FÖLDESSY Edina. — *Emil Torday's Congo Collection*

Budapest, Museum of Ethnography (« Catalogi Musei Ethnographiae », 21), 2015, 220 p., bibl., ill., index.

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- 1 The Hungarian Ethnographic Museum published a long overdue, uniquely important work, namely, African collections curator Edina Földessy's long-awaited monograph describing and analyzing Emil Torday's (1875-1931) life and work. Torday is considered to be perhaps the most significant Hungarian explorer and ethnologist of Africa with a valuable Central African (Congolese) ethnographic collection. ¹More precisely, Földessy's work presents that part of the collection which the eminent scientist donated to Hungary following his nine years of fieldwork in Africa. The author also includes a number of detailed introductory studies, containing new factual and scientific data valuable for the international community as well. In 2016, the Museum also organized a small exhibition connected to the publication of this volume.
- 2 If we consider that something finally began to stir in Hungarian cultural and scientific life and contributed to preserving Torday's legacy, this reviewer's enthusiasm about the appearance of Edina Földessy's above-noted monograph is clearly justified for the reader. In this spirit, the first thing we need to emphasize is that the author's research makes it possible to dispel a number of myths and misunderstandings about Torday. This is all the more true because, until now, we have only had but dim and uncertain knowledge about the first twenty-five years of his life and activities.
- 3 In other words, we finally found out that Torday was, in fact, born as Emil Böhm on 22 June 1875. Together with his older and younger brothers, he was the son of Lajos Böhm,

an insurance clerk and Erzsébet Mannheimer, who originally came from Csáktornya (today the capital of Medimurje County in Croatia). The family name as it is known today derives from the fact that it was changed to Tordai in 1890 by a decree of the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. However, the origin of the “y” modification is unknown.

- 4 Földessy’s revealing of the origin of the family name makes the Romanian attempt to appropriate Torday even more ridiculous: after World War I, it was suggested, based on the list of names who were promised family estates, that Torday might have had claims for Romanian citizenship.
- 5 Unfortunately, we still do not know much about his schooling and university or college studies. According to Földessy, Munich, which is often mentioned by foreign sources on Torday, cannot be ascertained as a possible place of education by the list of foreign students who received education in Germany. Maybe it would be worthwhile to review the documentations of former or still existing Munich institutions of higher education. Of course, it is also possible that Torday frequented the lectures at one university or college as a liberal arts student, and therefore, the years spent there are not documented.
- 6 As we do not dispose of any of Torday’s personal documents (they were either destroyed in the war or perhaps misplaced due to his daughter’s negligence), our last hopes are his unpublished manuscripts and correspondence, which, however, are very difficult to read. The first step would be to archive the correspondence, which, to the best of my knowledge, has already been started by Ildikó Szilasi, a young Hungarian researcher (a doctoral student at the University of Pécs).
- 7 However, thumbing through Földessy’s book, I also have to note that, unfortunately, we still do not know much about how Torday’s interest in Africa came about, other than the fact that it is generally believed that his readings, specifically of Stanley and Livingstone, inspired him greatly.
- 8 The author of this monograph also notes another significant piece of information in this respect. Namely, that “there is also a theory that he [Torday] may have been in contact with the Croatian scientist Dragutin Lerman, who also spoke Hungarian, and who participated in Stanley’s expedition between 1882 and 1896, compiling an ethnographic collection as well.” It is claimed that a friendship formed between the two of them, contributing largely to Torday’s decision to go to Africa.
- 9 Another great value of Földessy’s introductory study is her objective, factual and easy-to-follow summary of Torday’s three African trips, devoid of confusions and mistakes. We can also perceive the gradual deepening of the researcher’s awareness very clearly: the sub-section concentrating on the Hungarian ethnologist’s third trip bears the title “The Scientific Expedition,” opening up to a whole new interpretation. Working for the colonial authorities at Lake Mweru, after a stint at the Brussels Bank, Torday lived in the southeastern portion of the Congo Free State, and learned eight African languages over time (he spoke fifteen languages). There he studied the Luba culture and then later returned to the Belgian Congo on behalf of the British Museum on expeditions. When employed by the Compagnie du Kasai, he mounted his own expedition in 1907. His collection (more than 3,000 objects in the British Museum and 391 objects from the Congo donated to the Hungarian Ethnography Museum) was derived from the Kwango-Kwilu river basin area and during his Kasai studies, in particular, his ethnographic study of the Kuba people. When he returned to Europe, he published much of his work

and was awarded the Imperial Gold Medal for Science and Art (1910) by the emperor of Austria. His last publication was a contribution to the rewriting of the descriptive sociology of African races (1930). ²He is known for the significant collection of Kuba (Bushongo) Kingdom objects he collected including three royal *ndop* figures in the British Museum. ³

