

The Emergence of Völkerkunde, ca. 1770 in Göttingen¹

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If anthropology is taken as synonymous with ethnography, this discipline existed as early as 1771, when the concept 'Ethnographie' was introduced in a publication by the German historian, linguist and political scientist August Ludwig Schlözer (1735-1809), who worked at the newly established university of Göttingen, in the kingdom of Hannover in northern Germany. Schlözer used this concept, as well as the concept 'Völkerkunde' as equivalents of each other, in a book on which he had worked since 1766, after returning to St. Petersburg (Russia) from Göttingen for the second time. In this book, the *Allgemeine Nordische Geschichte*, or General History of the North (Halle 1771), he 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 Lapland and the Samoyedes in the North to the Southern Slavs and the Kirgis, Kalmuks and Mongols in the South. As a boundary between Europe and Asia Schlözer proposed the Ural mountains. Although Schlözer in this work was not concerned with the Middle East (an area which had occupied him in the years 1759-1761), he did mention the old problem of Russia as 'vagina gentium', i.e. the area around the Black Sea which by Leibniz and others was considered as the migration tunnel of numerous nations.

The book was a contemporary masterpiece because Schlözer succeeded in destroying ancient views on the origin and relationships between numerous peoples, both in Europe and in Asia, and supplanted those "myths" by fresh and new ideas on the origin, kinship and migrations of nations. Moreover, Schlözer insisted that the history of these peoples (*Völker*) could only be reconstructed by paying attention to relationships between the languages and language groups instead of to mere etymologies and/or uncertain passages in obscure chronicles. In the context of this double endeavour, destruction and reconstruction, Schlözer introduced, as if in passing, the concepts 'Völkerkunde', 'Ethnographie', 'ethnographisch' and even the concept 'Ethnograph'. This is significant for two reasons: first, because it has been thought that these concepts first surfaced in later books by Schlözer and his colleague J.C. Gatterer; second, because the occurrence of the concepts in Schlözer's earlier work points to different scientific influences than the occurrences in the later works do, as interpreted by Hans Fischer and Justin Stagl. Thus Fischer, in a critical review of discussions on the early history of the concepts Völkerkunde, Ethnographie and Ethnologie (1970), stated that the earliest occurrence of the concepts Völkerkunde and Ethnographie was in a book by the historian and geographer Johann Christoph Gatterer (1727-1799), working in Göttingen, entitled *Abriß der Geographie* (1775). Fischer also observed that these discussions had been held on a narrow basis and were characterized by uncritical borrowing of sources as well as by nationalisms of diverse kinds. He mentioned that the concept of 'Ethnologie' surfaced a few years later in 1787 in a book by the Swiss theologian Alexandre-César Chavannes (as was already pointed out by Topinard 1891, but thereafter almost forgotten). Fischer remarked that especially the concepts Völkerkunde and Ethnographie emerged within the context of geography, were probably coined after the German words 'Erdkunde' and 'Geographie' and in the eighteenth eighties and nineties were used extensively in German-language textbooks on geography as well as in compilations of travel accounts.

However, as Fischer succeeded in correcting many long-held beliefs about the relative age and the origin of these concepts, he was a few years later corrected himself, when Stagl in 1974 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 volume 1773, 2nd ed. 1775). Stagl not only prolonged the history of the concepts Völkerkunde and Ethnographie from 1775 (Gatterer) to 1772 (Schlözer), but he also widened the general framework in which the formation of the discipline is to be interpreted. Instead of the connections with geography, Stagl stressed the relations with world history and with a discipline called 'Statistik' or 'Statenkunde', i.e. a comparative study of states. On the basis of Schlözer's *Vorstellung*, Stagl ventured the opinion that the occurrence of the concepts was related to the historical and "statistical" programme that Schlözer developed and he observed that Schlözer had proposed an "ethnographical method" as one of the four methods of world history.

Although these influences are obviously important, it can now be pointed out that the concepts 'Völkerkunde' and 'Ethnographie', as well as the concept 'ethnographisch' (which also occur in Schlözer 1772) not only surface in an even earlier book by Schlözer, his *Allgemeine Nordische Geschichte* (1771), but there stand in an entirely different context and are related to phenomena which, in my opinion, come much closer to the ethnographic background of the nascent discipline. Although it would be foolish to deny the influences from geography, history and 'Statistik', it can be stated (first) that the concepts in Schlözer's earlier, regionally oriented, work occur in passages which are connected with one central problem, namely the origin, descent and migration of diverse nations in the Nordic world; (second) that the solution to this problem was sought in a deconstruction of the Mosaic interpretations suggested by generations of "etymologists" by means of a theory of comparative linguistics which goes as far back as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz; and (third) that the regional scope of Schlözer's studies suggests that his inspiration primarily derived from the nations found in northern and central Europe and northern and central Asia. The problem was essentially biblical-historical in that the bible placed a constraint on history. Schlözer established that the peoples discovered in the remote parts of the Russian empire (as well as the users of the ancient Runan script) were not contained in the genealogical tables presented in Genesis X and he concluded that Moses, the presumed writer of the first five books of the Bible, "had no concrete knowledge of the peoples of the European and Asiatic North at all". This rendered speculation on the basis of these tables on the relationships between the diverse peoples in the area in the roughly 4000 years for which the bible allowed, as senseless. In this solution Schlözer was strongly influenced by the views propounded by his teacher Johann David Michaelis, Prof. of Hebrew and Oriental languages in Göttingen, as well as by the theories developed some seventy years earlier by Leibniz on the comparison of languages as "the only certain means of reconstructing the unknown early history of the world's nations" (Schlözer 1771). To this end Schlözer supplied a classification of languages of the peoples of the North, which, judged by modern standards is in essence correct as well as more or less complete, and his book stands as a watershed between the old and the new ways of historical scholarship. It was still hailed as a masterpiece by no less a historian than Carl Ritter.

