

22

Father Wilhelm Schmidt, Indigenous beliefs and Oceanic collections in the Vatican's Anima Mundi Museum

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In a biography of the history of Pacific archaeology, Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954) is a notable contributor with a wide sphere of influence. He demonstrates the entwined nature of the roots of ethnographical, anthropological and archaeological research in the early stages where disciplines engaged with remote and largely unknown Indigenous peoples.

In 1906, Schmidt quoted one of his mentors, Friedrich Ratzel, in rejecting the belief of the separation of humankind into the so-called *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*, or ‘progression’ from nature to culture (Brandewie 1990:102–103). His life’s work would try to clarify the problem:

For a long time people have been concerned in great detail mainly with those groups which have the most highly developed cultures, so much so that these groups alone began to represent mankind and were considered exclusively responsible for world history [...] the concept of mankind should not be understood in a superficial way [...] one can no longer write a world history without mentioning those groups who were till now thought

to be without history because they had no writing or left no traces of themselves hammered in stone. History is interaction! In comparison how unimportant it is whether groups have writing or not. How irrelevant to the actual doing and creating is the written description thereof. (Schmidt 1906:600, quoted in Brandewie 1990:102)

Schmidt believed that all humanity had history and culture. In his many writings, while he accepted the basic facts, he famously refuted the dominant theory of Darwinian evolution. He opposed evolutionism's application of the concept of natural law to the study of culture and society, stating instead 'that cultural growth is cyclic and proceeds in waves' (Brandewie 1982:154, 1990:103).¹ He hypothesised that cultures developed from a diffusion of ideas and technology coming out from 'innovation centres' where individuals' abilities could affect history (Brandewie 1990:185). He stimulated the study of world cultures in Europe and strove to show the value of Indigenous cultures to Europeans, contributing to an awareness, understanding and perhaps acceptance of 'otherness' (BurrIDGE 1973:17, quoted in Peterson and Kenny 2017:7).

Schmidt desired to learn, not from written history, but from living cultures – a call still echoed by Indigenous peoples today. His earliest ethnographic writings² ushered in a new era of study of so-called 'hunters and gatherers'; he stressed their similarity, 'true humanity', morality and 'intelligence' (Brandewie 1990:103, 184–185). This paper profiles his thinking and influence in what he tried to achieve at the time in relation to bringing awareness of the cultures of the Pacific to Europe, through some of the objects from the Oceanic collection in the Vatican's Anima Mundi: Peoples, Arts and Cultures Museum.

1 Schmidt criticised E.B. Tylor because 'his method was wrong ... he misconstrued or ignored the ethnographic facts' (Brandewie 1982:158). I acknowledge the important work of Spencer and Gillen in Central Australia. Until the 1967 referendum approved the deletion of Section 127 of the Australian Constitution, which stated that 'in reckoning the numbers of people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted', Indigenous Australians were not recognised as part of the Australian population (Attwood and Markus 2007; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) n.d.). Some scholars (e.g. Wood 2015:286) have interpreted s 127 as meaning that Indigenous Australians were not considered part of the 'human' population. While others have disputed this interpretation, Indigenous Australians involved in campaigning for a 'yes' vote certainly identify the desire to 'have more "status" as human beings' and to 'see white Australians ... affirming at last that they believe we are human beings' as reasons for seeking change (Attwood and Markus 2007:51–52, 130, 132, 158).

2 *Die Stellung der Pygmäenvölker in der Entwicklungsgeschichte des Menschen*, 1910 (*The Place of Pygmy Peoples in the Developmental History of Humankind*) and *Völker und Kulturen* (*Peoples and Cultures*), finished in 1914 (Brandewie 1990:185).

