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## Working Through Colonial Collections

Margareta von Oswald

► **To cite this version:**

Margareta von Oswald. Working Through Colonial Collections. Leuven University Press. 2022, 978 94 6270 310 0. 10.11116/9789461664242 . halshs-03955923

**HAL Id: halshs-03955923**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03955923v1>**

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Working Through Colonial Collections  
An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin



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An Ethnography of the  
Ethnological Museum in Berlin

Margareta von Oswald

Leuven University Press

The publication costs of this book were provided by Sharon Macdonald's Alexander von Humboldt Professorship, the Open Access Publication Fund of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and the KU Leuven Fund for Fair Open Access.



This book is a revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2020.

Published in 2022 by Leuven University Press / Presses Universitaires de Louvain / Universitaire Pers Leuven. Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium).

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ISBN 978 94 6270 310 0 (Paperback)

ISBN 978 94 6166 424 2 (ePDF)

ISBN 978 94 6166 425 9 (ePUB)

<https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461664242>

D/2022/1869/54

NUR: 764

Cover design: Daniel Benneworth-Gray

Cover illustration: Map of Africa, drawn in 1911 by the then-curator of African collections, Bernhard Ankermann

Layout: Theo van Beurden



To my mother Anne and my father Moritz



# A visual introduction

As part of my fieldwork, I commissioned the visual artist Marion Benoit to take photographs of the Ethnological Museum. In May 2015, she traversed the Museum's different departments in order to capture one moment of the Museum's organisational present. These images are a visual introduction to this book.

The photographs of the East Africa museum storage feature objects from communities located in today's Tanzania. These are not allowed to be shown without consultation with Tanzanian partners. This is why no images of the East Africa museum storage figure as part of this series.

- Back entrance (1-2)
- Hallways (3-4)
- Archive (5-12)
- Library (13-15)
- West Africa museum storage (16-25)
- Africa photography archive (26-28)
- Location for disinfecting (29-32)





























SWDSEE 22  
BIEN 24  
HERIKT 23  
PRIKT 25

RUM 2

























Pack 1. Kongo (Democratic Republic)



Pack 2. Kongo (Democratic Republic)

M.C. Washburn

























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# Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation as part of the research award for Sharon Macdonald's Alexander von Humboldt Professorship, and was carried out at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH) at the Department for European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. I also received financial support from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the International Scholarship Program Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in the form of an 'Aires culturelles' scholarship, all of which I acknowledge gratefully.

Without the support of those who let me participate in their museum life this work would not exist. I thank all of those at the Ethnological Museum Berlin who shared their everyday jokes, thoughts, and reflections with me, and in particular Paola Ivanov, without whom none of what follows would have been possible. My gratitude for being made welcome at the Museum extends to the Museum's and the Humboldt Lab Dahlem's entire staff, but in particular to Jonathan Fine, Ulrike Folie, Silvia Gaetti, Boris Gliemann, Peter Junge, Viola König, Ute Marxreiter, Caroline Nüser, Hendryk Ortlieb, Romuald Tchibizo, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, Eva Ritz, Verena Rodatus, Andrea Scholz, Andrea Schubert, Angelika Tunis, Agnes Wegner, Anja Zenner. Mathias Alubafi and Romuald Tchibozo were also working in the Museum at the time, and I want to thank them for their research and generous contribution to *Object Biographies*. Concerning my work at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, I would like to thank in particular Christine Bluard, Hein Vanhee, Bart Deputter, and Brigitte Cornet for letting me participate in the crafting of the museum's permanent exhibition. I thank those who agreed to do interviews with me for sharing their experience and thoughts with me. Many of their reflections have become crucial points of departure for my analysis, as well as personal learning. I want to thank in particular Clémentine Deliss, Billy Kalonji, Wayne Modest, and Nanette Jacomijn Snoep for the ongoing conversation.

I am grateful to my PhD supervisors Sharon Macdonald and Béatrice Fraenkel for their continuous, encouraging, and critical engagement with this research, and their support – on all levels – for getting my research done.

Your committed reading, editing, and discussion of my research have enriched and guided this work substantially. Béatrice, you accompanied me through the ups and downs of this research, always with encouragement, great advice, and care. Sharon, I don't know how to put my gratitude into words. Sometimes it feels like you read my work more than I did. You taught me how to write. Thank you.

The academic support of Sophie Houdart and Ann Laura Stoler as members of my comité de thèse, as well as of Charlotte Klonk during a time of institutional floating also remain unforgotten. I want to thank Emmanuel Grimaud and Kerstin Pinther, James Clifford and an anonymous reviewer for their valuable reflections on this research. For their editorial work on my text, I want to thank Danielle Carter, Theresa Clasen, Deborah Cohen, Christopher Feeney, and Frank Lange.

I don't think I would have survived the period of writing without my dear colleagues at CARMAH. I would especially like to thank Larissa Förster, Christine Gerbich, and Jonas Tinius for their ongoing interest in this research – the most original thoughts in this book certainly stem from them. I also thank my other most wonderful peers-turned-friends with whom I shared the pleasure of reading and writing: Aida Baghernejad, Ulrike Gerhardt, Friederike Landau, Yann LeGall, Antonia Wagner, and Patrick Wielowiesjki. I am grateful to Stefanie Weißmann for her continuous and laborious efforts to establish the Co-tutelle contract. I want to thank Ama Walton for legal advice and mentoring.

The research seminar 'Réécrire le passé colonial: enjeux contemporains des collections de musée', as well as the related doctoral atelier at the EHESS Paris, accompanied my research for several years and the exchange with its many guests and my co-organisers Felicity Bodenstein, Damiana Otoiu, Anna Seiderer, Benoît de L'Estoile, Dominique Poulot, and Laurella Rincon contributed significantly to my research and reflections.

Other than this wonderful professional context which appears in its outlines through the names I have listed, I thank my family, my love, and my friends. To make it short: I am surrounded by love, warmth and strength which I cannot account for, and the simple thought of what you have given me makes me shed tears of joy.

# Foreword

Sharon Macdonald

This book goes behind the scenes of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin at an extraordinary moment, namely, during the 2010s, when questions of colonialism and the decolonisation of institutions came onto the public agenda in many European countries, and beyond, to a remarkable new extent, resulting in considerable and often vehement debate. Those museums that are variously called ethnological or ethnographic became key locations in which some of the most awkward and symbolically significant aspects of continuing colonial relations – cultural property, restitution, and who has the right to represent whom – were played out. In the process, the very legitimacy of these museums was questioned and they struggled to make the case for their continued existence, at the same time as looking for new modes of operating and positioning themselves.

Nowhere was the debate more intense than in Berlin, where it was planned that the public displays of the Ethnological Museum – one of Germany's national museums and one of the largest ethnological or ethnographic museums in the world – would in future be shown in the Humboldt Forum. Opening in stages since late 2020 until 2022, this exhibition and cultural complex has been mired in controversy over its architecture and historical resonances. Locating the Ethnological Museum within it only inflated the disputes further.

Margareta von Oswald carried out what she calls 'observant participant' fieldwork in the Ethnological Museum during some of these fraught years. In addition, her documentary and oral history research take her further back into the past, and her coverage of continuing developments brings it closer to the present, showing both stasis and change underway. While this careful context-setting is valuable in itself, the significance of this book lies especially in its attention to, and original analysis of, the work being done within the Ethnological Museum in relation to its colonial collections. Her focus is not so much the high-profile cases of objects subject to restitution claims or the creation of the main exhibitions for the Humboldt Forum. Instead, she takes us into a variety of less prominent locations and more everyday practices within the Ethnological Museum, where we meet not only curators but also other staff whose work – usually invisible to the outside world – also shapes what is done and what it is possible to do. Striking here is just how deeply

and widely what she calls ‘colonial legacies’ may pervade the workings of the Museum, creating problems, for example, of the names and categories in the object database, of the sheer number of objects to deal with, and of remaining toxic substances that were used for conservation. Each of these – like the other challenges for ‘working through’ that she identifies – exerts its own force, posing awkward and even intractable problems for museum staff in their attempts to do things differently. An important message of this book, then, is that any attempt at change within ethnological museums – including attempts to decolonise the institution itself – needs to grapple with such usually overlooked routine museum work and ways of doing things.

That many staff in the Ethnological Museum are aware of the problems of their discipline and institution – and that in some cases they have long been trying to address these – is another insight of Margareta von Oswald’s work behind the scenes. By introducing us to particular individuals who variously try to get things done – sometimes in creative and even surprisingly improvised ways – she not only introduces readers to museum workers who never or rarely take public stage but also shows how they are often actively grappling with the situation at hand. Here she is able to draw on her own first-hand experience of curating an exhibition in the Museum – an experimental exhibition that might have ended up in the Humboldt Forum but did not – to reflect still further on the challenges of working differently with colonial legacies.

Since Margareta von Oswald completed her fieldwork, the situation has changed further. In particular, the wider public and media attention to colonial legacies and decolonisation have continued to grow, and governmental positions have become more supportive of provenance research and restitution. At the moment at which I write, that looks set to escalate further, though readers of this book will be better able to judge whether or not the momentum continues or not. Whatever is the case, however, a thorough working through of colonial legacies depends not only on change in this and other museums’ public-facing activities but also on the more mundane – but so crucial – matters identified in this important book.

# Introduction

My fieldwork on ethnological museums started with a major conference in the summer of 2013. ‘The Future of the Ethnographic Museum’, hosted by the University of Oxford and its Pitt Rivers Museum, was the culmination of a major five-year-research project funded by the European Commission. Representatives of its eleven partaking ethnological museums, as well as pioneers in the field of museum scholarship and practice were present. The conference’s organisers Clare Harris and Michael O’Hanlon, both curators and anthropologists, stated in an accompanying article that ‘the ethnographic museum is dead’. Reflecting voices from the field, they wrote that ‘[The ethnographic museum] has outlived its usefulness and has nothing more to offer in pursuance of its historic mandate as a location for the representation of “other” cultures’ (O’Hanlon & Harris, 2013, p. 8). The provocative statement reflects what characterised the field at that particular moment: ethnological museums were facing what was described as an ‘identity crisis’ (O’Hanlon & Harris, 2013, p. 9). The demands that people – not only in academia, activism, and the field of art and cultural production but also in politics – addressed to the museum were manifold. Linked to the ethnological museums’ constitutive relation with the European colonial project, the moment was shaped by enquiries into their mission, authority over representation, and ultimately, the collection as rightful property of European museums.

These demands were far from new. In 1998, the French anthropologist Jean Jamin polemically asked whether ethnological museums should be burnt. Within the discipline, anthropologists had debated on the authority over cultural representation in both writing and exhibiting practices, ownership, and repatriation since at least the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Restitution had been put and erased from the political agenda (von Paczensky & Ganslmayer 1984; Savoy 2021). What marked this particular moment in 2013, however, were



processes of fundamental transformation in ethnological museums across Europe, which requested museums take stance with regard to these queries.

Most major museums holding ethnological collections in European capitals had gone through or were preparing name modifications, changes in leadership, the radical restructuring of permanent exhibitions, and the construction of new buildings for their collections.<sup>2</sup> In the context of these museums' transformations, their renaming reflected their search for a place within Europe's museumscape. Former denominations established links to the different traditions of social and cultural anthropology in Europe, being named 'anthropological', 'ethnographic', 'ethnological', or '*Völkerkunde*' museum. However, the large-scale museum projects of the last two decades throughout Europe typically chose names that erase this relation. Some museums introduced categories such as 'world', 'cultures', or a combination of the two in their titles.<sup>3</sup> Others chose to name themselves after a particular place<sup>4</sup> or to keep denominations linked to a particular person, usually a European collector or researcher.<sup>5</sup> Such names made the museum's position within the museumscape less legible. They also marked the profound unease governing museums holding ethnological collections, then and now: if the museums are no longer 'ethnological' or 'anthropological', which role do they choose to adopt?

With this question in mind, I planned my research with fieldwork in several European museums undergoing transformation. My research started in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin (henceforth, Ethnological Museum or Museum with a capital M) and would ultimately lead to this book. In Berlin, the debates were particularly sensitive. The Humboldt Forum, a new cultural centre, would host the Ethnological Museum's future exhibitions on Berlin's Museum Island. The project put the questions of which ruins to keep, which monuments to (re)build in Germany's capital, and therefore, which histories to honour or neglect on the political and public agenda: approved by the German parliament in 2002, the Humboldt Forum is now situated in the partly reconstructed Berlin Palace (Stadtschloss), selectively emulating the historical baroque architecture. The Stadtschloss was substantially affected by bombing in the Second World War, then demolished by the government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and replaced with the Palace of the Republic, to be finally rebuilt on the ruins of this demolished 'House of the People' (Haus des Volkes), as it was often referred to. Characterised by the coming together and confrontation of the nation's different histories, or in Jonathan Bach's words, the 'incarnations of Germany's twentieth century' – imperial (until 1918), Weimar (1919–1933), National Socialist (1933–1945), a divided Germany (1945–1990), and a reunited Germany (since 1990) – the Humboldt Forum turned into a 'conflict

zone' in which the question of how to deal with its diverse histories has taken centre stage (Bach, 2017a, p. 91). Players in the Humboldt Forum were to be the collections of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin's Central Library, and the so-called non-European collections, represented by the Ethnological Museum and the Asian Art Museum. Most of Berlin's museum collections, including those two, are part of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz; henceforth, SPK). The SPK consists of a large conglomerate of cultural organisations, including, among others, the State Museums of Berlin (SMB), the Berlin State Library, the Prussian Secret State Archives, as well as several research organisations. Employing more than two thousand people, it is Europe's largest cultural organisation (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2018). The Humboldt Forum, often referred to as Germany's 'most important cultural project of the 21st century' (Parzinger, 2011), reflected this grandeur: The costs for the building alone rose from an original estimate of 480 million euros to 680 million euros in 2021 (Bundesregierung, 2019a, p. 2; Schönball, 2019; APA, 2021).

I wanted to understand how the Ethnological Museum was to position itself within a broader museum landscape, what its mission could be, and who it was to serve. The issues raised about the Humboldt Forum, and in particular, its relation to the Ethnological Museum, pointed from the beginning to larger questions of collective memory, and thus, to politics and the negotiation of German national identity. Observing how people negotiated the give-and-take of exhibition making and related tasks on a day-to-day basis, I imagined, would provide insights into how these larger questions resonated. Which echoes would they find in the process of producing the exhibition's move from Berlin's outskirts, where the Ethnological Museum was located, to Berlin's centre on Museum Island? I imagined that breaking open the process of production would allow me to enter, at their core, the debates on ethnological museums and their historical mission to represent culture. I didn't imagine, however, that it would be precisely via the debate on national museums collections that the negotiation of Germany's colonial past would take political centre stage in the period of 2013 – 2021, the period this research is concerned with.

I started my research with a body of literature on ethnological museums and material culture at hand that conceptualised objects and museums with metaphors related to change, hybridity, and transformation. The literature applied theories from actor-network theory to conceptualise how we work with and understand museums and their collections (Gosden, Larson, & Petch, 2007). These understandings focused on the dynamic and transformative potential of museums, describing them as 'enmeshed', or as 'assemblage' (Harrison, Byrne, & Clarke, 2013). The idea that the museum is

constituted by its objects was the point of departure for my investigation, but I regarded the museum not only as a construct consisting of material assemblages but also as a set of social collections (Byrne et al., 2011, p. 4). I adopted the analytical and methodological tool of the object biography to trace and problematise the negotiation between the different layers of significations that the objects had accumulated over time and their affective and political weights that were being negotiated (Harrison, Byrne, & Clarke, 2013, p. 5)<sup>6</sup>. I distanced myself from approaches that frame the museum as a static entity, going beyond the immediate physical and temporal confines of the museum, and involving a variety of events, negotiations, and technologies. In defining the museum as a 'repository of social histories in material form' (Gosden, Larson, & Petch, 2007, p. 2), I considered the museum as a dynamic and relational entity, made up of a variety of associations between people and things in a constant state of transition.

