from different disciplinary points of view.

In den letzten 10 Monaten haben Sie im Rahmen des French Institutes for Advanced Study Fellowship Program am Institut d'Études Avancées de Paris über Yucatec Maya geforscht, also über eine Maya-Sprache, die auf der Yukatan-Halbinsel gesprochen wird. Wie ordnen sich diese Untersuchungen in Ihre bisherigen und anderen laufenden Forschungen ein?

This is a very interesting question. Well, my research among the Náayeri was in Northwestern Mexico, and it was about a very traditional context, in which language was used in a particular way. My whole project is about philology, and that is like the traditions of usage of language in their relationship with texts. In the Northwest, I was trying to study how the people were dealing with traditions without text, but also how in the anthropological tradition, we transformed these traditions into texts and we analysed them through these written versions. In the Yucatec case that I'm studying now, it is a completely different context. For example, I don't work in traditional settings but in the cities, where I am working with Mayan teachers teaching their language as a second language and trying to see how their language becomes an object of knowledge about the language itself. I analyse how teachers speak about their language and how this way of speaking about their language becomes, in a certain way, a discourse that will be present in all the graphic materials they create to give a class of Maya as a second language. It is like the other extreme of this

phenomenon, about how Indigenous languages interact with writing and how can we understand languages as objects of knowledge.

Bereits 2005 während Ihrer Doktorarbeit hielten Sie sich mit einem DAAD-Forschungsstipendium am Ibero-Amerikanischen Institut in Berlin auf, in den Jahren danach und bis heute wiederholt als Gastwissenschaftlerin und zuletzt als Forschungsstipendiatin der Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. Was ist der Grund für diese wiederholten Aufenthalte?

Well, my relationship with Germany and in particular with Berlin started in 2005 as I realized that the research, I was doing about the ritual chants of the Náayeri People, was something that was already started at the beginning of the 20th century in that, as I mentioned, Konrad Theodor Preuss conducted research among the Náayeri and recorded and registered several ritual chants. For me, it was very important to understand what was the work of Preuss and what were his observations. So, I started going to Berlin, first to learn German, but also to visit the archives and understand what kinds of materials were there in order to see them and study them. I started visiting very frequently Germany, and in 2011 I became a Humboldtian. This stay allowed me to work in the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut and in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. And there, I had the time really to see the archives and to reconstruct Preuss's expedition to Mexico, and understand the context in which he recorded his materials and analysed them. Since then, I have been going back several times because I'm still working on this subject. And I also started new research at the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut because I was able to start working very intensively with Barbara Göbel, who is the director of the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut. We have been exploring different subjects related mainly to the inequality of distribution of knowledge and the way institutions reproduce these inequalities. This is part of my research because I believe that languages, as objects of knowledge, travel through times in art collections and are studied and become part of the intellectual worlds. And this is the case in anthropology, where not just material culture becomes the object of collections, but also languages. In several groups of research that have been created around the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut my reflections try to understand languages as objects of knowledge, and mainly, how Indigenous languages were conceived and understood from the European perspective.

Eine Ihrer letzten Arbeiten behandelt die mögliche Rückgabe von Objekten der Cora, die von Konrad Theodor Preuss während der Nayarit-Expedition 1905-1907 gesammelt und nach Deutschland überführt wurden. Restitution von geraubten oder unter dubiosen Umständen 'erworbenen' Kulturgütern beschäftigt ja seit einigen Jahren nicht nur die Politik, sondern zunehmend auch die Öffentlichkeit. Wieviel können Sie aus Ihrer Fachrichtung heraus zu diesem Thema beitragen? Ist das auch ein Thema während Ihrer Forschungsaufenthalte in Berlin?

The article you mention in this question actually was a reflection about what would be the case if Náayeri ritual objects were to be repatriated to Mexico. What I did in this article is to try to reflect about all the things that I know about these objects that I've learned through my research experience, and to see through these elements the complexity of a repatriation

of objects. And what I see is that every object in a museum has, of course, a past life in which the object had a function in the culture where it was created. But then objects have, what I call a 'Nachleben', that starts maybe after this life they originally had.



Margarita Valdovinos driving to a Náayeri village with Felícita. Foto: privat

This afterlife is very complex also and should be understood in layers. Of course, it's important to see if these objects were taken away in a good way or if they were stolen or just taken, and the implications of these acts. But we also have to see the concrete story they have after they started to be part of a collection in a museum. In the case of the Berlin collection of Northern Mexico it was very interesting to see that these objects are contaminated because they were treated with DDT and they were also saved during the Second World War in mines that were contaminated with cyanide. So, returning these objects would imply a very complex physical process and many political situations because, for example, if these objects were given back to the Indigenous people in Mexico, where they were taken off, these people would need several protocols to be able to handle these objects with the care they deserve. So, it's not just a culture asking for objects and Germany, or any other country, returning objects. It's a very, very complex and very long and very expensive process that has to be taken into account. So, while my research has helped to think these horizons and the questions that may arise in repatriation processes, I think I have been able to enriching this discussion and also to think that objects of knowledge that can be physical objects, material objects, but also intellectual objects. Languages are all the time travelling around and when they travel, they influence themselves and they influence the context where they are received or handled. And this circulation of knowledge is also one of

the main subjects that I try always to think about because it will tell us about the other cultures, but also about our own culture.