Born in 1868 in Hörde, now part of Dortmund in northern Germany, Wilhelm Schmidt joined the Society of the Divine Word (SVD, *Societas Verbi Divini*) and, after nine years of 'humanistic, philosophical, and theological study', was ordained in 1892 (Bornemann 1982:16, quoted in Brandewie 1990:77). From 1909 he agitated for a chair of ethnology at the University of Vienna and, in 1929, became founder, professor and head of the Institut für Völkerkunde and leading proponent of the 'Vienna Cultural-Historical School' of ethnology (Brandewie 1990:99). From the late imperial and colonial period of Europe there was interest in ethnography, but Vienna and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, situated on the western side of the 'Eastern world', were also multiethnic so there was little interest in distinguishing so-called 'civilised' and 'primitive' peoples (Gingrich 2005:78–85, n.d.). Father Schmidt 'successfully promoted the increased separation of ethnography from physical anthropology at the University of Vienna' (Gingrich n.d.). He set out a founding orientation and theory of ethnology, promoted studies of social and cultural life, and supported a 'rapid development' of 'ethnological research' (Haekel et al. 1956:1–16, quoted in Brandewie 1990:99).

Schmidt composed over 60 pieces of sacral music, published over 700 books and articles, and founded several academic journals: *Anthropos* (1906),³ which published thousands of photographs, articles and reviews and continues to be a significant platform for scientific studies today; *Monumenta Serica* (1935); *Annali Lateranensi* (1937); and *(Asian) Folklore Studies* (1942) (*Anthropos* n.d.). After 1939, he lived in Fribourg, Switzerland, and was professor until 1948.⁴ As a professor and editor, his theories influenced many young students and priests who went to live in some of the most remote areas of the world, including Oceania where they were active from the late nineteenth century on. He encouraged missionaries to learn local languages, to better understand the peoples they worked among and to 'advance the study of Völkerkunde, the world's cultures and languages' (*Anthropology Research* n.d.). Schmidt promoted a scientific approach and was the driving force for a system of research infrastructure that fostered networks that also included secular scientists, university institutes, academic journals and missionary and secular museums.⁵ He died in 1954 in Switzerland, aged 86.

3 *Anthropos: International Review of Ethnology and Linguistics*. Schmidt established the *Anthropos* Institute and Library in 1931 (in Mödling, near Vienna, Austria; now in Sankt Augustin, Germany) as a working community of editors and coworkers for the *Anthropos* journal and remained director until 1950 (Steyler n.d.).

4 He was a lecturer until 1942, then professor.

5 For example, he was president of the IV International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Vienna in 1952 and received honorary degrees from six universities.

While British anthropologists were comparatively more likely to embrace the evolutionary ideas of Darwin, the ‘dynamic and interactionist’ diffusion ideas of cultural growth promoted by Schmidt had a greater influence on German-speaking thinkers (Brandewie 1982:154; Ganter 2018:189).⁶ German ‘*Ethnologie*’ encompassed a broader study between historical and geographical perspectives of cultural groups, also including language, songs, mythical narratives, folklore, ritual and material objects (Brandewie 1990:98; Peterson and Kenny 2017:4). Schmidt refined the theory of *Kulturkreise* (‘cultural circles’) of Fritz Graebner (1877–1934) to three major stages and used a method he called ‘culture-history’ to classify and study cultural traits (see Schmidt 1931:238–239). He believed studying the historical dimension was essential to understanding the cultural data. His studies of language and material culture influenced the future direction of archaeological research.⁷

Linguistics

Initially, Schmidt’s interest in linguistics focused on the study of the languages of Papua New Guinea and then gradually expanded to include the rest of Oceania and Australia. He gained a certain degree of recognition in academic circles for the seriousness and depth of his analyses. Even today, despite all the progress made in this field, some findings of his research are still used and cited, including the term ‘Austronesian’, which he coined in 1899 to indicate a family of four related linguistic groups: Indonesian, Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian (Lukas 2006).

According to his biographer Brandewie (1990:46), Schmidt

had studied and could speak or read at least the following: Hebrew, Arabic, Syrian, Aramaic, Samaritan, either Assyrian or Ethiopian, or both [...] Latin, French, Polish, Czech, Spanish, English, Greek, Italian, and Dutch, in addition, of course, to German, and there may have been more. But it was in the comparative study of the languages of Melanesia, Southeast Asia, and Australia that he began his scientific work.

