



Josef Kandert<sup>1</sup>

## Ask Josef Kandert, he will tell you!

(22 July 1943 – 8 December 2022)

I first met Josef Kandert in 1967 when, after finishing high school, I had worked for a year as a documentalist with an interest in foreign ethnography at the Náprstek Museum of African, Asian and American Cultures. Two young museum curators, Josef Kandert and Stanislav Novotný (1941–2014), took me under their wing to prepare me for my future studies at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University.

Following that, I knew Josef as a kind person with a broad outlook on life, educated not only in social and cultural anthropology but also in history, geography, and more. He was always a calm and composed man who behaved in a warm manner. Without any trace of superiority, he treated everyone equally, whether he was talking to colleagues, researchers, knowledgeable collectors, or individuals who possessed some exotic objects by a mere coincidence and offered them to the museum or sought to identify and appraise collections or individual pieces from their family heritage.

His breadth of knowledge, especially in cultural and social anthropology and non-European ethnology, was truly exceptional in Czechoslovakia. This was partly influenced by the circumstances in which he joined the Náprstek Museum after graduating from high school in 1960, even before starting his university studies. He underwent a one-year internship under the guidance of two prominent scholars and pioneers of non-European ethnology in the Czechoslovak lands: expert on Oceania Milan Stuchlík (1932–1980) and Africanist Ladislav Holý (1933–1998). With their influence and the support of the museum director, Erich Herold (1928–1988), an Indologist and Africanist, Josef Kandert started off by specialising in African studies after previously focusing on Egyptology and American studies.

Since the 1950s, the Náprstek Museum had been flooded with non-European objects in collections confiscated by the communist state from castles and church collections. The aforementioned experts had to address this situation by sorting and identifying the collections, and they trained the young new colleague as well. Under their guidance, Josef Kandert gained specific practical experience in identifying and contextualising objects within the ethnographic and historical framework, acquiring invaluable comprehensive knowledge of museum collections. Whenever curators had any doubts about how any given enigmatic collection of objects ended up in the museum, the recommendation was always, 'Ask Dr. Kandert!' Josef Kandert had to be consulted in all matters concerning the objects in collections.

He naturally endeavoured to share his knowledge with anyone interested. During the tightening of the communist regime, during the so-called 'normalisation' period after 1969 when the teaching of foreign ethnography at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University was in decline, he had a brilliant idea. He organised several lecture series for the public at the Náprstek Museum, titled 'Chapters from General Ethnography'. He did not lecture alone but brought in other experts from within and outside the museum.

1 Photo: Jiří Vaněk.

These activities took place from 1977 to 1980, and the lectures on foreign ethnology were received with great acclaim. The compiled texts of the lectures continued to circulate amongst a wide range of interested individuals.<sup>2</sup>

He also devoted much attention to enthusiasts from the group known as 'Euro-Indians' (officially: members of the Nature Protection Association) who, in their free time, recreated the lives of Native Americans. He invited them to the museum for regular meetings and engaged in discussions with them about their handcrafted replicas of indigenous objects, comparing them with museum collection artifacts.

In the difficult period of 'normalisation', he adamantly kept his distance from the official politics. During that time, he became known for his characteristic and somewhat resigned exclamation, 'Ah well!' That is how he simply ended discussions on unsolvable issues arising from the stifling political and social climate. In 1977, for example, Josef Kandert, as one of few museum workers, did not sign the so-called 'Anticharter', even though he knew it would certainly not contribute to his further career advancement. What was typical of him was that on the entire day designated for persuading museum staff to sign the 'Anticharter', he spent his time at the National Library. With a mischievous smile, he declared, 'I'm going to the library; let them find me there!' And he distanced himself from the museum for the entire day.

Reportedly, due to spatial constraints at the Náprstek Museum, Josef Kandert was never able to create a new permanent exhibition on Africa, despite having prepared a script for it since the 1980s, which he continuously updated until his last days at the museum. He realised only an overhaul of the older exhibition which was open until 1986.<sup>3</sup> The planned permanent exhibition on Africa relied, amongst other things, on his outstanding publication, and still the only Czech Africanist monograph, *Afrika*.<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to his book, he generously thanked all his close colleagues from the ethnographic department of the Náprstek Museum, where he served as the head, for their advice and inspiration.

Josef Kandert drew material, both physical and written, for his publications, lectures, and exhibition preparations, including the unrealised African exhibition, not only from the museum's collections but also from his study trips abroad, where he ventured 'into the field' and could employ methods such as direct observation. After his first trip to Africa in 1974, particularly to Nigeria, he enthusiastically and with laughter shared his experiences about the general 'theory of otherness' and the practical aspect of feeling different, which he personally experienced when Nigerian children ran after him, excitedly shouting, 'White man, white man!'

Despite subsequent, mostly short-term stays in Africa (Ethiopia, October–November 1989; Zimbabwe, January–April 1991; Morocco, September–October 2005; Angola, November–December 2007) and in the USA (Chicago, December 1977; Amherst, 1988), long-term research activities abroad were not feasible given the circumstances of the time. However, Josef Kandert managed to continue purposeful collecting activities for the Náprstek Museum even in these conditions. He inspired various Czechoslovak experts sent by the state to Africa to acquire local artifacts, while also explaining to them the important criteria for selecting objects for the museum.

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2 See the following bibliography for the incomplete listing of the texts.

3 Kandert, *Afrika* [Exhibition], 1980.

4 Kandert, *Afrika*, 1984.

During the 1990s, Josef Kandert gradually began to change his style of dress. In contrast to the unremarkable fashion of the ‘normalisation’ period, he developed a preference for stylish shirts with striking botanical motifs, reminiscent of the African and American environments that had formed a lasting impression on him.

During his time at the Náprstek Museum, Josef Kandert made a concerted effort to consistently keep up with foreign literature, which was not common at the time. New issues of the journal *Current Anthropology* regularly appeared on his desk, thanks to the assistance of his foreign colleagues. These same connections contributed to Kandert’s publishing activities in relation to his research on early states. One notable result was his study titled ‘Zande’, which became part of the monograph *The Early State*, edited by Henri J. M. Claessen and Petr Skalník.<sup>5</sup>

After the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, he initially started lecturing as an external lecturer on social anthropology at the Faculty of Arts, and since 1991, also at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University. Gradually, he reduced his workload at the Náprstek Museum until he left entirely for the university environment, where he became an associate professor in 1996 and a professor in 2004.

Josef Kandert’s tenure is associated with a long museum era during the unfriendly ‘normalisation’ period, when, despite various obstacles, he succeeded in developing the Czech tradition of ethnology, social anthropology, and cultural anthropology at the Náprstek Museum, both domestically and internationally.

In our memory, Professor Josef Kandert remains as an outstanding expert and kind colleague who welcomed his friends with a characteristic impish smile.

Kateřina Klápřštová

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5 Kandert, Zande. In: Claessen and Skalník eds., *The Early State*, 1978, pp. 511–530.