Sie beschäftigen sich auch mit der zunehmenden Digitalisierung von Archiven und den damit einhergehenden audio-visuellen Möglichkeiten, Anthropologie und anthropologische Forschung der Öffentlichkeit besser zugänglich zu machen. Können Sie dazu ein paar Sätze sagen?

The digital world is a very, very interesting field of research. Normally we take it just as a tool for recording or registering elements in the field, but I think it has become an object of knowledge by itself. Digital materials become also objects of knowledge and these objects of knowledge circulate and transform the social worlds where they are used. My work in the research groups that Barbara Göbel has created are directed to try to understand how a digital object can become something that will reunite different fields of society. The academic world normally is closed and it's very difficult to produce knowledge that will reach, again, the communities at the origin of this knowledge. As an anthropologist, for example, I would say how hard it is sometimes to produce articles or books for Amerindian people. For example, we did a CD with the recordings that Preuss did in 1905, and we wanted to bring them back to the community to let them know that there are these recordings and they are part of their history; and bringing them back was very complex. So, what I've been doing also is to try to analyse the process through which digitalisation may have a different impact in the way knowledge circulates. This is also very interesting because for me, digitalisation and the use of all the digital technologies that we have nowadays is somehow related also to the first recordings we could have in anthropology, as Preuss's, which were made with a phonograph and were recorded in wax cylinders. Even if this is not digitalisation, it is another procedure that allows recordings and registers of things that normally couldn't have been recorded or saved for the future. So now digitalisation allows this type of materials to circulate more easily, and at the same time it poses new questions. Here again, the question of inequality is very important because the digital turn has brought of course the possibility of bringing things further away and to let more people know these materials. But at the same time, it brings also a very complex world in which some people in the world are familiar with this technology and other people from the world are not. So, I am also interested in trying to reflect about these questions that are very important when we work with people that live in a very different cultural context.

In Ihrem Curriculum Vitae fallen Ihre zahlreichen, auch länger andauernden Auslandsaufenthalte ins Auge, nicht nur in Paris und Berlin, sondern auch in Austin, St. Andrews, London, Manchester und Sankt Petersburg. Welche Bedeutung hat diese Internationalität für Ihre Forschungen und für Sie persönlich? Wie weit sind diese zahlreichen Wechsel der Orte und Kulturen bereichernd oder auch anstrengend?

I think the possibility of being in several academic contexts has been very enriching for several things. Well, on the personal level, I was able to meet many researchers and different schools of thinking. On an academic level, it was also very important because as an

anthropologist, I was able to understand academic cultures and the way knowledge is produced in each one of these contexts. I think this was one of the things that helped me in my research because I was able to understand that every time that we deal with a theory or an analysis of a cultural phenomenon, we are dealing also with a whole school of thinking.

Neben Ihrer Muttersprache Spanisch sprechen Sie fließend Englisch, Französisch, Deutsch und auch gut Italienisch. Das erleichtert natürlich den Zugang zur Kultur und zu den Menschen in den jeweiligen Gastländern. Wie weit bleibt Ihnen während Ihrer Forschungsaufenthalte, die sicher mit Arbeit dicht gefüllt sind, noch Zeit, in das kulturelle Leben von z.B. Paris oder Berlin einzutauchen und vielleicht persönliche Kontakte auch zu Menschen außerhalb Ihrer fachlichen Umgebung aufzubauen? Und bleibt Ihnen Zeit für andere Dinge, die abseits der Wissenschaft und Ihrer eigenen Profession liegen?

Well, in every of my research stays, I've stayed for different periods. I think it is very nice to be able to stay longer because that allows us more time to get to know our colleagues and research groups and also to understand the cultural perspective in which they live and they work. Of course, it is important to take some time to understand the culture and to try to learn the language. I think one needs to do a lot of effort to get to a better level of linguistic abilities. This is always good because the relationships that we can establish with our colleagues transform themselves at the moment that we start speaking their language. I think it is also important to try to find our space in this cultural context, because we can work better. So yes, it has been great that I have been able to stay longer in Paris and in Berlin, and I think my academic contacts are also richer and deeper because I have been able to have this time. I think this is one of the greatest things about the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung.

Und am Ende ein bisschen Deutsch. Ja, es war total interessant, mit meinen Kollegen Deutsch sprechen zu können, und ich danke Ihnen für dieses Interview.

*Die Fragen stellte Jörn H. Kruhl, Sprecher der Regionalgruppe Rhein-Main.
Die Antworten von Frau Valdovinos wurden von einer Audionachricht transkribiert.*