Working in the Museum made me see these approaches in a different light. The Museum didn't feel 'dynamic' to me. I experienced the everyday in the Ethnological Museum as shaped by frustration, anxieties, complaints, slowness, and hurdles. Despite the ongoing and passionate work of museum staff, some things just didn't seem to change. The museum staff related this atmosphere to what they framed as the larger organisational 'structures' affecting museum work. The public debate and activist opposition to the Humboldt Forum – which had just started to be built – influenced this atmosphere of stagnation, or even regression, as some critics situated the Humboldt Forum. These activist positions and the curatorial work within the Museum focused the attention on the complicity between ethnological museums and colonial rule, in particular German colonial rule. Taking these changes into consideration, my questions and analytical lenses shifted.

This book takes the current transformation processes of ethnological museums in Europe as its point of departure to analyse how colonial legacies are worked with and through in the present. Defined here as colonial legacies in themselves, ethnological museums have long been criticised for their attempt to both own and represent the world. This book focuses on how these points of critique are addressed in one museum – the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, and in particular, its Africa department. How do museum staff work with collections that were collected in colonial contexts? How do the museum's colonial legacies materialise in the museum's everyday? How do museum staff relate to and engage with both the material and immaterial colonial legacies, as they become increasingly contested?

This book focuses on *how* and *why* the stubborn facts remain. Working in the Museum and researching the biography of particular objects made me realise not only how strongly colonialism had shaped the Museum's coming

into being but also how powerfully colonial logics influenced the Museum's present. I relate the resistance to change in the Museum to how colonial logics persist within it. In this research, I don't argue against change in ethnological museums – indeed, so much has changed in the decade during which I have followed this debate and which this book also traces. Rather, the book shows how deeply colonial ways of conceiving and doing the world are ingrained in the organisations we work with, how they linger and are carried along, and how they continue to act powerfully in our everyday.

### **The Ethnological Museum as colonial legacy**

My analysis departs from the observation that the Ethnological Museum is a colonial legacy in itself. I unravel the different dimensions of the collection's relationships to colonial rule in the following. I then show how in this book, I approach the Museum via an ethnography, which unfolds in the systematic working through of colonial collections.

Ethnological museums offer themselves as potential subjects for an ethnography of colonial legacies. Both in their material and immaterial dimensions, ethnological museums are a blatant example of colonial violence, as they played a crucial role in the colonial system of appropriation and alienation. They materialise contemporary anthropological ways of thinking that were informed or even structured by the racialisation that characterised the colonial endeavour. Today, the organisational character of the collections per se perpetuates the colonial construction of the 'unmodern other' through anthropological knowledge orders that themselves conceal the colonial encounter.

I work with the notion of 'colonial collections' in this book, but this doesn't mean that these collections are in themselves colonial. Many of the objects labelled as such and the related systems of governance and belief predate colonial times. The collections carry meaning and significance beyond the colonial encounter. However, these collections have been considered under and somehow limited to this attribution, due to their mode or the period of acquisition, production, and appropriation in 'colonial contexts', both in the colony and the metropole (German Museums Association, 2019, pp. 20–33). The collections stand in for the colonial and imperial histories that underlie their presence in the museum.

'Colonialism was profoundly material', argue Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Philipps (Edwards, Gosden, & Phillipps, 2006, p. 3). The materiality of colonialism didn't only concern the extraction of 'resources' (gold, rubber, human resources, etc.). The often violent acquisition of

material culture in the colonies was equally a constitutive part of the colonial enterprise and governance. Colonial collecting allowed the coloniser to research, control, and disempower societies by means of seizing their material culture, both in the colonies and in imperial centres (Abonnenc, Arndt, & Lozano, 2016; Bennett et al., 2017). This included not only a mere material seizure but also a spiritual disempowerment, such as in the context of war: some objects were deliberately taken because they were of spiritual importance to those resisting colonial conquest (see, for example, Ivanov & Weber-Sinn, 2018). Colonial collecting usually went hand in hand with the establishment of colonial archives or, put differently, the collecting of material culture was part of constituting the metropolises' archives of colonial rule. These archives supported the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of knowledge from and about the colonies (Basu & de Jong, 2016). How museum staff used both these archives and collections – in exhibitions and research – often encouraged the justification of the colonial mission and supported the contemporary conviction and narratives of European and White superiority in imperial centres. Objects became principal players in the construction of narratives about the colony and confirmed the role of collecting as central, not marginal, to the colonial project.<sup>7</sup>

Anthropology was equally profoundly material, in particular in its constitutive phase, which coincided with the heyday of European colonial rule (1884–1914). As in other European anthropology departments, the progressive institutionalisation of anthropology in Berlin was closely linked to Berlin's Ethnological Museum, then *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*, and its collecting policies. From the museum's foundation in 1873 onwards, its co-founder and director Adolf Bastian aimed to establish anthropology on the basis of the natural sciences. In that context, the collection would serve as the point of departure for research. Bastian was convinced that 'the monstrous mass [was] necessary to sufficiently represent in a systematic, methodological order the ethnological provinces of the earth in their full extent' (quoted in Zimmerman, 2001, p. 186). For Bastian, in contrast to the natural sciences, categories in anthropology had not yet been established, but would result from and be developed out of the totalising gaze on the collections. Bastian attempted to create a 'universal archive of mankind [...] to provide a real basis for the study of ethnology' (Bastian, 1872, p. iii). Defining anthropology as a 'comparative' and therefore 'statistical' discipline, 'completeness [...] is the first and most important desideratum'. In the tradition of a salvage anthropology, Bastian described this desideratum of completeness as 'eternal' ('für immer'), as in 'impossible', because he started from the postulate that 'many tribes [*Volksstämme*] are irretrievably and forever lost' (Bastian, 1872, pp. iv–v).<sup>8</sup>

The publication of the *Anleitung für ethnographische Beobachtungen und Sammlungen* ('Instructions for Ethnographic Observation and Collecting') in several editions reflected the Museum founder's mission and alludes to the kind of collecting the Ethnological Museum pursued.<sup>9</sup> The instructions put forward the aim to collect 'systematically', 'to give a preferably exhaustive image of the respective tribe's culture' and 'to raise an inventory, as it were, of the complete cultural heritage' (Ankermann & von Luschan, 1914, p. 9).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the fact that there was a need for the instructions pointed to the lack of documentation of the collections. This means

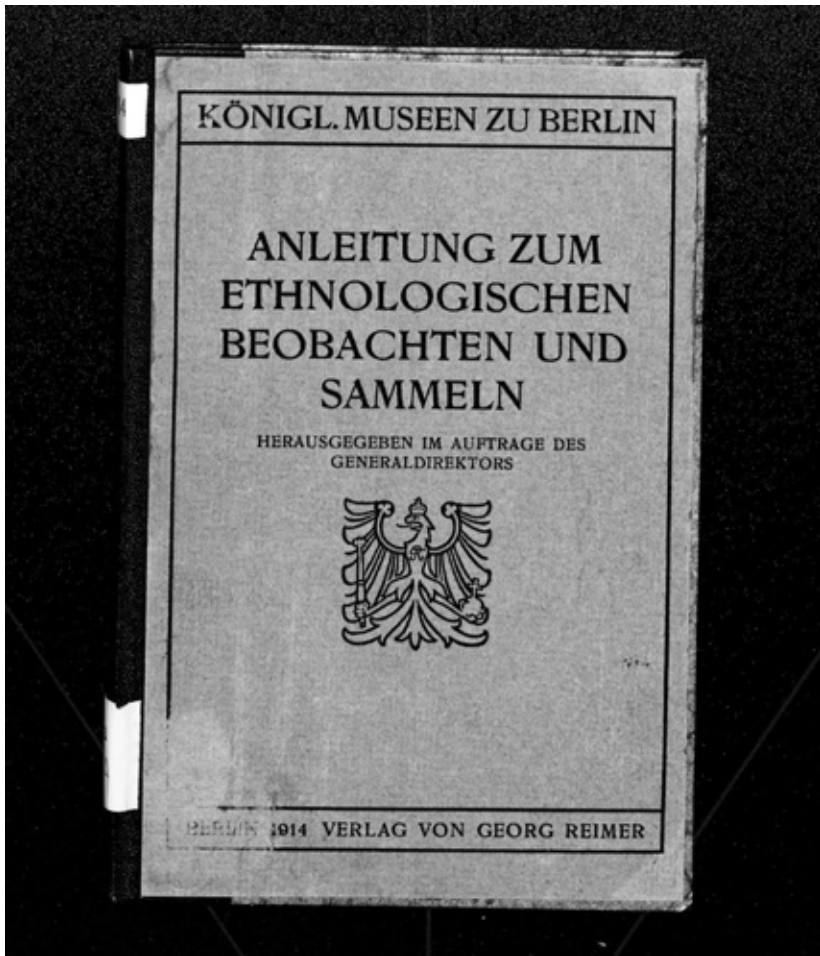


Figure 0.1. Cover of 'Instructions for Ethnographic Observation and Collecting', Bernhard Ankermann and Felix von Luschan, 1914

that, unlike other museums, which would send scientific expeditions to the colonies,<sup>11</sup> the collections were mainly provided by colonial staff situated in the colonies who served as suppliers of material culture for the Museum. It is subsequently both the collections as well as the lack of information and documentation about them that constitute the Museum's legacy.

Concerning the Africa collections, objects arrived in disproportional numbers from the German colonies, namely what were then Togo, Cameroon, German East Africa, and German South West Africa (Ivanov, 2005, p. 42). Between 1884 and 1914, the African collections grew from 7,388 objects to 55,079 objects (Krieger & Koch, 1973, p. 106). The Berlin Museum's position as the 'Central Museum' encouraged the steady growth of collections, as the Berlin Museum claimed the right of ownership to all collections arriving from the German colonies.<sup>12</sup> About 64 per cent of today's Africa collections, consisting of approximately 75,000 objects, stem from what have been defined as 'colonial contexts', be they governed by German or other European colonial powers (German Museums Association, 2018, pp. 16–23).<sup>13</sup> Ethnological museums played a crucial role in the colonial system in which 'comprehensive collecting [manifests] as a form of domination', as Mieke Bal pointed out (Bal, 1992, p. 560).

At the same time, the colonial project was backed up with ideologies, imaginations, knowledge systems, and knowledge production – in short, a mindset. This mindset justified the colonisers' mission by virtue of their alleged superiority, beyond actual colonisation – meaning the occupation of a territory and a society. As literary research has shown, 'colonial fantasies' and 'imperialist imaginations' were as much part of German colonialism as the exercise of rule. These imaginations and mentalities preceded, accompanied, and lingered long after actual German colonisation (Zantop, 1997; Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, & Zantop, 2001; Ames & Gilman, 2005). As Sharon Macdonald, Henrietta Lidchi, and I summarised it,

[e]thnographic museums, then, carry a colonial legacy not only in terms of objects acquired during specifically colonial periods and not only, indeed, in terms of the objects themselves. Questions of potentially wrongful acquisition of objects, as well as the issues of ownership to which they lead, are undoubtedly important, but they are only one aspect of the complexity of this legacy [...] Important too in considering the extended legacy of colonial relations are questions about particular knowledge formations and modes of knowledge making, the nature of the ethnographic museum and to whom it orients itself, and access to the collections and involvement in shaping their futures, in both the past and the present. (Macdonald, Lidchi, & von Oswald, 2017, p. 97)

|      |        |                |
|------|--------|----------------|
| 1880 | 3 361  | Katalognummern |
| 1884 | 7 388  | Katalognummern |
| 1887 | 11 058 | Katalognummern |
| 1890 | 12 723 | Katalognummern |
| 1893 | 14 246 | Katalognummern |
| 1896 | 17 107 | Katalognummern |
| 1899 | 25 105 | Katalognummern |
| 1905 | 36 241 | Katalognummern |
| 1910 | 48 845 | Katalognummern |
| 1914 | 55 079 | Katalognummern |
| 1925 | 60 182 | Katalognummern |
| 1945 | 66 953 | Katalognummern |

Figure 0.2 Documentation of the Africa collection's growth between 1880 and 1945, in catalogue numbers (Katalognummern) (Krieger & Koch, 1973, p. 106)

Figure 0.3, designed by the department's curator, Bernhard Ankermann, in 1911, also figures on the cover of this book. This image epitomises the constitutive relationship between colonialism and the Ethnological Museum in both its material and immaterial dimensions. The map reflects contemporary ideas of the Museum's collections, in which 'a culture', 'a tribe', or a particular 'region' could be represented through 'its' material production. Conceptions of 'tribes' and indigeneity were defined by drawing on collections, which were constructed as the materialisation of otherness, and in particular of 'savageness' and 'primitiveness'. In exhibition, the objects were used as representative of particular kinds of otherness, as fragments of cultures. These exhibition and display modes as well as the objects themselves would have implications for the ways in which notions of 'culture' were normatively employed and how they were used in social management regimes in the metropole and colonies (see, for example, Dirks, 1992; Bennett et al., 2017). At the same time, the map reveals the strong impact that colonisation would have on the acquisition policy of the Ethnological Museum: all the areas marked in dark grey – indicating 'complete or almost complete collections' – are almost identical with the German colonies (see figure 0.4). The collections are proofs of colonialism's materiality; they constitute one of colonialism's tangible manifestations. How collections were used, then – in exhibitions and research – reveals how contemporary colonial ontologies were substantiated with the help of anthropology, and in particular, its museums.

At the same time, the relations between colonialism, anthropology, and museums have been shaped by ambivalence. As Benoît de L'Estoile highlights, colonial relations are characterised by 'a multifarious process of appropriation rather than by the sheer negation of the colonised' (de L'Estoile, 2008, p. 268). These processes of appropriation, roughly situated between



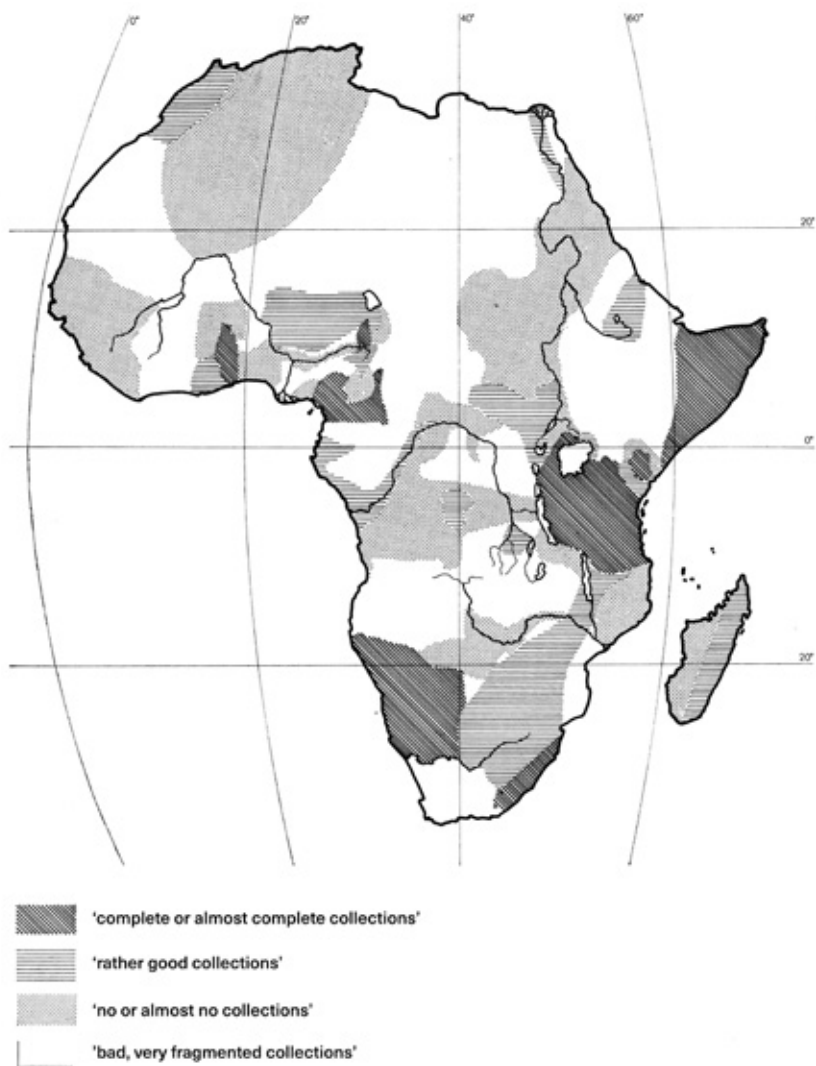


Figure 0.3 'Map with Indications on the Collections of the Africa department in the year of 1911' (authored by Bernhard Ankermann, Krieger, & Koch, 1973, p. 112)



Figure 0.4 Map of contemporary national borders and German 'protectorates', designed and used for *Object Biographies* exhibition

the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries, have historically adopted different forms and modalities, but they have often been predominantly shaped by violence, domination, and conquest. For de L'Estoile, '[a]lthough generally asymmetrical, this process of appropriation entailed, to some extent, a mutual aspect' (de L'Estoile, 2008, p. 268). This concerns the discipline of anthropology in particular. If one scrutinises the politics of anthropological research at the time – both conducted in armchairs in German anthropological institutes, and in colonies abroad – it is clearly complicit with colonial regimes of domination, appropriation, and racist misrepresentation. It also crucially reveals an interest in and defence of cultural difference, exchange, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism.<sup>14</sup> Seeing these processes of appropriation as a legacy, then, centres on the enquiry of a common history of mutual, often violent, and conflicting relationships.