- 10 It is a shame that Földessy's monograph does not mention the drama concluding the three otherwise successful expeditions to Africa. In the autumn of 1909, days before his final homecoming to Europe, a rhinoceros nearly gored Torday to death, the consequences of which he bore for the rest of his life. His scientific output is rich in spite of his short life: he died at the age of fifty-six leaving behind eight books, about one hundred valuable writings (half of these research studies, the other half are book reviews), as well as a number of lectures he had given before international audiences (in Hungary, Belgium, France and the United States). These invitations to speak in public had been extended, in part, due to his serious accident.
- 11 Furthermore, the presentation of Torday's twenty-two years of academic research after the explorations and the fieldwork in Africa is perhaps a little shorter than would be required. It is true that such a comprehensive assessment is difficult because to review Torday's work completely, one needs to evaluate his results from the perspective of all the disciplines in which he engaged (the various fields of ethnography in the broad sense, (ethno)linguistics, history, geography, natural history, physical anthropology, etc.). The same is true for evaluating his rich collections.
- 12 Nonetheless, the brevity of the chapter, "Torday's Legacy," cannot be an object of criticism, considering that the eminent scholar's entry into Hungarian scientific consciousness and an understanding of both his domestic and foreign reception may ultimately result from the publication of Földessy's work, which will undoubtedly be considered an important milestone in Hungary (and hopefully, abroad as well).
- 13 The most thoroughly developed part of the album's descriptive text, in conjunction with the main objective of the publication, is obviously the overview of the collection kept in the Museum of Ethnography (which, of course, includes a series of extremely accurate, detailed and important museological descriptions of all illustrations).
- 14 Földessy typically explores the objects collected from a material ethnological perspective. She first discusses how Torday acquired his collection, followed by a presentation of the people (nineteen on this list), from whom the objects originate. This is followed by a detailed description of each item group: textiles, costumes, clothing accessories; wooden household items and other utensils; ceramic and squash objects; woven and wicker objects; weapons and tools; instruments for fishing, hunting, farming, fire ignition; musical instruments; religious life and ritual objects; emblems of power, games and excise goods, traditional means of payment, and objects related to body care and healing.
- 15 Colour photographs of approximately one hundred objects, a selection of the best material from the collection, are included in the album, among these are some carved masks and statues in wood which deserve special attention.
- 16 The African collection curator refers to the fact that the British Museum has around 2,500-3,000 black and white photos in their Torday collection, while the part of the collection that has been allocated to Hungary contains only 82 photographs. One minor shortcoming of the monograph, as I perceive it, is that although the photographic

appendices in this volume seem to come from this narrower group of photographs, the author does not pay much attention to them and, in fact, does not provide a list of photographs in the book among the indexes.

- 17 I mention also, not to criticize, but as a tribute to the significant value of the volume that it would have been useful to place a table of contents at the beginning or at the end of the work. Also, in the case of colour maps, due to the colour choices and graphics, the intended visual information unfortunately does not reach the reader despite no doubt the best of intentions. These technical deficiencies should easily be corrected in a future reprint or new edition.
- 18 This notwithstanding, Edina Földessy's work is remarkable as I seek to emphasize: not only does it function as a monograph, with its exhaustive presentation of Torday's life, work and collections, but it also reaches both a scholarly public interested in African studies and new findings, while providing an even wider audience with an album of high quality colour illustrations. All in all, it will undoubtedly inaugurate (in Hungary, at least) a new era of research on the intellectual and material heritage of Emil Torday. The documentation of previously inaccessible materials and the amount of new information available in this study should attract considerable attention in the international academic community since the volume is published in both Hungarian and in English.

NOTES

1. See S. BIERNACZKY, "Emil Torday's Bibliography. A List of His Works," *AHU MATT*, 2, 2012, pp. 1-9, < <http://afrikatudastar.hu>>.
2. E. TORDAY, "African Races: Pygmies, Bantu, Equatorial Hybrid Tribes, Sudanic Peoples, Nilotics, Nilo-Hamitics, Fulani, Khoisan," in *Spencer Descriptive Sociology*, v. 4, London, Williams & Norgate, 1930.
3. See, for example, the eighteenth century *ndop*(king shrine) figure in the British Museum collected by E. Torday from Mushenge in Western Kasai: < https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/>.