6 The thirteenth-century scholastic philosopher Saint Thomas Aquinas OP influenced Schmidt, who developed ‘encyclopaedic’ systems of knowledge (Brandewie 1990:77–91, 344; Swain 1993:72).

7 His *Kulturkreise* theory also influenced researchers in Australia, including Norman Tindale and D.S. Davidson, who studied ‘spatial distribution of material culture and patterns of diffusion’, as well as Joseph Birdsell and Carl Strehlow (Peterson and Kenny 2017:18, 361).

Known for his study of language families of the world:

Why did he begin with Melanesia and the South Seas? Because of his contacts with SVD missionaries, who had recently opened a mission in New Guinea, in the part known at that time as *Kaiserwilhelmsland* (1898). Schmidt's very first publication is a reworking of ethnographic materials collected by Fr. Vormann, a missionary in New Guinea. He already realized what valuable contributions missionaries could make to ethnology, especially to religious ethnology and to comparative religion. (Brandewie 1990:46–47)

Brandewie summarised Schmidt's contribution in the linguistic field: 'He proved that the languages of Oceania are most closely connected with those of South Asia.'⁸ He was the first to show the order existing in the languages of Australia' (1990:344). In 1919, Schmidt published *Die Gliederung der australischen Sprachen* (The structure of Australian languages).

Urmonotheismus: 'Primeval monotheism and primeval revelation'

The best known among Schmidt's numerous academic publications is the 12-volume monumental work *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (The origin of the idea of God), composed between 1912 and his death. For Australia, he had the help of Father Ernest Worms's fieldwork, which was published in 1968 as *Australische Eingeborenen-Religionen* (Australian Aboriginal religions). Using the 'cultural circle' theory, Schmidt believed the original message from God to humankind was found not in the religions of the so-called 'higher civilisations', but in those groups labelled at the time as having 'animistic beliefs' – that is, those peoples who still lived close to their environment (God), and were connected to the seasons and animal migrations, for example. Schmidt tried to attribute to each cultural circle a specific type of religion, concluding that in the most ancient cultures, that is, those with the simplest material culture, *monotheism* was the original form of religion, where traces of belief in a Supreme Being are still found.

8 Schmidt's identification of the close connection between Oceanic and South Asian languages, specifically those within the Austronesian language family, is still current. Austronesian languages are spoken throughout the Malay Peninsula, Maritime Southeast Asia, Madagascar, islands of the Pacific Ocean, the Philippines and Taiwan. It is the fifth largest language family by numbers (Blust 2008).

Schmidt thus reversed the then popular viewpoint that monotheism came at the end of the religious evolution of humanity. He believed the contrary was true: if we want to know something of the original message of God, we must learn from these older cultures (*Altvölker*). What takes place after is not evolution, but degeneration. Schmidt dramatically concluded *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (1931:289–290):

as external civilization increased in splendour and wealth, so religion came to be expressed in forms of ever-increasing magnificence and opulence [...] more priests and servants, more sacrifices and ceremonies were instituted [...] despite the glory and wealth of the outward form, the inner kernel of religion often disappeared and its essential strength weakened. The results of this, both moral and social, were anything but desirable, leading to extreme degradation and even to the deification of the immoral and antisocial [...] But all the while, the ancient primitive religion still continued among the few remainders of the primitive culture, preserved by fragmentary peoples driven into the most distant regions [...]

Schmidt spent most of his life in Europe,⁹ relying on the fieldwork of his trusted collaborators for precise ethnographic materials, most of whom were also SVD priests. These included Paul Schebesta for the peoples at the time known as the ‘Bushmen’ and ‘Pygmies’ (Africa and Southeast Asia), Wilhelm Koppers and Martin Gusinde for the Fuegini (South America), Philipp Beck among the Negritos in the Philippines, and Franz Kirschbaum and Georg Höltker for peoples in Papua New Guinea.¹⁰ All were scholars who in one way or another made their contribution in the field of ethnology. Through them, Schmidt amassed a large amount of material about the ‘existence of a belief in a high god’ at a time when anthropologists could not ‘find anything but “supernatural powers”’ (Rahmann 1975:211–212).¹¹

9 Giving guest lectures in Japan, the USA (Princeton and Berkeley) and notably China in 1935, where he lectured at Yanjing and Qinghua universities, while based at Furen University (Anthropos n.d.).