As the situation was complex in the past, it is equally contradictory in the present: ethnological museums, in their attempts to transform themselves, have researched, addressed, and problematised their much-criticised missions to own and represent otherness, while risking glossing over, legitimising, and reproducing epistemologies, representations, and inequalities conventionally associated with ethnological museums' coloniality. Working through these ambivalences, contradictions, and complexities of how the colonial presence manifests in the museum's present is what an ethnography of the museum as colonial legacy attempts to illuminate and understand.

### **An ethnography of colonial legacies**

Colonial pasts, the narratives recounted about them, the unspoken distinctions by which they continue to 'cue', the affective charges they reactivate, and the implicit 'lessons' they are mobilized to impart are sometimes so ineffably threaded through the fabric of contemporary forms they seem indiscernible as distinct effects, as if everywhere and nowhere at all. (Stoler, 2016, p. 5)

It is via an ethnography that I approach the black box of the 'everywhere and nowhere at all' of colonial legacies in this book. I look at how the aforementioned relations between anthropology, colonialism and museums manifest in the present. Whereas postcolonial critique has been accused of establishing quick links and making causal assumptions between the colonial past and its continuity in the present, I try to identify and understand the ways in which people – including myself – approach the museum as colonial legacy through an ethnographic account of the Museum's everyday and the museum staff's

concrete practices. Probing the different kinds of relationships to the colonial past in the present, I examine the persistence of colonial epistemologies in particular. Working through colonial collections manifests as an invitation to grasp and analyse the complexity of colonialism's remnants in the present.

The research interrogates ways of relating to the colonial past in two modes that I mark as distinct but that are related to each other. I elaborate these modes in the following two sections. On the one hand, the analysis deals with identifying and analysing the *explicit* negotiation, use, and mobilisation of the colonial past. On the other hand, this ethnographic approach to colonial legacies interrogates 'the past as it lives now', as Benoît de L'Estoile defines it, with reference to Bronislaw Malinowski (de L'Estoile, 2008, p. 272). It focuses on how colonial presences materialise, sometimes in uncontrollable, unexpected, or unpredictable ways, and how these past presences are dealt and lived with in the Museum's everyday.

### **The mobilisation of the colonial past**

An ethnography of colonial legacies entails to understand how German colonial history is explicitly dealt with through the debate on ethnological museums and their collections. Sharon Macdonald's concept of 'past presencing' is helpful here, as it is concerned 'with how the past is related to at specified moments or stretches of time' (Macdonald, 2013, p. 16). In this case my concern is with the way in which 'Germany's colonial past and history' – defined differently by the many agents involved – is 'related to'. This means in particular how the colonial past is mobilised, negotiated, downplayed, or neglected in regard to the Ethnological Museum's collection in manifold ways – or to name even more nuances, how it is addressed, suppressed, silenced, censored, made invisible or visible.

That this book concentrates on the working through of colonial legacies also stems from the considerable developments in the field. One characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork is how research questions and foci shift when undertaking this work. In my case, my interests, in sync with the developments in the field and in the Ethnological Museum evolved towards a focus on German colonialism and its negotiation.

At the time of writing, between 2019 and 2021, the debate on German colonialism reached a momentum reflected in considerable public and media interest, presence in political debates, position-taking by different stakeholders, and policymaking. A few months after the Ethnological Museum's opening in the Humboldt Forum in the fall of 2021, there was a general political agreement *that*, and sometimes even *how*, German colonialism should

constitute a significant part in Germany's memory culture. Key events and examples include

- the government's coalition contract (January 2018) and subsequent political negotiations on a national level, including an official hearing in parliament and the definition of framework principles (*Eckpunkte*) on how to deal with collections from colonial contexts on both national and state levels (March 2019);<sup>15</sup>
- the application of public funds to provenance research, the subsequent establishment of a focus on colonial-era provenance research at the German Lost Art Foundation, and the nomination of four permanent posts devoted to provenance research in both Berlin's Museum of Asian Art and the Ethnological Museum in 2019 (BPA, 2019);
- the recurrent public positioning of the SPK, the Humboldt Forum, and its representatives as supporting restitution, reconciliation, and partnership with the formerly colonised (Parzinger, 2019; Dorgerloh, 2019).

In 2018, representatives of the government stated that 'Germany and Europe need to face their colonial history', and in direct connection with this recognition, described restitution as 'only the first step' in a process of historical reconciliation (Grütters & Müntefering, 2018). The Humboldt Forum's website states that '*Colonialism and Coloniality* is a core theme in our programme'.<sup>16</sup> The organisation is profiled to become a 'centre for postcolonial debate' (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2019; see also Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 9). The commitment to the restitution of the so-called Benin Bronzes to Nigeria in the autumn of 2021 is the latest step in a chain of events and political decisions presented by politicians as contributing to the addressing of the colonial past in Germany.

However, it was only during the period of my research that the Ethnological Museum's collections were gradually, publicly, and politically defined as 'sensitive' (Lange, 2011, p. 19), and thus contested, in Germany.<sup>17</sup> While the Humboldt Forum slowly took shape, the collections that had long been considered as unproblematic, scientific, and naturally part of European museums by museum officials and in cultural politics became 'contested', 'awkward', and 'unsettling', as Sharon Macdonald describes some of the characteristics of 'difficult heritage' (Macdonald, 2009, p. 1). In regard to German colonialism, Friedrich von Bose in his pioneering research described the Humboldt Forum as a 'catalyst of critique' and a 'discursive nodal point' – which was rapidly appropriated by cultural politics – to pin down how the Humboldt Forum functioned as a prism to problematise Germany's colonial past (von Bose, 2017a, p. 127; Federal Government Commissioner

for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, quoted in Ringelstein, 2018). Whereas the constitutive relationship between colonialism and anthropology had, for some time, been acknowledged in scholarship, both concerning ethnological museums in general and in Berlin's specific case,<sup>18</sup> in public debate, journalists and politicians only gradually constructed and perceived the Ethnological Museum as a remnant of colonialism during the period of my fieldwork. The collections subsequently became subject to 'ongoing conflicts of interest and differences of view' (Macdonald, 2009, p. 19). From 2013 to 2021, negotiations around Germany's colonial legacies in relation to the Ethnological Museum's collections – both inside and outside of the Museum – show a shift of attitude in regard to how public organisations, politics, and the public debate have positioned themselves towards Germany's colonial past. This shift is orientated towards recognising and accepting Germany's colonial past as part of the nation's histories, as well as the aim to establish a moral consensus when it comes to how this past and its symbolic and material implications are publicly dealt with. That German colonialism has most prominently been addressed in politics and a broader public via issues related to museum collections stands out.

The period 2013 to 2015, which this book focuses on, is a time characterised by political insecurity about how to handle the rising claims related to German colonialism, which preceded the successive public, political, and national acknowledgement of Germany's colonial past. An analysis of this period allows me to identify the differences of view and to point to the lines of conflict that processes of negotiation of contested colonial legacies involves *before* reaching an apparent consensus. This involves an analysis of the questions, hesitations, and resistances that accompanied this process. Here, I build my analysis in particular on my own position as the co-curator of an exhibition addressing colonial provenance and violence. Beyond the political, cultural, and social developments, which seemed to change on an almost daily basis, this book focuses on how colonialism 'endures' in the museum (Stoler, 2016, p. 7), interrogating how the past manifests now.

### **The colonial past as it lives now**

Unlike the past's explicit 'mobilisation', such as for political means or financial reparations, an ethnography of colonial legacies also looks at 'the past as it lives now' in the museum's everyday (de L'Estoile, 2008). This approach entails grasping and situating the different forms in which colonial presences manifest and act on the present – not necessarily immediately identifiable or identified as such – including the sometimes scarcely obvious, historically

grown, and possibly transformed manifestations of colonial modes of knowledge production or representations.

To examine that which remains from the past, or put inversely, 'the deep imperial genealogies of the present' (Stoler, 2016, p. 4), it is necessary to relate historical and ethnographic analysis.

As such, doing an ethnography of the museum as colonial legacy is distinct from but closely related to literature subsumed under the category of 'anthropology of colonialism', which centrally interrogates the relationship between the colonial history and present of anthropology.

Anthropologists have long recognised that anthropology is 'a daughter born out of an era of violence', as Claude Lévi-Strauss phrased it in the 1970s (Lévi-Strauss, 1973, p. 69). Rodney Harrison has argued that anthropology as a scientific discipline was founded 'out of the desire to characterise racial and cultural differences to legitimise the rule of colonial societies' (Harrison, 2009, p. 238). The anthropology of colonialism then, as defined by Peter Pels, consists in the analysis of the historical relations between anthropology and colonialism in relation to the present.

The anthropology of colonialism is also always an anthropology of anthropology, because in many methodological, organizational, and professional aspects the discipline retains the shape it received when it emerged from – if partly in opposition to – early twentieth-century colonial circumstances. (Pels, 1997, pp. 164–165)

Because the Ethnological Museum is an anthropological organisation, the analysis of its historical modes of knowledge production and, more generally speaking, epistemologies form a constitutive part of the analysis of what constitutes its contemporary working. The Ethnological Museum has already figured as a prominent subject of analysis to identify and deconstruct both past and present representations, in anthropology itself as well as in cultural studies and museum studies more generally speaking. Furthermore, the anthropology of colonialism puts anthropology's intellectual roots, tools, and methods at the centre of its enquiry. It questions the disciplines' relations, and in particular, its resistances to and complicity with colonial regimes of power. Methodologically, this meant to not only be in the presence of museum staff, to understand their everyday grappling with the remnants and residues of the colonial past. It also meant to ask past and present staff about the histories, especially recent, of the organisation and to engage in a historical research of the organisation. An anthropology of colonial legacies thus necessarily works hand in hand with an

anthropology of colonialism in order to situate these present phenomena within their historical genealogy.

I use the notion of ‘colonial legacies’ here although it is not agreed upon.<sup>19</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, for instance, whose work this research substantially builds on, has advocated that ‘colonial legacies’ lack analytical potential to depict and analyse how colonial histories matter, notably in contrast to the notions of ‘duress’, ‘debris’, or ‘ruins and ruination’ that she has herself established (Stoler, 2009; 2011; 2013; 2016). It is, however, exactly this lack of conceptual precision and an evocative argument and thus the potential for an open description and analysis of what happens on the ground that prompts me to use the term ‘legacy’ here. In contrast to Stoler’s description of the remnants of the past, often implying the shattered or the broken, the Ethnological Museum as colonial legacy seems relatively intact, even if contested. It is rather the notion of ‘working through’ that stands in for the argument here, as it refers to the analysis of how contending with the colonial past materialises in the museum.<sup>20</sup>

### **Working through colonial collections**

I first came across the notion of ‘working through’ in the context of ethnological museums in a conversation with the curator and scholar Wayne Modest. Wayne Modest coined his understanding of the museum as a ‘space for the process of working through’:

the objects sit in a space of contested, entangled relationality. ‘Working through’ implies that one has to question, debate, to feel uncomfortable; to box and fight about the objects and their meanings in the present. (von Oswald, Ndikung, & Modest, 2017, pp. 15–18)

Modest’s description resonated with my work and my experiences in the field. Working through points to hurdles, resistance, and process, as it draws attention to work. In a classic ethnographic interest, I approached the museum to understand its everyday, partaking in work practices, looking to identify the extraordinary in the ordinary. To do so, between 2013 and 2015, I worked as the assistant to one of the two Africa curators and then co-curated the exhibition *Object Biographies* as part of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem with Verena Rodatus. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a temporary programme dedicated to finding experimental formats of working with the Museum’s collections. These two different curatorial entries allowed me to do an ethnography of the Museum as a whole. I spent more time in the Ethnological



Museum than I had planned, and abandoned the comparative dimension of this work.<sup>21</sup> Concentrating on the Ethnological Museum and its collection, this research spans different work practices – unlike most museum ethnographies, which tend to focus on one aspect of museum work or to concentrate on one particular department.<sup>22</sup> In the library, archive, museum storage, conservation, as well as digitisation, I worked with museologists, exhibition designers, archivists, restorers, museum storage managers, and many more. The ethnography unfolded in working together, allowing me, to grasp what people actually did, not only what they say they did (Miller, 1997, p. 16).

Working *through* colonial collections translates the complications and adds the political and memorial aspect of museum work to the picture. English dictionary definitions of working through describe it as dealing with something that is difficult or unpleasant, to manage a problem that has many parts, or to go through a process of understanding and accepting.<sup>23</sup> In German, the different dimensions of working through unfold in their translation: working through translates as *durcharbeiten* and *abarbeiten*, *verarbeiten* and *aufarbeiten*. These notions carry different significations, histories, and connotations.

### **Abarbeiten/durcharbeiten**

*Abarbeiten* has the connotation of a to-do list, of a task to be done bit by bit, to toil away at a problem. *Durcharbeiten* means to engage with something thoroughly, patiently, from the ground up. Engaging with colonial museum collections is tedious and seemingly never-ending, always in process. The quantity of colonial collections remains innumerable: much is uninventoried and unknown to museum staff – not only for the Ethnological Museum, but for most ethnological museums in Europe. As the former storage manager once said about the conservation, storage and care of collections: ‘I had a lot of ideas in a short period of time. But then I realised that every single idea I have, I need to keep up 75,000 times’, referring to the estimated number of objects in the Africa department. Beyond quantity, colonial ideologies traversed the Museum. They were ingrained in its very structure and functioning.

An analogy with Sigmund Freud’s concept of ‘working through’ (*durcharbeiten*) would be all too easy to make here. For Freud, in short, the process of working through consists of two phases: a resistance to remembering, articulated in the patient’s sickness, followed by a recognition of the resistance, which, in turn, becomes an overcoming of this resistance and a process of healing. Ultimately, for Freud, the process of working through turns into a will to recover and, thus, a will to remember. However, and beyond the

critique of why the application of psychoanalytical concepts to institutions, societies, or nations is difficult to maintain,<sup>24</sup> this schematic description of Freud's concept risks oversimplifying the manifold ambivalences, nuances, and contradictions the process of working through colonial collections in the Museum entails. It turns the process into a progressive and somehow causal one, denying at once the many precursors, as well as relapses, recurrences, and reproductions the process may involve.

### **Aufarbeiten/verarbeiten**

In Germany, possibly more than in other national contexts, the notion of working through (*aufarbeiten*) implies, even if only tacitly, references to dealing with contested pasts and trauma more generally speaking. In particular, it references the ways in which Germany's National Socialist and, later on, socialist past have been dealt with. The notion of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, commonly translated as 'coming to terms with the past', stands in for the necessity to tackle one's own history.<sup>25</sup> Nuancing a finite idea of engaging with one's history, the notion of working through, *aufarbeiten*, refers to ongoing and inconclusive work: work that a dealing with contested pasts and their deployment and implications in the present comprehends. Working through underlines that remembering, as well as forgetting, are not passive acts, but actual 'work', active and continuous engagements. It alludes to the laborious, lengthy, and repeated efforts that working through the past involves, as well as to the multiple forms of difficulties, denials, resistances, and refusals to do so. Working through as in *aufarbeiten*, then, defies the illusion that one can get over and done with difficult pasts. What makes this process so difficult and repetitious, then, are the insistent ways in which working through the colonial past points to ongoing forms of exclusion, racism, and inequality that persist in our contemporary societies.