Of direct interest is that Schlözer, although refraining from a definition, used the terms in connection with the concepts of "Völkersystem" (or *Systema Populorum*, a clear reference to Linnaeus), Völkerhistorie as well as with Weltkunde and Erdkunde or Kosmographie and Geographie. It thus appears that Schlözer came to coin the concepts by reference to these and other current concepts, in view of the need of a discipline on a subject which was obviously important but badly lacking, and in so doing opened a field, which, especially in Germany, but later also in the surrounding countries, was exploited intensively for years to come.

It is significant that the concepts not only were adopted extremely quickly (some forty references were traced during the twenty years between 1771 and 1791), but also were severely criticized (by Johann Gottfried Herder, in 1772), and amended: in 1782 the concept

'Volks-Kunde' appeared (in Göttingen), in 1787 the concept 'Ethnologie' appeared (in Lausanne and in Halle). In 1781 the first journal was launched, by Johann Reinhold Forster and Matthias Christian Sprengel, *Beiträge zur Völker- und Länderkunde* (27 vols. till 1793) (Vermeulen f.c.).

As to the scope and content of the new discipline, we can surmise that Schlözer had thought it sufficient to indicate by coining a Greek equivalent, Ethnographie (or nation-description), that Völkerkunde was a descriptive discipline of peoples or nations. It is clear from the reading of his books that this Völkerkunde was inclusive and that no peoples of the earth were excluded from it. However, as his older colleague Gatterer already indicated in 1773, this inclusiveness was a problem in that some peoples had no written history at all, so that they could not be handled within the mother discipline of history. It was probably for this reason that Gatterer, in his *Abriß der Geographie* mentioned by Fischer, proposed a classification of the geographical sciences in which, for the first time in the history of anthropology, the subject of "Menschen- und Völkerkunde (Anthropographia und Ethnographia)" was taken up as one of the subjects worth, indeed in need of, developing. Thus, Völkerkunde in conjunction with Menschenkunde was to be a subfield of geography, which was itself an auxiliary discipline of history. This was a deviation from Schlözer's conception who regarded Völkerkunde as a subfield of history and devised an "ethnographical method" as one of the means of revolutionizing history in general and the history of nations in particular. It is interesting to observe that Gatterer's conceptions were influential in originating the trend of "Länder-, Völker- und Staatenkunde" observed by Fischer, although Schlözer himself was also influential in stimulating research on the ethnic or national bases of historiography. His Völkerkunde was historical and descriptive, instead of comparative as in the case of Démeunier or Goguet.

The relevance of these findings is that a clearer view is obtained on the history of anthropology as a whole. In the historiography of the discipline much attention has been given to the "age" and meaning (content) of this discipline. By accepting the fact that the concepts Ethnographie and Ethnologie originated in the 1770s and 1780s as denotations of a new discipline, and by acknowledging that this discipline through various transformations came to be known as the science of cultural or social anthropology (the "science of custom" as Keesing called it), a number of problems regarding the relative datings of the origin(s) of this discipline can be solved. Thus, if we look for the origins of this succinct trend within the history of scholarship at large, it is clear (first) that the concepts of 'Anthropologie' and 'Ethnologie' are not discriminative, because the first was already known at the beginning of the sixteenth century for an in essence philosophical treatise, while the latter surfaced a little later as an adaptation of the concept 'Ethnographie'; and (second) that the period which nowadays is frequently designated as the institutionalisation of anthropology (the nineteenth century) was preceded by another important period (the eighteenth century), the end of which can be characterised as the period of the conceptualisation and classification of Völkerkunde, i.e. Ethnography and Ethnology. From this vantage point it can be seen, 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 century, underwent a terminological transformation in the 1870s (when the ethnological societies were rebaptized as anthropological societies) and emerged in its modern form only in the twentieth century.

By paying close attention to the formation and diffusion of concepts such as Völkerkunde and Ethnographie, as well as to their definitions, much insight can be won into the different national forms of coming to terms with the description and classification of the history, languages and customs of the tribes, peoples and nations of the world.

Recently, Stocking (1990) has distinguished between three paradigmatic traditions in the history of anthropology: first, the biblical (or 'ethnological'), second, the developmental (or 'evolutionist') and third the polygenist (or 'anthropological'). The Ethnography introduced by Schläzer and others definitely links up with the first of these traditions, although it must be observed that this Ethnography was intended as a correction of and a supplement to the biblical paradigm, as part of the general Enlightenment endeavour to replace religious and mythological representations by empirical knowledge.

1. This article is based on research carried out in 1984-1988 in the Netherlands during research for a masters thesis in cultural anthropology at the University of Leiden (see Vermeulen 1988), as well as on research in Göttingen (Germany) in 1991 which confirmed the central propositions of the thesis: that the concepts Ethnographie and Völkerkunde first occurred in the work of August Ludwig Slözer in 1771 and were coined by Schläzer (or somebody in his close surroundings) in an attempt to elucidate the history of nations or *Völkergeschichte*. The research is currently being continued with a doctoral grant from the Centre of Non-Western Studies (CNWS) at Leiden University (The Netherlands). Abstract of a thesis presented at Leiden University, April 1988 (cf. Vermeulen 1988).

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