10 Kirschbaum lived on the Sepik for over 20 years, from the founding of Marienberg in 1913 to 1939, immersed in the study of languages and cultures. He accompanied several ethnographic expeditions and sent hundreds of works to Rome in the 1920s and 1930s, which were displayed in the 1925 exhibition and the new museum.

11 His associate and critic Father R. Rahmann described *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* as ‘a warm-hearted apology [...] for primordial man’ (Rahmann 1975:212).

The Vatican's 1925 exhibition

Schmidt was an early proponent of what are known today as world culture museums. He founded the museum at St Gabriel, a large SVD mission community outside Vienna, established in 1889, and by around 1900, objects were arriving from China and Oceania for an exhibition. Focused on agriculture, academic education and research, St Gabriel had an extensive library and through the reputation of Schmidt, developed an image as a community engaged in scientific research worldwide.

From 1923 to 1928 Schmidt was called to Rome to establish museums for 'comparative religion and ethnology' and Pope Pius XI, a visionary and 'man of science', invited him to organise the great Vatican Exhibition of 1925 (Schmidt in Bornemann 1982:166, as quoted in Brandewie 1990:178). The exhibition included objects already in Rome at the Museo Borgiano of Propaganda Fide – such as the statue of the god Tu, sent to Pope Gregory XVI in 1836 from Mangareva in Polynesia (inventory no. 100189) – as well as literally tens of thousands of objects from communities around the world (Figure 22.1). It was an opportunity for Schmidt to explain his categorisation of world cultures through the display of cultural artefacts, and demonstrate his central theories of *Kulturkreise* and *Urmonotheismus*, to 'put gradually together from many faded fragments a life-like picture of this [original] religion' (Schmidt 1931:289–290).

Schmidt found preparation for the exhibition 'strenuous and taxing', working every day 'without a break' (Schmidt, quoted in Brandewie 1990:181). It opened according to schedule on 21 December 1924 and remained open for a year, attracting over a million visitors and displaying 100,000 objects, with dioramas, explanatory panels, photographs, maps and paintings. Held in 24 specially designed pavilions inside the Vatican State, the Ethnology Hall was where 'hunter-gatherers' had the most important space, then 'nomadic herders' and then 'more recent civilizations' from Melanesia and New Guinea. It was a great success. Pope Pius XI spoke of it as a 'book of world cultures', the complexity of humanity offered to a European audience ravaged by one world war and heading into another (Aigner et al. 2012). Pius XI decided to transform the exhibition into a permanent museum, locating it in the Lateran Palace in Rome. Sixty per cent of the objects were returned to the communities who lent them, as promised; only a core collection remained for the permanent museum.



Figure 22.1. *Iniet* figure, Gazelle Peninsula, New Britain, Papua New Guinea.

Before 1910. Stone, red ochre. 38.5 × 15 × 5.5 cm.

Source: Photo Copyright © Governorate of the Vatican City State–Directorate of the Vatican Museums (inv. 109090).

Schmidt looked to the example of Bernhard Ankermann and Fritz Graebner who, as curators of the rich ethnographic material in the Berlin Ethnological Museum, succeeded in displaying their theories of *Kulturkreise*. For Schmidt, the Vatican's new ethnological museum, solemnly inaugurated on 21 December 1927, provided an opportunity to both educate and demonstrate intangible cultural beliefs such as religion. He was the first director of the museum, now called Anima Mundi, from 1926 to 1939. Representing Australia and the Pacific world, the first room was dedicated to Insular Southeast Asia, the Philippines and Micronesia; the second to Polynesia and Melanesia; the third to New Guinea and Australia; and the fourth to Africa (Figure 22.2). A model of a *Haus Tambaran* from the Sepik River, still in the museum today, was one of the main attractions. The French Marist missionary Father Patrick O'Reilly sent a collection from Bougainville, including a commissioned carving of the Madonna in local style by Joseph Guenou (Figure 22.3). Schmidt also collaborated with other well-known anthropologists, including Gregory Bateson, who couriered feathered shields from Kirschbaum in Papua New Guinea to the museum in 1930 (Aigner and Mapelli 2022).¹²



Figure 22.2. 'Rongorongo tablets', Rapa Nui (Easter Island).