In their differences, the translations and their significations capture what this book's argument is about: working through colonial collections in museums is a request to engage with the depth and breadth of how colonial pasts manifest and are dealt with in the Ethnological Museum. The process of reckoning with the past as political and memorial work (*aufarbeiten, verarbeiten*) entails as much the practical, lengthy, tiring collection work inside the Museum (*abarbeiten*), as it includes grand political symbolic gestures outside of it.

Working through is not an ethnographic term. I use it here as an analytical and methodological approach that unfolds in the book's composition and structures its argument. In eight chapters, I unravel how colonial

logics traverse the Museum's tissue and how they manifest in the Museum's practices, infrastructures, and materialities. I focus on how museum staff address and engage with these durabilities, and how I myself encountered them. Different from programmatic terms such as 'undoing' or 'unlearning', 'working through' first and foremost implies the desire to comprehend and analyse the existing forms of engaging with colonial collections in the Museum. The book is structured around different practices. I describe the practices of museum staff, but also my own approach to this research and to dissecting and understanding colonial collections.

One central observation runs through the book: working through colonial collections always includes the risk of reproducing the mechanisms and logic one attempts to dismiss, erase, oppose, or counter. Working through is not an easy, linear process, but rather a repetitive, draining, and laborious engagement, which involves discomfort and conflict. Dealing with these questions doesn't only concern the Ethnological Museum in its quest to define its position and interrogate its relationship to its colonial past. Rather, it relates to questions of the 'working through' of colonial legacies more generally speaking.

### **The structure of the book**

Working through stands in for the relations between that which remains and that which changes in processes of transformations. Museum ethnographies tend to be described as studies of closed-off and isolated societies, comparable to villages, dominated by the researcher's interest in the organisation's 'total social life' (Handler & Gable, 1997, p. 10; see also Gable, 2013) – in my case, the Ethnological Museum was located in Berlin's suburbs, approximately ten to fifteen kilometres from the city centre and usually deserted. However, and in contrast to understandings of museums as villages or islands, the fieldwork in Berlin's Ethnological Museum allowed me to see how 'the local is negotiated into being in relation' (Macdonald, 2009, p. 5). As Sharon Macdonald, Christine Gerbich, and I discussed in an article on methodological approaches to museum ethnographies, organisations such as museums 'are, inevitably, entangled in multiple networks of various kinds, usually involving some degree of distributed governance' (Macdonald, Gerbich, & von Oswald, 2018, p. 140). I was confronted with organisational and political change with regards to the Humboldt Forum, which did not seem controllable from within the Museum, because of this distributed nature. As such, this research project situates itself at once as an ethnography of a process, of an organisation in the making – the

Humboldt Forum – and as an ethnography of an established organisation – the Ethnological Museum – shaped by rules and regulations, routines, and habits. The research project addresses the relationship and tensions between individual agency and structure, between ‘good’ intentions and their outcomes.

The book shows how colonial legacies are identified, researched, and addressed within the Museum. It illuminates efforts and processes brought forwards and fought for by museum staff to identify and publicly address the museum’s colonial legacies, as in an explicit mobilisation of the past. Whereas the book chronicles, describes, and analyses these processes, it focuses above all on the way in which museum staff struggle to find alternatives to the disciplinary framings and orderings, professional conventions, and organisational hierarchies, with a view to their historical genesis. The book notably discusses the limits and boundaries that museum staff face when trying to work through the museum’s colonial legacies. It points to the constant push and pull, as well as the risk of reproducing, stabilising, and legitimising the museum as colonial legacy: tensions that the working through of contested legacies entails.

In the first chapter, I trace my own attempt to situate the remembrance of colonial history in Germany, and in Berlin. I start with my account on how I, as many others, didn’t learn in school that there were German-governed colonies. Relating German memory politics with developments related to the Humboldt Forum shows how activist engagement prepared the grounds for the Humboldt Forum to become a ‘catalyst of critique’, as Friedrich von Bose (2017) put it.

Building on the history of how colonialism was remembered and silenced in Germany, the second chapter situates the reader in 2013, when I started working in the Ethnological Museum. The chapter introduces the reader to the field and fieldwork the book is based on. I describe the political context and affective atmosphere at the beginning of the fieldwork in 2013 as dominated by binaries, between an ‘outside’ and an ‘inside’ of the Museum and the Humboldt Forum, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, between ‘activism’ and ‘critique’. These binaries decompose, I show, once I enter the Museum. I observe curatorial work reckoning with the museum’s histories of colonial collecting. My position as researcher changes from participant observer to observant participant, when I become the co-curator of an exhibition. I become ‘affected’ by the field (Favret-Saada 1977), a field in which the colonial haunts the present. The second chapter shows that working through the museum’s colonial legacies as an observant participant prepared the grounds for a critical engagement beyond binaries. This work proved to be emotionally challenging within a public organisation

positioned in a politically uncertain context with regards to access to collections and inventory, collaborative practices, and ultimately restitution.

To ethnographically understand the workings of the past in the present within an organisation, its histories need to be engaged with. In the third chapter, I situate the Museum and its collection in their histories. I show how the history of the Museum as organisation, especially its recent histories, have been disregarded in its archiving practices and have to be reconstructed via oral history and fragments of archival traces. As such, the process of reconstructing organisational histories shows how archival and ethnographic work go hand in hand to understand the duress of coloniality in these organisations. The chapter focuses on the way in which the collections moved, beyond national borders, within Berlin, and within the Museum itself. Working through manifests here as engaging with and contributing to writing of organisational histories.

In chapter four, I trace how colonialism operates in the Museum's knowledge infrastructures. This chapter is structured along the learning experience of meeting and working with Boris Gliemann, the database manager, who initiates me to the documentation work done in the Museum. I analyse the relationships between past and present inventory and cataloguing practices to argue that museum work is based on and continues to rely on colonial modes of ordering, naming, and thus conceiving the world. Working through manifests as a means to engage with categories, classification, and names. These are 'historically situated artefacts' (Bowker & Star, 1999b, p. 278), despite attempts to change, erase, or replace them. Names are difficult to get rid of. Avatars then figure here as a means to imagine alternative futures for the objects' historical groundedness, in terms of an 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2011, p. 9).

Chapter five addresses the imbalance of resources – financial, personnel – and of attention attributed to the caring and managing of the results of colonial collecting (versus representative work). Building on chapter four, chapter five depicts the Museum as a space fragmented by hierarchies, through the story and narrative of Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, who pursued a twenty-year career in the department as its storage manager. Between different tasks and obligations, the Museum is organised along practices understood as mundane, which can be summed up as 'care', versus practices associated with the 'representation' of the Museum – clearly reflected in the distribution of resources. Working through colonial legacies manifests here as an individual attempt to reckon with the ambitious project of collecting the world at the end of the nineteenth century. This personal narrative reveals how managing shortage (lack of budget, resources, and knowledge) results

in improvisation, and how it leaves its personal marks on the organisation's structure and materiality.

Departing from an account in chapter five of how little is known about the collections present in the museum storage, chapter six follows my journey to find out more about the provenance of a particular group of objects depicted as 'Luba' and acquired by a German military officer, Werner von Grawert. The process shows how little can often be found with regards to the object's biography within and outside of the Museum. An analysis of the mechanisms of research reveal, on the one hand, processes of past exclusion and suppression of Indigenous voices (in the archive). On the other hand, I show how the disparity between the Global North and South continues in the production of knowledge on these objects. Following the Luba object in its itineraries through Western circuits of value, the invention of 'masters' as individualised producers has been an effective means to circumvent the lack of documentation in provenance and monetise the production of knowledge related to provenance. Working through provenance ultimately shows a process in which mechanisms of appropriation continue to serve Western organisations – universities, museums, and the art market – financially and symbolically.

Chapter seven questions the collections as active and agentive matter; it discusses the shifts from subjects to museum objects, and from museum objects to subjects. The chapter builds on ethnographic observations from museum practitioners responsible for conservation. I frame the museum's obligation to keep things, built on conceptions of heritage as stable and durable, as the attempt to master materiality. The practice of musealising and the accompanying paradigm of conservation deny the collections other forms of existence and life than those imposed by the museum's rules and regulations. As part of this paradigm of conservation, museum professionals since the nineteenth century have treated collections with pesticides. In turn, museum objects have transformed into agentive subjects, as they affect those surrounding them via their toxicity. The object then counteracts the attempt to control and destroy all possible forms of life, the attempt to *entwesen*, but rather develops a toxic agency. The object not only changes symbolically via a transformation of the significations and usages within and outside of the museum organisation. Rather, through its transformation of substance, it physically changes and turns into a material and chemical amalgam of its histories. Working through manifests here as engaging with the collection's materiality itself.

The book's last chapter closes the narrative on the working through of colonial collections. As the book's different chapters analyse and show, the Ethnological Museum originated from and was still embedded in colonial

modes of doing and thinking the world. Beyond the question of *what* to display, the chapter looks at processes of *how* exhibitions were produced. It analyses the museum's curatorial cultures. Based on an ethnography of the planning process for the Humboldt Forum, the chapter proposes that these cultures remained authoritative, research-focused, and collection-centred. I ascribe the resistiveness of this culture to the Museum's and SPK's unchanging structures, which impeded change from happening. The book ends with the observation that, if the Museum as such doesn't change its foundational structures, attempts to transformation within the Museum will remain challenging.

In the concluding discussion, I return to the book's main arguments by elaborating on the question of change and transformation in ethnological museums.

As a research resource, I chronicle the most important events, notably political, of the developments related to the negotiation of colonial museum collections in Berlin and Germany in a concluding timeline, starting with the Humboldt Forum's foundation stone ceremony in 2013 and ending with the opening of the Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum in 2021.

## Notes

1. These dimensions of the 'crisis' had been identified, discussed, and responded to for at least thirty years. Seminal monographs and edited volumes that have significantly shaped my research include, for example, in relation to international case studies, Clifford (1988); Karp and Lavine (1991); Karp et al. (1992); Clifford (1997); de L'Estoile (2007); Gosden, Larson, & Petch (2007); Kazeem, Martinz-Turek, and Sternfeld (2009); Byrne et al. (2011); Phillips (2011); Harrison, Byrne, and Clarke (2013); Golding and Modest (2013). In the German context, see, for example, Berner, Hoffmann, and Lange (2011); Kraus and Noack (2015); Förster et al. (2018); Edenheiser and Förster (2019); Splettstößer (2019).
2. For an overview of the changes in ethnological museums, see, up to 2013, Pagani (2013), including the restructuring of the Dutch ethnological museum landscape, the opening of the Museum aan de Stroom in Antwerp, as well as the new permanent exhibition in Basel. Since then, in the German-speaking context, beyond the Humboldt Forum, the following developments have notably stirred debate: the appointment of Clémentine Deliss at the Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt (2010–2015) with the introduction of a 'post-ethnological' museum mission; of Nanette Snoep at the State Ethnographic Collections (SES) Saxony (2015–2018), followed by her directorship of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne; the replacement of Nanette Snoep at the SES by Léontine Meijer-van Mensch in 2018; the appointment of Barbara Plankensteiner at the Völkerkundemuseum in Hamburg; and the subsequent name change of the museum to MARKK, as well as the name change, renovation, and opening of the new permanent exhibition in 2017 at the Weltmuseum Wien. On an international level, the reopening of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (Belgium) in 2018 was the most awaited event, preceded by the release and handing over of the so-called restitution report by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr to the French president Emmanuel Macron in November 2018, which shifted attention to questions of restitution (Sarr & Savoy, 2018); for an overview of the debates related to the report, see von Oswald (2018).
3. The Weltkulturenmuseum Frankfurt changed its name in 2001 and 2013, and changed its concept and exhibition design in 2012; the Museum der Kulturen Basel change its name in 1996 and its permanent exhibition in 2011; the Weltmuseum Wien changed its name in 2013 and opened its new permanent exhibition in 2017; the Museum of World Cultures Gothenburg opened in 2004.
4. The Musée du Quai Branly opened in a new building and structural setting, including a new name in 2006. Since 2016, it has been called Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac; the Museum aan de Stroom Antwerp opened in 2011; Museum der Fünf Kontinente München changed its name in 2014; the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, reopened as the AfricaMuseum with a new permanent exhibition in 2018.
5. Museums named after collectors and/or researchers include: The Rautenstrauch - Joest - Museum in Cologne which reopened with a new permanent exhibition in 2010; The Linden-Museum in Stuttgart; The Pitts River Museum in Oxford which reopened in 2009; The Humboldt Forum which opened in stages between 2020–2021.
6. The concept of 'object biographies' has been increasingly used as an analytical and narrative tool to understand the social and cultural life of things, first coined by Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai in the 1980s (Kopytoff, 1986; Appadurai, 1986). Despite criticism that the notion of 'biography' might mislead to an understanding of the objects' biographies as linear, or as attributing the object intentional and individual agency (Hahn, 2015; Joyce & Gillespie, 2015), the concept can serve as a point of departure to trace and analyse relationships between people and things over time and to depict the socio-material networks they are enmeshed in and show how long-lived things extend beyond different systems of understanding (Joy, 2009), including their museum lives.



Used in anthropology and archaeology alike, numerous examples of object biographies now exist. For literature reviews and discussions related to object biographies, see, for example, Hirschauer and Doering (1997); Gosden and Marshall (1999); Hoskins (2006); Brower Stahl (2010); Chua and Salmond (2012); for monographs and edited volumes dealing with particular object biographies, see, for example, Daston (2000); Bonnot (2002); Daston and Galison (2007); Tythacott (2011); Bonnot (2014); Förster and Stoecker (2016).

7. For case studies and examples that trace and interrogate the interrelatedness between museums, the colonies, and the metropolises, see, for international examples, Thomas (1991); Gosden and Knowles (2001); Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips (2006); Bennett et al. (2017). For German case studies, see Essner (1986); Gothsch (1983); Zimmerman (2001); Penny (2002); Weber (2005); Förster and Stoecker (2016); Brandstetter and Hierholzer (2017); Förster et al. (2018); Reyels, Ivanov, and Weber-Sinn (2018); Spletstößer (2019).
8. Extracts quoted from the German:

Die Ethnologischen Museen sind eine Schöpfung der Neuzeit und der Gedanke zu ihrer Anlage, um dem Studium der Ethnologie eine thatsächliche [*sic*] Grundlage zu gewähren, konnte überhaupt erst dann gefaßt [*sic*] werden, nachdem bereits die Entdeckungsreisen den Blick über die gesammte [*sic*] Erdoberfläche erweitert und neben der historischen Entwicklung unserer eigenen Cultur [*sic*] noch eine große Zahl selbstständiger Cyclen innerhalb der Menschheitsgeschichte in den Geschichtskreis eingeführt hatten. (Bastian, 1872, p. iii)

Da die Ethnologie, als zu den comparativen Wissenschaften gehörig, statistischen Regeln zu folgen hat, bleibt, wie in jeder Statistik, Vollständigkeit der thatsächlichen Daten, auf den sie ihre Aussprüche zu begründen hat, ihr erstes und wichtiges Desiderat, und leider, wie es scheint, ein Desiderat für immer, da auf jemalige Erfüllung dieses Wunsches wird verzichtet werden müssen. (Bastian, 1872, pp. iv–v)

For a documentation and analysis of Adolf Bastian's position and work, see, for example, Penny (2002); Fischer, Bolz, and Kamel (2007); Penny (2019).