Coated plaster with etchings. Late nineteenth – early twentieth century.

Source: Photo Copyright © Governorate of the Vatican City State–Directorate of the Vatican Museums (inv. 124713; 124714).

12 In 1922 the superior general of the SVDs, Father William Gier, went to Papua with Father Bruno Hagspiel, who published *Along the Mission Trail: III. In New Guinea* (1926), which recounted local rituals and objects, including feathered 'shields' (see Boissonnas 2018:110).



Figure 22.3. Left: the artist Joseph Guenou (Toroa people) with his life-size wooden carving of Madonna and a suckling baby Jesus in local style, with red hair and skirt, in 1935, Rorovana, Bougainville. Right: *Madonna and Child* (Rorovana, Bougainville), by Joseph Guenou. Early 20th century. Wood, pigment.

Source: Left: Photo © Marist Archives, Rome (APM 2507). Right: Photo Copyright © Governorate of the Vatican City State–Directorate of the Vatican Museums (left: inv. 112773; right; inv. 112773).

Archaeology was exemplified in the 1925 exhibition by the *Sala della Preistoria* (Prehistory Gallery), which Schmidt specifically wanted included in the new museum.¹³ The internationally famous French scholar of prehistory, the abbé Henri Breuil (1877–1961), gave him many objects relating to France. However, Schmidt wanted a wider representation. He spent three weeks in Paris with Breuil in 1926 and then included archaeological materials from Africa, the Americas and Australia in the new museum.¹⁴ *Anthropos* had

13 For much of this information, I follow Cook (2016).

14 Viktor Lebzelter (1889–1936) from the University of Vienna was partly funded by the Vatican (1926–28), through Schmidt, to travel to the Kalahari Desert and collect materials and information related to the San people, once known as 'Bushmen'. However, Schmidt worried that Lebzelter was focusing too much on collecting archaeological rather than ethnographic material (Cook 2016:42–45). Schmidt's general view was that it was more important to focus on the present than on the distant past. According to him, the key to the original message of God, in fact, could be found more in the living tradition of the most remote Indigenous groups than in what he saw as the silence of the archaeological past.

published early articles relating to Pacific archaeology in 1909–10, including the first accounts and illustrations of Lapita pottery by Father Otto Meyer MSC (*Missionnaires de Sacré-Coeur*, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart: Casey 1936:94; Dotte-Sarout and Howes 2018; see also Howes, **Chapter 15**, and Spriggs, **Chapter 24**, both this volume). Meyer had ‘discovered’ the Lapita pottery in 1909 on the island of Watom (New Britain) and sent examples for the 1925 exhibition, which were returned to Rabaul in New Britain when it closed. In 1947 German Father Ernest (Ernst) Ailred Worms (1891–1963), who lived in Australia from 1930, sent ‘Kimberley points’ and other archaeological materials (Figure 22.4).¹⁵ Extensive documentation still exists at the Anthropos Institute of stone artefacts acquired by Father Höltker in New Guinea from 1936 to 1939, including the ‘magic stone’ (Figure 22.5) in the museum collection (inv. 125794) (Howes 2018).