9. The instruction was first published in 1899 by the curator of Oceania and Africa, Felix von Luschan; it was republished in 1904 in an extended version by the same author; and it was reformulated in a last edition by Bernhard Ankermann, Luschan's successor, in 1914. The instruction was designed like a questionnaire, with questions on one side of the page and blank spaces to fill in information on the other.
10. My translation from the German: 'Wo es sich aber nicht nur um die Beschaffung einzelner Gegenstände handelt, da sammle man systematisch, d.h. so, dass die Sammlung ein möglichst erschöpfendes Bild der Kultur des betreffenden Stammes gibt. [...] Diese sind also in erster Linie zu sammeln; es ist gewissermaßen ein Inventar des gesamten Kulturbesitzes aufzunehmen.'
11. The Dakar–Djibouti expedition (1931–1933) headed by the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule is probably the most famous example of such a 'scientific' collecting mission.
12. The extensive collecting of material culture was facilitated by the federal council's decision ('Bundesrat') in 1889 by defining Berlin's museum as the 'Central Museum' when it came to the acquisition of collections from German protectorates. This decision implicated that all collections acquired under publicly funded expeditions would be the property of Berlin's Museum, which could then decide to keep the collections, send them back to the colonies, or to send or swap doubles, so-called *Doubletten*, with other German museums. For further explanation and contextualisation, see, for example, Stelzig (2004, p. 39); Ivanov (2005, pp. 41–42).

13. This was different, for example, from scientific expeditions in colonial contexts, which focus not only on *owning* but also on *knowing* the people by means of their material culture, reflected then in the collection's detailed documentation. French museums, unlike Berlin's Africa department, acquired a significant part of their collections via scientific expeditions. For details on the different modes of acquisition concerning the Musée de l'Homme, see Sarr and Savoy (2018, pp. 42–52). Sixty-four per cent stem from the following calculation: between 1884 and 1914 (German colonial rule), the African collections grew from 7,388 objects to 55,079 objects (Krieger & Koch, 1973, 106). Given that today's Africa collection is estimated at 75,000 objects, the difference constitutes approximately 64 per cent (Website Ethnologisches Museum, <https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/sammlung.html>, consulted 16 April 2019).
14. For examples, see Pels (2008, p. 283). When it comes to museum collections, this aspect of mutuality is seen, for example, in the fact that not all the objects acquired in colonial contexts were looted, robbed, or acquired in dubious circumstances and that there is proof of diplomatic gifts, of trade, and of the early formation of an art market, including the negotiation of and adaptation to styles, tastes, and prices, or the mockery of the colonised through pictorial depictions of Europeaness. For discussions concerning German East Africa, see, for instance, Weber (2005, pp. 120–130); for Central Africa, see, for example, Schildkrout and Keim (1998); and for depictions of Europeaness, see Lips (1937).
15. The political debate focused on 'colonial cultural goods', both reflected by a document authored by both the national and regional ministers of culture (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2019), as well as an official hearing of experts in the German national parliament (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019), initiated by parliamentary questions put forwards both by the Green and the Liberal Party (Fraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2019; Fraktion FDP 2019).
16. <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/colonialism-and-coloniality/>, consulted 15 November 2021.
17. See, for instance, the exhibitions and research projects *Sensitive Heritage: Colonial Traces to the Present Day* ('Heikles Erbe. Koloniale Spuren bis in die Gegenwart', Hanover, 2016–2017); see also von Poser (2018) and *Difficult Heritage: Colonial Objects – Postcolonial Knowledge* (*Schwieriges Erbe. Koloniale Objekte – Postkoloniales Wissen*, Stuttgart and Tübingen, 2018–2019), see also Grimme 2018.
18. For an extensive literature review, see chapter two of this book, and as prominent examples concerning Berlin's case, see Zimmerman (2001) and Penny (2002).
19. Objections to the term have been voiced, for example, in Dias (2008, p. 307) or Stoler (2013, p. 7).
20. Related reflections on and analysis of the persistence of the colonial in the present are subsumed in other intellectual traditions, which feed back and which I refer to in the course of this book. These include what has been referred to as postcolonial studies with such prominent scholars as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, or Homi K. Bhabha, those subsumed under the concept of 'coloniality' and 'decoloniality', with scholars such as Aníbal Quijano or Walter Dignolo, or the Caribbean tradition of *créolisation et créolité*, with Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau. For an overview and comparison of the 'decolonial' and the 'postcolonial', see Bhabra (2014).
21. I conducted fieldwork in the Royal Museum of Central Africa in 2015, and I led multiple interviews with curators and museum directors, which this work also substantially builds on: Julien Volper, Tervuren (Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale), 18 August 2015, Nanette Snoep, Leipzig (Director Ethnographic Collections Saxony), 19 April 2016, Yaëlle Biro, New York City (Metropolitan Museum, New York City), 6 June 2016, Kevin Dumouchelle, New York City (Brooklyn Museum, New York City), 8 June 2016, Gaëlle

- Beaujean-Baltzer, Paris (Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris), 14 November 2017, Stefan Eisenhofer, Munich (Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich), 18 November 2016, Peter Junge (formerly Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, 19 and 25 January 2021).
22. In a text co-authored with Sharon Macdonald and Christine Gerbich, we review the literature on museum ethnographies extensively, which I rely on in the following. Examples include a focus on exhibition-making (Macdonald, 2002; Yaneva, 2012; Morgan, 2013; Bunzl, 2014; Franklin, 2014; Shannon, 2014; Bouquet, 2015; Jung, 2015; Kreplak, 2017; Marsh, 2019); analysis of how museums present and communicate about themselves, notably via exhibitions, and how/when their role is perceived and negotiated by others (Butler, 1999; Price, 2007; Meza Torres, 2011; von Bose, 2016; Porsché, 2018); how they are used by their publics or how museums try to engage these publics (Roberts, 1997; Bhatti, 2012; Schmitt, 2012; Morse & Munro, 2015; Knudsen, 2016; Debary & Roustan, 2017; Kendzia, 2017; Sabeti, 2018). They include ethnographies of processes of conservation, archiving, and digitisation (Geismar, 2013; Domínguez Rubio, 2014; Beltrame, 2015), and of community work and collaborative projects (Hendry, 2005; Krmpotich & Peers, 2013; Schorch, McCarthy, & Hakiwai, 2016), and finally, of collecting practices, both contemporary and historical (O'Hanlon, 1993; Förster & Stoecker, 2016).
  23. Online dictionaries consulted on 1 July 2019: *Merriam-Webster*, *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Cambridge Dictionary*.
  24. See, for example, Macdonald (2013, p. 11) and Rothermund (2015, pp. 13–15).
  25. For a discussion of the different English translations and significations of the term, see Macdonald (2009, p. 9).

## CHAPTER ONE

# Learning about German colonialism: On memory, activism, and the Humboldt Forum

I entered the Ethnological Museum's Africa department in 2013, because I had been interested in the genealogies of and current grappling with representations of the continent, and the Black body in particular, in art and museum organisations. The interest in representations stemmed from my former research in the field of contemporary art,<sup>1</sup> during which I understood that many of the imaginations, constructions, and narratives I encountered originated in or had been co-produced by anthropology and its museums – and that some of these narratives continue to be produced in these fields. I was aware of the origins of these representations in colonial ideology and had learned about the entanglement of colonial rule, anthropology, and colonialism in the mainly Anglophone literature about ethnological collections that constituted the state of the arts. However, I started to work in the Ethnological Museum a few months after the foundation stone ceremony of the Humboldt Forum, during which the activist group No Humboldt 21! stressed the colonial origin of the Museum's collection and requested the return of the Museum's objects, highlighting how Berlin related to both the slave trade and colonial rule. In the Museum, I was asked to join a research project about collections acquired in the former German East Africa, in today's Republic of Tanzania. Encountering German colonialism, I realised that I didn't know anything about it. I myself had not learned about German colonialism in school. I was unaware *that* Germany had governed colonies, and I was even less aware of *how* Germany had governed those colonies.

My situation reflected a common diagnosis at the time. Germany was suffering from 'colonial amnesia' (Kößler, 2006; Zimmerer, 2013b, p. 9). 'Amnesia' implies a 'forgetting' of the colonial past in Germany, an inability to recall this time period and its larger, encompassing structures and mechanisms. In this chapter, I unravel the processes and histories of remembering colonialism in Germany, histories I needed to chronicle, reflect on, and

assemble to understand the historical dimension of my research subject. How to situate the remembrance of the German colonial past in Germany? What were the key moments of memory activism? How did the remembrance of colonialism in Germany and the Humboldt Forum relate to one another? What prompted change in this process?

### **'A gap in memory politics': The remembrance of colonialism in Germany**

In comparison with other European nations, the conditions and genealogy of colonial remembrance in Germany is particular. As Britta Schilling stated, 'part of what makes the German case unique is not only that the colonial period was so short, but rather that it was cut short' (Schilling, 2014, p. 4). Germany's main colonial efforts started after the Berlin conference in 1884/85, from which on it occupied German East Africa (in the region of today's Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi), German South West Africa (in the region of today's Namibia), Togoland and Kamerun in West Africa (in the region of today's Togo, Ghana, and Republic of Cameroon) as well as concessions and protectorates in Kiaotschou (Jiaozhou Bay) in China, German Samoa (today's Samoa) and German New Guinea (today's Papua New Guinea), both located in the Pacific. These colonial efforts were preceded by individual German states with colonial ambitions, some of which had been involved in slave trade. Germany lost its empire with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Those who lived through and remember German colonial rule first-hand, then, belong to a different generation from those who lived under colonial rule in other European colonies.

Concerning Germany's public memory, small groups were engaged in continuous attempts to commemorate German colonialism up to 1945, efforts that dispersed in the public sphere after the war. The year 1968, Britta Schilling argues, marked 'the most visible and lasting caesura with Germany's colonial past in the West' (Schilling, 2014, p. 10). The destruction of several colonial monuments during 1968 student revolts, in solidarity with decolonisation movements in the Global South, left blank spaces in several cities' public spheres, which led public discourse on German colonialism to be 'laid to rest after 1968' (Schilling, 2014, p. 10). Concerning its historiography, German colonialism has only recently been defined as a valid topic to be researched in German academia, encouraged by a focus in history departments on national histories, excluding transnational and global dimensions of these histories (Möhle, 1999; Reinhardt & Reinhard, 2018). Different to European imperial powers like France or the UK, Germany's immigration

politics were characterised by contract-based labour immigration, unrelated to former German colonies. This has had an impact on who writes the histories of (German) colonialism in Germany: pioneers in the 1980s and 1990s in academia and public life had worked on rendering the question of German colonialism and its remembrance in Germany more prominent, most notably an emerging Afro-German movement.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of such exceptions, histories of colonialism have only partly been shaped and enriched by former colonial subjects, their descendants, and diasporas in Germany. At the same time, and significantly, German historiography and memory politics focused on reckoning with the Holocaust and the German *Sonderweg* (Eckert & Wirz, 2013, p. 508; Zimmerer, 2015, p. 22).

Although these different factors contribute to what has been termed an ‘absence of the colonial past in German remembrance culture’ (Lutz & Gawarecki, 2005, p. 10) and, more particularly, on a political level, a ‘gap in memory politics’ (Bauche, 2010), the term ‘colonial amnesia’ has been challenged. On one hand, recent research has shown that private colonial remembrance has always continued (Schilling, 2014), and debates and controversies on colonialism in the historiographies of both the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR resurged after the Second World War (Bürger, 2017). On the other hand, the term ‘amnesia’ denies memorial space and agency to those who suffered from colonial rule as well as to their descendants, who, even if not publicly recognised and with little space accorded to them in Germany’s memoryscape, kept and continue to recount memories and histories of German colonial rule. The established use of the term ‘amnesia’ also discredits the work of activists, academics, and cultural producers who have been engaged in rendering Germany’s colonial past visible, continuous efforts that particularly intensified in the years 2004 and 2005.

### **Claiming recognition of Germany’s colonial past**

In activism and research, the years 2004 and 2005 have been described as pivotal turning points concerning the public remembrance and awareness of German colonialism. These years marked several anniversaries, giving the opportunity both in Germany as well as in the former colonies to request public remembrance. In 2004 came the 120th anniversary of the so-called Berlin Conference of 1884 – also known as the Congo Conference – which confirmed the distribution of territory and trade rights on the African continent among European colonial powers. More importantly, 2004 coincided with the hundredth anniversary of the genocide committed on the Herero and Nama in Namibia (Zimmerer & Zeller, 2003; Böhlke-Itzen, 2004), and

2005 coincided with the anniversary of the Maji Maji war in Tanzania (Becker & Beez, 2005). Of major importance in both Tanzania and Namibia, these events were officially remembered in the former colonies (Becker, 2010; Förster, 2010). However, within Germany, no official commemoration ceremony took place, but was rather relocated abroad.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the active silencing of German colonialism in German politics, a ‘social movement in memory politics’ started (Bauche, 2010). This movement was supported and sustained by a growing number of research projects related to German colonialism, concerning both its histories<sup>4</sup> as well as its contemporary implications in Germany, such as language,<sup>5</sup> popular culture and education,<sup>6</sup> remembrance and *lieux de mémoire*.<sup>7</sup> These developments were closely linked to each other, in the sense that activists were themselves academics or that academics were aware of and fostered the political aspect of their work. In 2010, the historian Manuela Bauche described members of this ‘movement’ or ‘scene’ as consisting mainly of Black and White Germans ‘predominantly educated in a Western academic way, many of whom are historians, who sometimes share experiences as workers in memory sites remembering National Socialism; others come from anti-racism work’ (Bauche, 2010). In different German cities, associations that engaged with the call for the recognition of German colonialism were founded.<sup>8</sup> Activists tried to render knowledge about German colonialism public, knowledge that was scientifically ‘acknowledged by specialists’ but ‘hardly present in public conscience’ (Bauche, 2010).

The negotiation of German colonialism has concentrated on Africa. The historians Andreas Eckert and Albert Wirz’s observed that colonialism and Africa have become ‘almost a synonym’ in Germany (Eckert & Wirz, 2013, p. 508). This was, for instance, reflected in the German contemporary art field, and cultural production more generally speaking, which I followed closely. Established and emerging artists and curators have made questions concerning Africa in the German cultural landscape visible, notably in regard to discussion of the colonial project and its afterlives – both concerning German colonies and colonialism in Africa more generally.<sup>9</sup> What is meant by ‘Africa’ here is quite particular. Definitions usually explicitly or implicitly concern ‘sub-Saharan’ Africa, a seemingly regional depiction that continues to circulate despite virulent critique, as it implicitly refers to a racialised division of the continent into a ‘White’ North Africa, opposed to the southern part, long depicted as Black Africa (*Schwarzafrika*) in Germany.<sup>10</sup> Finally, and crucially, contestations around museum collections in relation to colonialism were almost exclusively focused on collections from the African continent. In Germany, and at the Humboldt Forum in particular, this was notably reflected in the negotiation concerning specific objects and human

remains,<sup>11</sup> but also in regard to the concentration of expertise and interest concerning 'Africa' in German ethnological museums and academia.<sup>12</sup> Berlin played a particular role in this context, as it allowed convergences of activism with other fields to take place. These convergences, in turn, provided fertile ground for the protests against the Humboldt Forum to arise.

### **Relating German colonialism and the Humboldt Forum in Berlin**

Two central controversies succeeded one another since the fall of the Berlin Wall with regards to the Humboldt Forum, and they continue to echo to this day: the debate on the reconstruction of the Stadtschloss versus the maintenance and renovation of the Palace of the Republic centrally evoke questions on the role of the public remembrance of GDR heritage in Germany. With the decision to devote the Berlin Palace to 'non-European' collections, the debate shifted the perspective towards controversies around Germany's Prussian and colonial past, almost entirely eclipsing and replacing the preceding debates on Germany's socialist past.

In 2002, the German parliament confirmed the reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, after more than a decade of debate (Internationale Expertenkommission Historische Mitte Berlin, 2002). The members of parliament based their decision on the recommendations of an expert commission appointed to imagine and design Berlin's 'historical centre' (*historische Mitte*). The Berlin Palace, built and developed as the residence of the Hohenzollerns in 1443, was destroyed in 1950 by the GDR government after heavy war damage. In 1976, the Palace of the Republic was inaugurated to host the GDR People's Parliament and served as a venue for cultural events and activities for GDR citizens. A landmark of GDR architecture, it had been closed since 1990. Advocates had begun to rally support for reconstruction shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The parliamentary decision opened a debate on how, in a unified Germany, the government should deal with GDR history, memory, and its traces. Framing it as a central place for lived experiences and social memory of GDR times, the Palace of the Republic's advocates interpreted its demolition as a public erasure and devaluation of those specific memories. As such, the conflict regarding the Stadtschloss was interpreted by many as an East-West conflict, symbolic of the difficulties surrounding the process of reunification (Binder, 2013, p. 106).<sup>13</sup> The advocates of the Schloss presented the area around the palace – the Schlossplatz – as abandoned from an urban policy perspective, as a centre that needed to be re-established. As the years passed by, they radicalised their argumentation. The advocates 'presented



the castle as the key to the genetic structure of the city, to its spirit and culture', as Jonathan Bach puts it in his compelling chronology of the debate (Bach, 2017b, p. 110). The suggestion of the demolition of one palace in exchange for the construction of another raised the question of which national history and memory was valued in what was being increasingly constructed as the historical centre of Germany's capital.