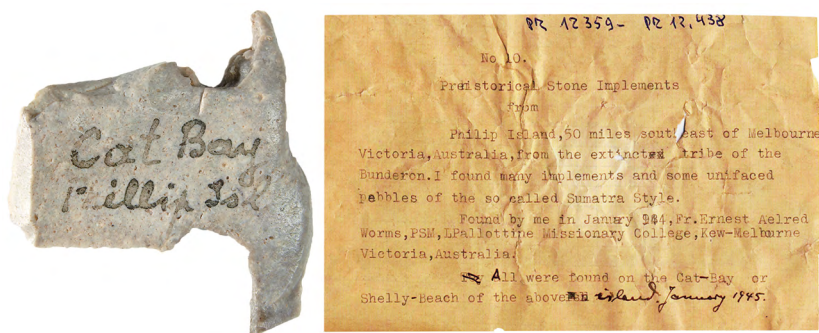


Figure 22.4. Example of stone (flint and chert) from Phillip Island, Victoria, Australia with note from Fr Worms concerning microliths collected on Phillip Island in 1945.

Source: Photo Copyright © Governorate of the Vatican City State–Directorate of the Vatican Museums (inv. 127073).

¹⁵ Worms was also interested in archaeological items from inland areas, such as from Broken Hill, but particularly on Phillip Island, in Victoria. Special attention was given to the Bunderon or Boonwurrung people – because of colonisation their numbers had waned, to the point that Worms had erroneously written that the stone flakes he sent had come from the ‘extinct tribe of the Bunderon’. But on a reconnection journey, we learnt they continue to thrive and are now known as the Boon Wurrung people of Victoria (Aigner and Edizioni Musei Vaticani 2017:84–85).



Figure 22.5. 'Magic stone' from the Noup River, Rai Coast, Madang Province, Papua New Guinea.

Source: Photo Copyright © Governorate of the Vatican City State–Directorate of the Vatican Museums (inv. 125794).

Importantly, Father Schmidt's work drew attention to the significance of Indigenous cultures, a counteraction to the dominant theories of the time. Although his emphasis on the belief in a Supreme Being was criticised (Sharpe 1975; Swain and Australian Association for the Study of Religions 1985), he affirmed the intrinsic value and sophisticated beliefs of Indigenous spirituality and culture, promoting Indigenous peoples as highly civilised (see Wood 2015). Because of this, ethnology came under *Geisteswissenschaften*, the humanities, rather than *Naturwissenschaften*, the natural sciences (Brandewie 1990:343). Schmidt emphasised that ethnology belonged 'to a brand of history' that he called 'culture-history', where humankind could also make their own history, more freely than

scientists had previously admitted (Brandewie 1990:343). His ideas may have influenced Pius XI, who often asked for his opinion; his 1926 mission encyclical, *Rerum ecclesiae* (The church), emphasised developing a 'native clergy and hierarchy' in countries with missions with 'an institution indigenous to the land' (Brandewie 1990:184–186). Schmidt positioned Indigenous peoples in world history and highlighted the intrinsic value of their cultures in closeness and protection of the natural world. Indigenous custodians today continue to speak out about disappearing ecosystems as sea levels rise around the world. Indeed, Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care of Our Common Home* highlighted these issues. Schmidt refined the method of historical ethnology, fostered an appreciation of the world's oldest cultures and 'inflamed' those he trained with a 'love for science' (Brandewie 1990:344).

Conclusion

Through the extent of his academic, political and missionary networks, Schmidt stimulated new directions in research and became a significant figure in the development of archaeology in the Pacific. The Vatican's museum was built according to his theoretical orientation. Objects, including archaeological items, from Australia and Oceania were thus incorporated into this general context. Brandewie commented:

For this, he and the museum were criticized by those who did not agree with his understanding of ethnology [...] But this approach stood firm in the museum until the whole was transferred, long after Schmidt's death, to the Vatican itself [...] Neither the culture circles nor Schmidt are represented there any more. (1990:183)

Although the number of objects on display have diminished from Schmidt's time, the main works from Australia and Oceania that he so much admired remain.¹⁶ In the new layout, the result of renovation work started in 2017, many examples from the Pacific continue to educate audiences in Europe today.

¹⁶ See Aigner and Miotk (2015:391–398).

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Objects highlighted in this chapter are on display at the Vatican Museums' Anima Mundi: Peoples, Arts and Cultures. The permanent Australia–Oceania display was inaugurated by a visit of Pope Francis in October 2019.

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