The decision to reconstruct the Berlin Palace triggered debate on whether the period before 1918 would be established as 'the actual identity-establishing moment for Berlin' (Philipp Oswalt, cited in von Bose, 2013). The expert commission's concept supported and integrated the arguments of the Berlin Palace's advocates: the commission suggested the name 'Humboldt Forum', with reference to the brothers Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, figureheads for Prussian science, culture politics, and their 'cosmopolitan world view' (Parzinger, 2011, p. 18). The commission also recommended a narrative for the Humboldt Forum that would highlight Prussian accomplishments in education and cultural policies at the beginning of the nineteenth century, establishing this period as a reference point in German history. As Jonathan Bach argued, the reconstruction sought to recreate the 'Prussian aura', an aura which he depicts as 'ambiguous' insofar as it stood for tolerance and cultural enlightenment, as well as for discipline, obedience, and, crucially, violence in Germany's colonial wars (Bach, 2017b, p. 115). Beyond the obvious link between the library and the university to the Humboldt brothers, the Humboldt Forum's concept was centred on 'the dialogue between European and non-European [*außer-europäischen*] cultures' (Internationale Expertenkommission Historische Mitte Berlin, 2002, p. 22) and based on a proposal by the then director of the SPK, Klaus-Dieter Lehmann.<sup>14</sup>

The combination of the symbolic politics of the Stadtschloss with the non-European collections shifted attention towards how Germany was to position itself with regards to its colonial past. Scholars and activists both in Germany and beyond translated and applied postcolonial theory to this particular constellation, an area of study which had hitherto received marginal attention in German academia. The Humboldt Forum was repeatedly presented as a 'place for the world cultures' by integrating the 'non-European' collections (Parzinger, 2011, p. 6). The museums associated with 'Ancient and Modern Civilisations' – 'Islamic', Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and nineteenth-century European painting – are situated in opposition to the Humboldt Forum. The framing of the Humboldt Forum as representing the non-European established a dichotomy between the 'European' and the 'non-European', which continues to act on Museum Island. As Sharon Macdonald has argued, this particular 'constellation of difference'

contributes to an understanding of the 'European' that is defined in terms of historic belonging, rather than in geographical terms. It implies the construction of these collections as 'European' heritage, which, conversely, serves as a constitutive part of 'European' history. This history is constructed in contrast to the 'non-European', a history that is excluded from the narrative (Macdonald, 2016; see also von Bose, 2013; 2016). The dichotomy was reinforced by the exclusion of the collections of the Museum of European Cultures, which remained in the former location of the Ethnological Museum, in Dahlem. The politics of place on Berlin's Museum Island were accentuated by the architectural frame of the Schloss, further emphasised by the housing of the ethnological collections. Critics understood the combination of a royal facade and ethnological collections as a continuation of colonial dominance and the maintenance of Western supremacy, while incorporating and 'strategically' using 'reflexivity' to fit with contemporary museum discourse, as Friedrich von Bose argued (2017b).<sup>15</sup> The collections' regional division in the Humboldt Forum confirmed ordering modes traditionally associated with anthropology and the claim to represent certain 'cultures' in their regional delimitation, traditionally via grand anthropological themes. These different points of critique confirmed how the Humboldt Forum unambiguously reproduced classificatory systems and representational politics that decades of critique and (international) museum practice laboriously tried to dissect and counteract, validating instead presuppositions grounded in colonial thought.

As Beate Binder pointedly argued in 2013, those advocating for the Humboldt Forum reflected the political ambition for the Humboldt Forum to be perceived as a representation of the national by profiling itself as cosmopolitan.<sup>16</sup>

Centred on the notions of encounter, openness and cultural experience, the Humboldt Forum is designed as a space for reflection, in which the national is stabilised in a globalised world and speaking at the same time about tolerance and openness of the German nation. (Binder, 2013, p. 114)<sup>17</sup>

This positioning reflected the contemporary trend to adhere to an idea of important Western museums as 'universal heritage', confirmed when the SMB signed the International Council of Museum's 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museum' in 2002. Interpreted by many as a means to warden off restitution (see, for example, Abungu, 2004), the International Council of Museums (ICOM) declaration stated that the collections have become 'part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them' (ICOM, 2004).

Understanding the collections as both universal and national reflections of the museum's mission, as Andrea Witcomb put it, is to 'encapsulate at the same time the world and the nation' (Witcomb, 2015, p. 130). The signature also signalled the organisation's general attitude that 'all objects came legally into the collections', as the SMB's director Peter-Klaus Schuster confirmed in 2004 (Schuster, 2004).

### **Berlin as postcolonial metropole**

Building on the above-mentioned research and activism on German colonialism, the intellectual and physical proximity of politics, academia, activism, cultural production, and, in particular, contemporary art in Berlin allowed the agents' shared interests in colonial legacies as well as in postcolonial theory to converge (see also von Oswald & Tinius, 2020).<sup>18</sup> The foci of the Berlin-based postcolonial activism – material culture and heritage sites – related to claims later addressed at the Humboldt Forum. They enabled artistic and curatorial agents to link with, on the one hand, the call for restitution and repatriation, especially the return of human remains. On the other hand, they addressed the representation of colonial histories, both in their absence, such as in organisational narratives, as well as in their unacknowledged presence in everyday Berlin as a former colonial metropole (Heyden & Zeller, 2002; 2005). The most active associations – Berlin Postkolonial, Tanzania-Network, Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland, AFROTAK TV cyberNomads, and AfricAvenir – confirmed the focus on German colonialism in Africa, encouraged by the fact that Berlin was home to Germany's largest African diaspora, both of German and international nationality (Diallo & Zeller, 2013, p. 12).

The activist claims for the repatriation of human remains from Germany's former colonies related those claims to the SPK. Berlin's significant collections of human remains were not stored in the depots of the Ethnological Museum, but in the Museum of Prehistory and Early History (Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte) since 2011 (Heeb & Jöbstl, 2017).<sup>19</sup> The relocation of the human remains in 2011 from the Charité, a university hospital in Berlin, to the Museum of Prehistory and Early History turned the SPK into a central target of critique for the activists. Whereas several returns of human remains were negotiated, the repatriation of human remains to Namibia in 2011 from the Charité was particularly contested, stirring debate and encouraging further activism, as German politicians didn't follow diplomatic protocol (see Stoecker, Schnalke, & Winkelmann, 2013). The claims for repatriations went hand in hand with the request for the recognition of

and claims for (financial) reparation concerning the colonial war and genocide committed against the Ovaherero and Nama peoples between 1904 and 1908 in today's Namibia. The genocide was recognised by the German government in 2016, but the government excluded any possibility of financial reparations at the time (see Kößler, 2015; Bundesregierung, 2016).<sup>20</sup>

Whereas the claim for repatriation was related to the Humboldt Forum in terms of its links to the SPK's collections, another of the activists' targets was challenging established modes of representation. This concerned both the deconstruction of colonial imagery, nomenclature, and monuments in Germany's everyday, as well as the (lack of) acknowledgement of histories of German colonialism in German public organisations. In Berlin, activists such as Tahir Della, Christian Kopp, Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, Manuela Bauche, Israel Kaunatjike, and Joshua Kwesi Aikins deployed different methods to make colonial histories visible in the first place and to develop counter-narratives. The activists used guided tours focused on the remains of colonial buildings and representations within the city, such as in Berlin's 'African Quarter' (*Afrikanisches Viertel*), to remind audiences of the 'everyday' and 'everywhere' of colonialism in Germany's cities. Furthermore, they intervened in the city's landscapes through the creation of informational and memorial plaques<sup>21</sup> and by protesting against and changing street names honouring colonialists and colonial events.<sup>22</sup> Joshua Kwesi Aikins, one of the initiators of changing Berlin street names, has depicted the strategy as a 'reversal of perspective', enabling memory politics to establish a resistant perspective (Aikins quoted in Kopp et al., 2018, p. 42; see also Jethro, n.d.). Finally, activists have challenged narratives at exhibitions addressing German colonialism, and there have been interventions in already existing exhibitions, in museums, and in independent project spaces.<sup>23</sup>

The activists' focus on museums and heritage allowed the borders between professional fields to blur. One central moment of convergence was the organisation of the two-day event *Anti-Humboldt: An event for the Humboldt Forum's selective deconstruction* in 2009.<sup>24</sup> The conference took place on the occasion of the exhibition *A different approach to the world: The Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace. A glimpse at the work in progress*.<sup>25</sup> The exhibition was announced as a preview of the 'making of' the exhibitions to be integrated in the Humboldt Forum. A year after the Palace of the Republic had been completely demolished, the exhibition was located in the Alte Museum just opposite the demolition and construction site. Subsumed under the name *Alexandertechnik*, a group of scholars, activists, and artists criticised what they understood as the lack of recognition of European colonialism, accentuated by the Humboldt Forum's politics of representation. The event was also the occasion on which the collective

Artefakte//anti-humboldt was founded, which has continued to publicly oppose the Humboldt Forum.<sup>26</sup> Alexandertechnik accused the leaders of the Humboldt Forum of ‘ontologising otherness’, ‘demonstrating openness to the world as a self-proclaimed nation of culture [*Kulturnation*]’, ‘presenting the “Golden Age” of Prussia [...] as a post-1990 fill-in’, and of ‘exploiting non-European arts and cultures’ through their recontextualisation on the Museum Island (Alexandertechnik, 2009).

Whereas the 2009 event allowed Berlin’s different scenes and fields to overlap and to solidify critique, the extent to which colonial legacies have been addressed in Berlin has since amplified, along with the significant number of (international) artists, curators, academics and other cultural producers who have opted for Berlin as their home or temporary city of residence. Colonial legacies within the contemporary art world were often negotiated with direct reference to the Humboldt Forum and the critique associated with it.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

In 2018, Germany’s Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, stated that it is ‘above all thanks to the Humboldt Forum that colonialism has been put on the political agenda’, attesting that it has ‘operated like a catalyst, even before its opening’ (quoted in Ringelstein, 2018). Contrary to Grütters’s statement, my observations show how the particular context of Berlin’s academic, political, artistic, and activist landscape provided fertile ground, laboriously prepared for more than a decade, for the critique of the Humboldt Forum to arise and, later, to be taken up by politicians and representatives of the Humboldt Forum itself. In particular, it was activism and cultural productions – often the result of unpaid, tedious, and risky work – rather than politics, that was involved in the ‘laborious excavation work’ of researching, addressing, and claiming Germany’s colonial past, as the anthropologist Larissa Förster depicted the process.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. My former research projects included an ethnography of the exhibition *La Triennale: Intense Proximity*, with the artistic director Okwui Enwezor, which centrally interrogated representational tropes in relation to anthropology, modernism, and colonialism; see von Oswald (2016).
2. This includes the formation of the Initiative of Black Germans (ISD) as well as the Black Women in Germany (ADEFRA e. V.) in 1986, as well as the publication of the seminal work *Farbe bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*; see Ayim, Oguntoye, and Schultz 1987.
3. During their visits to Namibia, Minister of Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder avoided any kind of public apology out of fear of being confronted with claims for financial reparations. It was only the Federal Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, in an act of ‘personal courage’ (Kößler 2005, p. 23), who publicly apologised for ‘[t]he atrocities of that time [which] were what would today be called genocide’ (quoted in Eckert 2007, p. 37). Immediately sanctioned by the responsible ministry, the minister’s reaction was framed as an ‘emotional outburst’ that ‘could cost taxpayers billions’ (Böhlke-Itzen quoted in Eckert 2007, p. 37). The minister’s apology excluded a juridical responsibility that would have possibly and eventually translated into valid repatriation claims from the Namibian side (Eckert 2007, p. 37). In contrast to the genocide in Namibia, the remembrance of the hundredth anniversary of the Maji Maji war in Tanzania hardly attracted any public media attention in Germany.
4. It was thus around and after the time of the parliamentary vote confirming the Humboldt Forum that research regarding German colonialism became more prominent: concerning the memory of German colonialism and specific historic case studies (Eckert 1999; Zeller 2000; Heyden&Zeller 2002; Böhlke-Itzen 2004; Hoffmann 2007), as well as comprehensive, usually edited, volumes (Lutz&Gawarecki 2005; Hobuß&Lölke 2007; Perraudin&Zimmerer 2011; Conrad 2012; Habermas&Przyrembel 2013).
5. See, for example, for language, Arndt et al. 2004; Arndt&Ofuately-Alazard (2011), and in particular controversies around the N-word in 2013, Zimmerer (2013b, pp. 22–25); Albrecht (2017).
6. See, for example, Bechhaus-Gerst and Klein-Arendt (2003); Kundrus (2003); Bechhaus-Gerst and Gieseke (2006); Langbehn (2010).
7. See, for example, Zeller (2000); Heyden and Zeller (2002); Förster (2010); Zimmerer (2013a).
8. *Freiburg postkolonial*, linked to the organisation Informationszentrum Dritte Welt, remains a precursor in this context, as it established a digital platform in 2006 based on local research but also collecting sources on German colonialism in general, which has turned it into one of the most frequently consulted databases on the subject, praised for its efforts in archiving colonial histories (Bechhaus-Gerst 2017, p. 50). Other associations were founded and continue their work in Munich, Hamburg, Dresden, Leipzig, Cologne, Augsburg, and Dortmund.
9. Pioneering curators, such as Okwui Enwezor or Simon Njami, as well as a younger generation of curators, such as Alya Sebti, Yvette Mutumba, Gabi Ngcobo, or Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, have contributed to institutionalising (and have been supported to do so) contemporary cultural production and art from Africa in Germany’s cultural landscape, in independent project spaces, biennales, and national museums. Public funding from the ifa or the Kulturstiftung des Bundes, some of it explicitly devoted to Africa (TURN fund), has supported these projects sustainably, such as the media platform and journal *Contemporary And (C&A)*, founded and directed by Yvette Mutumba and Julia Grosse.

10. For analysis and discussion on the concepts of *Schwarzafrika* and *Schwarzer Kontinent*, see Arndt et al. (2000, pp. 204–208), and for racist terminology in the German language more generally speaking, see Arndt and Ofuately-Alazard (2011); Arndt (2012).
11. Examples of particularly contested objects include the so-called Benin Bronzes, confiscated in 1897 by British colonial forces, located in today's Federal Republic of Nigeria. Christine Howald and Felicity Bodenstein have depicted these objects as 'proxies' (*Stellvertreter*) for objects acquired in colonial contexts (Bodenstein&Howald 2018, p. 533). Another key object has been the throne of King Njoya from the Kingdom of Bamum, located in today's Republic of Cameroon, whose status is all the more contested, because the throne has been described as a diplomatic gift from Njoya to the Emperor Wilhelm II. For instance, both objects were part of a poster campaign by *AfricAvenir*: see <http://www.africavenir.org/de/projekte/projekte-deutschland/dekoloniale-einwaende-gegen-das-humboldt-forum.html>, consulted 2 August 2019.
12. In relation to academia, anthropology in Germany is Africa-focused. Several institutes devoted to the art histories and anthropology of Africa exist in Germany (Kunst Afrikas, Freie Universität Berlin; Institute of African Studies and Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies, Bayreuth), as well as specific regional conferences. Within ethnological museums themselves, curators with a focus on Africa have recently been appointed to director positions in ethnological museums, with Barbara Plankensteiner in Hamburg (since 2017); Nanette Snoep in Saxony (2015–2018), who replaced the africanist Klaus Schneider in Cologne in 2018; Christine Stelzig in Munich (2011–2017); and Clémentine Deliss (2010–2015) in Frankfurt. Most of these curators dealt explicitly with their organisations' colonial entanglements and have focused on Africa, in particular in their programmatic focus, in exhibitions such as *FOREIGN EXCHANGE (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)* (Frankfurt, 2014) (Deliss, Mutumba, and Weltkulturen Museum 2014); *GRASSI invites: #1 Fremd* ('foreign'), co-curated by Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, Clemens von Wedemeyer, Anke Dyes, and Anna Jehle (Leipzig, 2016); *Erste Dinge. Rückblick für Ausblick* ('First things. Looking back to look forwards') (Hamburg, since 2018); and Cologne's permanent exhibition.
13. The debate concerning the position of the remembrance of the GDR has taken another direction through the debates around the *Einheitswippe*, a monument commemorating Germany's reunification. The monument, designed by the office Milla & Partner, had to be voted for twice in the Bundestag, and was last confirmed in the summer of 2017 (Peitz, 2017; Fröhlich, 2018).
14. For a reproduction of Lehmann's suggestions, see König and Scholz (2012, pp. 21–26).
15. See chapter two for a detailed account of the activists' critique and, as key examples, see *Artefakte/anti-humboldt* (2013); *No Humboldt 21!* (2013); von Bose (2017b); Ndikung (2018).
16. Temporary occupation of both the palace and, after its destruction, the lawn, allowed for artistic and cultural projects to take place, transforming it into a 'Fun Palace' (Misselwitz, Obrist& Oswald, 2005) and giving space for projects such as the private initiative of the *Temporäre Kunsthalle* (Temporary Art Gallery) (2008–2010); see also Bach (2017b, pp. 120–129).
17. My translation from the German.
18. These reflections, and in particular the notion of 'convergences', are based on discussions with Jonas Tinius and Larissa Förster.
19. Even though they were not stored at the Museum, the historic relationship between the collection of human remains and the Ethnological Museum was tight. The anthropologist and custodian for Africa and Oceania, Felix von Luschan (1885–1910), actively put together a collection of human remains, including 6,300 skulls (Heeb&Jöbstl 2017). At the same time, human remains were still an important part of the Ethnological Museum, as many objects included human tissue, hair, or teeth, as a simple search in the database

- would quickly reveal. See, for example, the list of human remains identified by Berlin Postkolonial via the Ethnological Museum's publicly accessible online database (No Humboldt 21, 2014b).
20. Even though the genocide was officially recognised as such by Germany in 2016, the right to claim reparations was officially excluded. The government's representatives argued that they were using the term genocide in a 'historical-political' and not in a 'juridical' way, meaning that 'no legal consequences result from this historical-political use of the term "genocide"'. This decision was disputed by the representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama people; a request reached the UN Council in January 2017 and remains open (as of May 2019).
  21. Until today, there is only one official memorial plaque in Berlin commemorating the atrocities of German colonial rule in Namibia, on the Neuer Garnisonfriedhof in Berlin-Tempelhof. The plaque is just next to the so-called Herero Stone, which was constructed to remember the voluntary service of German *Schutztruppen* in Namibia in 1904–1907, which is regularly visited and honoured by right-wing and veteran groups. The plaque was installed in 2009 (Habermalz 2018). In 2012, different postcolonial associations succeeded in installing an informational and memorial plaque in Berlin's so-called African Quarter (*Afrikanisches Viertel*) (Kopp&Krohn, 2012).
  22. One of the initiative's major successes consisted here in changing the Gröbenufer, or Groebenufer, named after a military officer engaged in the transatlantic slave trade in Berlin, to May-Ayim-Ufer, named after the feminist Afro-German poet, intellectual, and activist in 2009/2010. Ongoing is the fight in Berlin concerning the M\*straße in Berlin-Mitte. A success of the initiatives has been the agreement to change the street names Lüderitzstraße, Nachtigalplatz, and Petersallee in Berlin's so-called African Quarter (*Afrikanisches Viertel*) (DECOLONIZE BERLIN, 2018).
  23. Exhibitions addressing German colonialism in particular include, for instance, the exhibition *Namibia-Deutschland: Eine geteilte Geschichte*, curated by Larissa Förster and Clara Himmelheber, Deutsch-Historisches Museum, 2005; the touring exhibition *Freedom Roads. Koloniale Straßennamen. Postkoloniale Erinnerungskultur*, curated by H. M. Jokinen and Christian Kopp (August Bebel Institut, Berlin; Münchner Stadtmuseum; Kunsthaus Hamburg 2010–2013); or the touring exhibition *What We See: Images, Voices, and Versioning. Reconsidering an Anthropological Collection from Southern Africa*, curated by Annette Hoffmann (South Africa, 2009; Switzerland, 2009; Austria, 2011; Germany, 2012; and Namibia, 2013; for more information, see Binter (2014)). A precursor in German museography was the intervention *Colonialism in a Box (Kolonialismus im Kasten)*, put in place in 2013, which allowed visitors to listen to an alternative tour concentrating on German colonialism, addressing the gaps in the German Historical Museum's permanent exhibition. The tour was based on critical guided tours and was developed by the historians Manuela Bauche, Dörte Lerp, Susann Lewerenz, Marie Muschalek, and Kristin Weber; see <https://www.kolonialismusimkasten.de/>, consulted 3 May 2018.
  24. My translation from the German: *Anti-Humboldt. Eine Veranstaltung zum selektiven Rückbau des Humboldt-Forums*.
  25. My translation from the German: *Anders zur Welt kommen: Das Humboldt-Forum im Schloss. Ein Werkstattblick*.
  26. The group repeatedly organised events and put their protest on a wider agenda, such as in November 2011 in Paris's Bétonsalon and Musée du Quai Branly, <http://www.betonsalon.net/spip.php?article362>, consulted 24 April 2019. They prepared a special issue of the publication *darkmatter*, which would be released in late 2013 (Artefakte//anti-humboldt, 2013).
  27. Representatives of the Humboldt Forum or Humboldt Lab Dahlem were invited to events. Examples are the participation of the curator Paola Ivanov at the conference accompanying the exhibition *Wir Sind Alle Berliner: 1884–2014* in 2015, or the participation



of Agnes Wegner, manager of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, in the panel discussion *Blinde Flecken: Berlin*, which took part within the programme Return to Sender at the Hebbel am Ufer theatre, March 2015. In the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the debate around the Humboldt Forum was frequently taken up, such as by hosting the exhibition *Anti-Humboldt Box* (2013) and thus publicly legitimising the critique in a major cultural organisation. The Ethnological Museum hosted parts of the 8th Berlin Biennale and addressed colonialism both in discursive and exhibition formats (2014). The discursive series of four panels, *Crawling Doubles. Colonial Collecting and Affect*, was organised by Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc in cooperation with Lotte Arndt and Catalina Lozano. The exhibition *Double Lives* was curated by Natasha Ginwala in cooperation with the curator Paola Ivanov.

28. Discussion with Larissa Förster of an earlier version of this text, 5 April 2018.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Being affected: A methodological approach to working through colonial collections

In the Workshop of Cultures (Werkstatt der Kulturen) on 22 October 2013, the audience was composed of approximately two hundred people. As an introduction to the discussion, the plans for the Humboldt Forum were described by the moderator Arnim Massing and panellist Kien Nghi Ha as ‘particularly uninspired and unimaginative’, ‘revisionist’, and ‘lacking any kind of sensibility when it comes to dealing responsibly with one’s own colonial history’.<sup>1</sup> Frequent ironical laughter from the audience accompanied the discussion, and people murmured when the moderator introduced the curator of the Africa department, Peter Junge. The curator was the fourth invitee, the moderator announced, and the only invitee representing the Humboldt Forum to accept the invitation. Visibly nervous, Peter Junge tried to explain his position. He expressed his gratitude for being invited and highlighted the need for dialogue. He emphasised the discrepancy between how the Humboldt Forum was publicly perceived and what it would actually do, which he described as ‘breaking with the colonial past’. He foregrounded the work done in the Africa department at the Ethnological Museum and mentioned his practical work on exhibitions for the Humboldt Forum. A day before the event, during lunch at the Museum’s canteen, Peter Junge had reassured himself: ‘We have everything they want: collection history, contemporary art, visible storage’. But at the event the anthropologist Larissa Förster asked him why the Museum had not been more outspoken in recent discussions of colonialism:

You know the collections and its histories best, the problematic as well as the unproblematic parts. Where is your expert’s voice correcting the cultural politics you are criticising? Why don’t you take the chance to position yourself in the debate, taking the controversies as an opportunity?

Peter Junge responded diplomatically. He stressed his work at the Museum while refusing to take a critical stance. The curator occupied a position that bridged the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum, being both a curator and responsible for the Humboldt Forum's planning schedule. He was aware of the professional role he could adopt, and which one he couldn't, in a highly departmentalised and hierarchical organisational setting.

The next day, in the Museum's canteen, staff said to Junge that he had been 'skewered' (*aufgespießt*) by the critics. He vehemently denied it: 'I wouldn't ever let myself be skewered!' Despite his attempt to establish distance from the organisation, for those in the audience, he represented the SPK – the organisation representative of the Humboldt Forum at the time and owner of the Ethnological Museum's collections. 'This event was about exposing me, not about dialogue. It's like in 1968, but', he sighed and then continued: '[s]till, it is important not to dial in (*abhaken*) these kinds of events. Even if they are only a minority, and even if this kind of event dampens our mood' – the others seated at the table laughed again and seemed to agree – 'we have to remain in dialogue with them. These are the only people who are interested in the Forum, apart from the conservatives who want to rebuild the Palace! Ten years ago, no one questioned the origin of the objects. Today you are asked about it at every guided tour. That's why these people are important.'

In this chapter, I examine what it means to work in an organisation mired in anti-colonial controversy, between 2013 and 2015. In doing so, I use Jeanne Favret-Saada's notion of 'being affected' to support the study of these contested collections and contribute to the understanding of the curatorial struggles that were underway at that time.

My thinking about on Favret-Saada's reflections on affect began when I co-curated the exhibition *Object Biographies*, which explicitly dealt with the colonial provenance of the Ethnological Museum's Africa collection.<sup>2</sup> Instead of only observing curatorial work, I became myself a curator.

Monitoring my own affects allowed me to pay particular attention to the emotional dimension of curatorial work, which is only rarely considered in the museological literature. From my earliest work in the field, I described the general mood and emotions in my notes with observations such as 'is enraged', 'feels desperate', 'describes as draining' and 'feels accused of colonial crime'. Also, I myself was confronted with recurring feelings of unease, discomfort and malaise. Taking these emotions as analytical clues, it is thus not only the direct confrontation with colonial violence in the Museum's archives that I consider in this chapter. I rather elaborate on the responsibility of 'appropriately' addressing Germany's colonial history in a polarised

contex. Part of that responsibility is to make knowledge and information accessible, to respond to the politics of representation and exclusion and to avoid reproducing the practices and mechanisms inherent to colonial collections and governance.

### **The Humboldt Forum, anti-Humboldt activism, and German colonialism**

In June 2013, Berlin city officials held a foundation stone ceremony for the Berlin Palace. Described as a ‘little act of state’ by the press, the ceremony included federal ministers and members of parliament who were joined via video by the British Museum’s director, Neil MacGregor, and the former US Foreign Minister Henry Kissinger (Haubrich, 2013). Under beautiful skies, shouts of ‘bravo’ for the palace’s most prominent initiators were accompanied by encomiums praising the Humboldt Forum as ‘an opportunity for the whole of Europe’ (MacGregor). A journalist wrote that ‘...a new phase begins’ and ‘the time of ideological struggles is over’. ‘Construction is finally underway’ (Schaper, 2013). For some, more than two decades of dissent seemed to end with the beginning of construction work.

While the joyful event was taking place, however, members of a newly formed coalition known as No Humboldt 21! had gathered in protest. The purpose of the coalition was to stop the construction of the Humboldt Forum, which they considered ‘Eurocentric’ and ‘restorative’, ‘a direct contradiction to the aim of promoting equality in a society of immigrants’ (No Humboldt 21!, 2013, p. 21). Whereas the journalist had pronounced the end of ‘ideological struggles’, No Humboldt 21! refocused the discussion from debates about Germany’s socialist past – triggered by the demolition of the GDR-era Palace of the Republic – to Germany’s colonial history.

The physical separation between the festive foundation stone ceremony and the activists demonstrating outside the construction perimeters created a set seemingly insurmountable binary oppositions: between an organisation that perpetuated colonial modes of conceiving the world and one that opposed such worldviews, between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the Museum, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, between the Humboldt Forum and the activists.

### **No Humboldt 21! and the anti-Humboldt Forum campaign**

The coalition’s resolution was signed by 82 organisations, most of them located in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. Their specific objectives differed,

but most were engaged in de-colonial, anti-racist and feminist missions and some represented diaspora groups and their interests.

The logo for the No-Humboldt 21! campaign merges the image of the Humboldt Forum Foundation in the Berlin Palace (Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss) and that of the SPK. The difference is the eagle, which is crying and whose tears seem to morph into blood. The point was to signal which objects belonged to its critique—the building, its content, its name—and which did not (the Humboldt University and the Berlin State Library).

The activists focused their criticism on the publication ‘The Humboldt Forum: “To Be in Touch with as Much of the World as Possible”: The Goal and Significance of Germany’s Most Important Cultural Project at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century’. Authored by the SPK’s president Hermann Parzinger in 2011, the brochure was considered its *de facto* ‘concept’.<sup>3</sup> The No-Humboldt 21! campaign drew on international museum practice and recent scholarship as they identified five particular points of critique. First, the activists challenged the idea that museums were ‘the legitimate owners of



Figure 2.1 Logo of the No Humboldt 21! initiative



Figure 2.2 Logo of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz



Figure 2.3 Logo of the Stiftung Berliner Schloss

their holdings'. In view of the colonial origins of the museum's collection, they called for the 'disclosure of the ownership history', adherence to a UN resolution in favour of repatriation and 'dialogue' with the 'descendants of the artists and the legal owners of the exhibits'. Second, they accused the Humboldt Forum of 'redeeming Berlin's colonial past', and demanded that no objects acquired during colonial times be exhibited in the Berlin Palace. Third, they denounced a politics of representation in which 'the cultures of the world are discriminated against, marked as "strangers" and "other"'. They pointed to the Forum's particular position on the Museum Island, and noted the separation between the 'classical collections' (Altes Museum, Bodemuseum, Museum für Islamische Kunst, Alte Nationalgalerie) and the 'Non-European' ones. Fourth, they criticised forms of knowledge production from the 'era of discovery'. In their opinion, Alexander von Humboldt, the German naturalist and one of the Forum's eponyms, embodied 'colonial dominance' and was thus not 'an appropriate person to name an intercultural centre after'. Fifth, they focused on the politics of access, criticising the way in which cultural goods remain unequally available to populations around the globe. They demanded that cultural goods in the Global North be permanently returned to their countries of origin in the Global South.

Neither the SPK, the Ethnological Museum nor the Humboldt Forum had released an official statement or position paper on German colonialism. But the statements they did publish didn't allay and even added to the activists' criticisms. SPK representatives relativised the impact of German colonialism on the collections by comparing it with those of other European colonial powers. Official representatives stated in 2001 that '[i]n contrast to the typical colonial countries Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, etc. where selected objects reached the European motherlands as spoil, German collectors and scientists developed systematic and – astonishingly modern – databases in Humboldt's tradition' (quoted in König 2013, p.33). Hermann Parzinger offered a similar argument in 2010, stating that 'concerning the collection's genesis, Germany has...a colonial past, but it is not like other European powers' (Hermann Parzinger [2010]; quoted in V. König 2012, p. 56). The SPK focused on the accuracy and scientific rigour of collecting and research practices, and downplayed the role of German colonialism in the museum's collections (Parzinger 2011, p. 31–32). Another argument put forward was that only a small portion of the collections was shaped by colonialism; most of it, like Berlin's Royal Cabinet of Curiosities, was of a 'pre-colonial' provenance. This argument overlooks that era's contested politics of acquisition and representation (von Bose 2016, p.128–129).

These statements reflected a then-common understanding of Germany's colonial history and national politics. Since the early 2000s, German

diplomacy had neglected or circumvented its colonial past and the crimes related to it (see chapter one). At the same time, the statements of the SPK ignored the latest academic research on the relationship between anthropological museums and colonialism in general<sup>4</sup> and Berlin's collections and German colonialism in particular.<sup>5</sup>

The activists' campaign received a boost from the German Green Party Bündnis 90/Die Grünen<sup>6</sup> and the left-wing party Die Linke,<sup>7</sup> who in local governments and in the Bundestag vowed to investigate the colonial origins of the museum's collections, in particular the human remains they contain. (Deutscher Bundestag, 2011; Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2013a; Deutscher Bundestag, 2013). Support for the critique of the Humboldt Forum, therefore, had become entrenched among activists, politicians and academics, at the grassroots level (see also Ha, 2013), and in local and national political arenas.

### **Inside the Ethnological Museum: Complicating the picture**

I started to do research in the Ethnological Museum Berlin in October 2013. I focused on the past, present and future of selected objects from the Africa collection, as part of a larger ethnographic study of processes of transformations underway in ethnological museums in Europe. My archival and field research concentrated on practices related to the planned new permanent exhibition, which was to include the Museum's Africa collections for the Humboldt Forum. When I started my work, I sympathised with many of the arguments of the No-Humboldt 21! activists. At that time, it was difficult not to. After the Forum's foundation stone ceremony, activists organised a variety of public events, such as the travelling exhibition 'Anti-Humboldt Box'<sup>8</sup>. They coordinated conferences,<sup>9</sup> published articles and edited volumes.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the SPK, the SMB and the Ethnological Museum remained silent about the collection's colonial past. In the autumn and winter of 2013, outsiders frequently voiced their frustration with the organisations' behaviour.<sup>11</sup> The work at the Humboldt Forum took place behind closed doors, despite a provisional three-storey exhibition space known as the Humboldt Box located at the Forum's construction site. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem (henceforth: HLD) organised exhibitions and 'experiments' to accompany the Forum preparations. With a budget of more than 4 million euros, the HLD was perceived as the Humboldt Forum's showcase, yet it too had not taken a public position on German colonialism in the autumn of 2013.

Yet on my first day at the Museum, the seemingly clear-cut opposition between outside activist and museum insider collapsed. A museum staff member referred to the Humboldt Forum as 'an ultra-conservative project

led by old white men'.<sup>12</sup> That view was no exception among museum staff members. Throughout the duration of my research, museum staff routinely criticised the Forum. Part of their problem, they often said, was the absence of a stated programme and a clear idea of who would define it. 'No one wants to work for a project that is at the centre of criticism', I wrote in my fieldnotes. 'Museum staff lack identification with the Forum.'<sup>13</sup> Some were unaware of the brochure 'The Humboldt Forum: "To Be in Touch with as Much of the World as Possible"', highlighting the disconnect between experts working closely with the collections and those representing the Forum. I realised then that the SPK's leadership had not only *not* responded to the activists; they had not communicated effectively with their own staff. Neither did they seem to then have heeded the recommendations of the Forum's international advisory board, made in 2011, that the organisation address colonialism and its latter-day repercussions (Heizmann and Parzinger 2012). The Museum's Africa department curators, however, *had* defined colonialism as a central topic of their research and exhibition plans as early as 2008.<sup>14</sup>

Behind the scenes at the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnological Museum, then, were numerous opinions and positions, not a single unified view. My work at the Museum complicated the idea of straightforward binary oppositions – between those denying Germany's colonial past and those facing up to it, between those against and those for the Humboldt Forum, between the postcolonial and the neo-colonial.

### **Being affected: Making *Object Biographies***

After approximately two months of research in the Museum in December 2013, my position in the Museum changed. The HLD directorate approached Verena Rodatus, the museum apprentice (*Volontär*) working in the Africa department, and later myself, to curate an exhibition about what they subsumed under the term 'looted art' (*Beutekunst*).<sup>15</sup> The HLD was under pressure to present critical voices and reflect the current state of the academic literature on German colonialism and provenance. Verena Rodatus and I were asked to respond to a request made to the larger structures of the SMB and the SPK, but were, however, in a kind of insider-outsider position: we would both be temporarily employed, we were new to the field, and we were not on staff at the Ethnological Museum. As one of the HLD's leaders explained to us, it was 'obvious to everyone' that the provenance of cultural artefacts needed to be addressed, but no official 'proactive position' was likely in the near future. Neither the Ethnological Museum nor the SPK had the personnel and funds to deal with those questions because their curators



were in the final stages of determining their object lists for the Humboldt Forum. The HLD, by contrast, had enough resources at its disposal to fund such work.<sup>16</sup>

Initially, we were unsure whether to accept the offer. We worried that the Ethnological Museum or the SPK would distance itself from our criticisms because we were temporary employees, limit the project's critical scope or take over the project without changing their general stance. Working within the organisation, and being associated with the Humboldt Forum would restrict our room to maneuverer. Going from anthropologist and museum apprentice to public curators felt like a risk, one that could possibly drive a wedge between us and our immediate peers. As we later noted in the accompanying project management brief, one of our apprehensions was that we would be 'discredited in the critical field because of the institutional affiliation' (April 2014).

Our concern was not unjustified. The HLD's first efforts had received bad press (*Probebühnen*, March, June, September 2013),<sup>17</sup> and the programme underwent an external review. The evaluators found that HLD had ignored or inadequately addressed the general expectations of ethnological museums and the Forum's critics in particular, and the news had started to leak (Mörsch et al., 2014). The HLD's projects had been met with hostility even by museum staff, some of whom criticised the HLD as 'appropriating the objects for a second time'.<sup>18</sup> Some associated with the HLD found their experience emotionally challenging. 'I'd better do a good job so as not to lose my friends', one curator said in a meeting. Another recounted how she had publicly faced 'overt hostility, simply because I was working for the Humboldt Forum.' One person reported crying when a friend refused to say hello to her on the street. 'It's not nice when everyone turns away, like that', someone else said.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, we decided to accept the offer in the hope of helping change the system from within. We developed the exhibition, titled *Object Biographies*, in conversation with the Africa department's curators Peter Junge and Paola Ivanov. A crucial issue for the exhibition was provenance research, which we had already conducted for the Humboldt Forum as part of our individual work. Our objective was to address the Museum's ties to German colonialism head-on by taking the collection's history and the trajectories of specific objects as the exhibition's starting point. We were interested in which stories had *not* been told, who and what was absent or rarely visible in the museum's own story. With the help of contemporary voices and research, both from Europe and Africa (von Oswald&Rodatus, 2017), we wanted to arrive at a more expansive understanding of the Museum's collections. It would

be the first, even if very small, show at the Ethnological Museum to put the violent history of German colonial rule in Africa on centre stage.

### **From participant observation to observant participation**

When I decided to co-curate the exhibition, my position changed from being a scholar and stipend recipient to a curator, from being a ‘participant observer’ to being an ‘observant participant’.<sup>20</sup> Becoming a ‘participant’ changed my conception of ‘distance’ and ‘scientific objectivity’ in the field.

Jeanne Favret-Saada’s notion of affect in her work on witchcraft in rural France has helped me think through the particularities of my situation (Favret-Saada, 1977). The field of museum anthropology is obviously very different from that of witchcraft in France—not to mention, less deadly. Still, Favret-Saada’s idea that researchers are affected by their work challenges the relationship between ‘observation’ and ‘participation’ in a way that is also useful for my field. Favret-Saada argues that earlier accounts of witchcraft are usually written from the perspective of anthropologists who were interested in observation, rather than participation. She recalls that academics had long reduced witchcraft to an ‘accusation’ and depicted it as ‘a medicine for the illiterate and ignorant people’ (Favret-Saada, 2012). By contrast, she describes that the people she encountered wanted her to become a ‘partner’. They would only communicate with her once she too had been, as she put it, ‘taken’. She depicts the feeling of participating in the field as ‘being affected’, without knowing whether or not she was actually bewitched herself.

### **Being affected and affecting the field**

Though metaphors like being ‘taken’ were not unknown in my field – the former museum director Clémentine Deliss once asked me if I had been ‘turned’ by ‘museum anthropology’, as in ‘turned like a zombie’<sup>21</sup> – the field of ethnological museums was also shaped by binary oppositions like those that Favret Saada describes in her field.

Favret-Saada argues that participation can be an instrument of knowledge. To understand the ‘intensities’ that come when working within a field, one must experience them (Favret-Saada 2004, p.4–5). Researchers participate in and contribute to developments in the field: they are both affected by the objects of study and affect them. Being affected also means that one loses control over how one is positioned in the field. In conventional

‘participant observation’, the researcher can remain ‘just’ an anthropologist. Not so in the polarised atmosphere of Berlin, where the mere fact of collaborating with this state organisation meant being assigned a position. Unlike empathy, Favret-Saada argues, being affected tells the researcher about her own feelings and not necessarily the feelings of those who are the subject of research (Favret-Saada 2012; 1977). Being affected means becoming the person about whom the anthropologist is ultimately writing. In this way, the anthropologist’s own doubts, instabilities and anxieties become tools for analysis. Here, what Sharon Macdonald describes as the ‘anthropological approach’ – the ‘commitment to trying to see and experience life-worlds from the point of view of those who live them and within the context of which they are part’ (Macdonald 2013, 9) – becomes the personal, physical experience that is the researcher’s own ‘life-world’.

My approach to the field changed as I sought ways to exhibit the Museum’s objects publicly while balancing a complicated mixture of political and marketing interests, decision-making processes, legal regulations and professional convictions. As an insider, I began to look at the work of museum curators differently. Instead of focusing solely on identifying ‘mistakes’ – like many external critics of ethnological exhibitions – I became more in tune to their complexities and contradictions (see also Witcomb, 2015, p. 132).

### **Para-ethnography and research ethics**

As my role at the Museum expanded, the nature of my fieldwork changed. Initially planned as a comparative study between three museums undergoing transformation in three different countries, my research shifted its emphasis to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. I worked with many people each day and my roles at the Museum frequently alternated between scholarship recipient, research assistant, curator, ethnographer and conference organiser.<sup>22</sup> From the beginning, I was a full participant in the work of the Museum. This fostered what Gerhard Spittler has called ‘thick participation’ (2001). I paid staff rates at the museum canteen and had lunch with museum staff, gained access to internal email communications and had my own desk and computer. I shared gossip and experienced everyday struggles and routines. Many of my interlocutors were anthropologists: they regularly commented on, analysed and interpreted the field’s development. My research was ‘para-ethnographic’ insofar as the ethnography took place ‘side by side’ with my research interlocutors, I was never researching ‘up’ or ‘down’ (Marcus and Holmes, 2010). The frame of our relationship

was that of ‘intellectual partners in inquiry’, as Dominic Boyer has put it (2008, p.40).

In the classic ethnography ‘Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change’ (1963), Gerald D. Berreman’s employs Erving Goffman’s concept of ‘impression management’ to problematise the relations between a research’s frontstage and backstage, and to reflect on the relationship between the ethnographer, her interlocutors, and the construction of the research field. Goffman’s impression management is based on a ‘dramaturgical’ approach. He analyses social systems as being divided between a ‘front region’ and a ‘back region’. For Goffman, the backstage serves to *prepare* a performance, with controlled access policies, whereas the front stage serves to *present* the performance. Generally speaking, I understood the Humboldt Forum as the field’s research front stage, seemingly shiny, whose representatives attempted to keep up the image of a mastered, ordered, and well-planned cultural project despite recurrent public controversies. The work routines which I got access to at the Ethnological Museum were the, sometimes messy, field’s backstage, where exhibitions and research projects for the Humboldt Forum were developed, prepared, and implemented.

Backstages might turn into front stages in the course of fieldwork, and the ethnographer and her interlocutors ‘are both performers and audience to one another’, as Berreman writes (1993, p. xxxiii). The division between front and backstage is not clear cut, but rather depends on the ‘function that the place happens to serve at that time for the given performance’ (Goffman, 1956, p. 77). As described above, the roles I adopted during my stay at the Museum often switched. Regardless of my role, however, I continued to take ethnographic fieldnotes and document my experiences. Sometimes my interlocutors forgot that I was first and foremost an ethnographer. At other moments, museum staff explicitly referred to me in these terms and discussed it. They did so, for example, by saying not to note or document particular information, or by saying to document something but not to mention them by name. Sometimes, I was taken aside to talk, or told to note particular, usually ‘hot’, information. Museum staff shared their experience with me, as they sometimes felt unable to express particular critique or analysis themselves with regard to their professional position.

From the very beginning of my fieldwork, I knew that deliberations about what to reveal and what to conceal from the museum’s backstage would be delicate. In the case of this book, this process has also entailed going through numerous rounds of editing, rewording, and paraphrasing, in particular in order to appropriately and ethically handle sensitive information, as well as to negotiate the relationships on which this research builds. I finished this book in 2021, in a political and discursive context which was

largely different from the one I participated in between 2013 and 2015. The increasingly charged context, as well as the accompanying negotiations, shaped my writing considerably.

As my interlocutors acted as ‘partners in inquiry’ in the field, the question of who was acting in, translating from, and interpreting the field; and thus what to (not) document, how to contextualise, who to name and who to keep anonymous were all difficult to evaluate. Some interlocutors shaped the Museum in profound ways and wanted their history to be documented. The anonymisation of these research interlocutors would have been difficult in any case but also against their wishes. When people appear with their name, they have read the text relating to them and we have negotiated the way in which they are quoted. I anonymised, summarised, and, in one case, fictionalised other accounts (see chapter 8). One central research interlocutor wished to not be included in the study, and I deleted all existing ethnographic descriptions related to her work.<sup>23</sup> In other cases, I decided to write about my own experiences, in order to address prevalent issues in the museum’s everyday, such as the affective and emotional dimension of curatorial work, that this chapter is concerned with.

The Ethnological Museum, the SPK and the Humboldt Forum are public, tax-funded organisations. Part of my reflections on ethics also consisted in deciding whether or not it was important to render transparent what was happening in them, precisely *because* they had failed to release information and had even given inaccurate information.<sup>24</sup> The decision on how to assess and evaluate the situation was one where ‘the weight of responsibility for adherence to good ethical conduct is on the anthropological researcher’ (ASA, 2011, see also DGSKA, 2009). To carry this responsibility and to find adequate solutions for the negotiation of the research ethics remained a major difficulty throughout the writing process. These negotiations continue to raise questions to me about how ethical fieldwork can take place in museums, especially those under public scrutiny.

### **Curating contested collections**

At the Ethnological Museum the curators of colonial collections were aware of the expectations to respond to activist critique and recent academic research, and the relationship between German colonialism and anthropology, in particular. For decades, researchers, archivists, and curators had worked on the history of colonial violence and theft. The difficulty lay in collaboratively addressing that history in a politically explosive climate.

Did our project challenge or perpetuate the museum's role as a 'colonial instrument' (Boast, 2011)? *Object Biographies* addressed not only *what* was being told but *who* was telling the story. Who was allowed to speak, and from which position and how? This also concerned the composition of our team and what has been called the 'delegation of interpretative sovereignty' (*Deutungshoheit abgeben*) and the politics of representation more generally.

I often felt defensive and apologetic when working on and writing about *Object Biographies*. I was worried about being *perceived* as perpetuating colonial injustice and of *actually* perpetuating colonial injustice from within a contested organisation.<sup>25</sup> Ambivalent feelings continued to accompany me as I tackled the collection's colonial legacy and the question of how best to discuss and exhibit that legacy from my privileged position within the Museum.

As questions of colonial provenance and restitution garnered more and more public attention, those publicly representing the HLD and the Ethnological Museum found the SPK's silence on those issues increasingly difficult. In January 2015, in response to a parliamentary inquiry by the Green Party, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, announced that 'the government, including the SPK, defends the position that no unlawfully acquired objects should be kept within the collections of the State Museums Berlin, regardless of the time period from which they stem'. It was, in other words, an official guarantee that every object displayed in the Humboldt Forum would undergo provenance research and that this research would be 'made transparent' (Deutscher Bundestag, 2015, p. 2-3). The government position marked a shift in public and political debate that set the *legality* of collections against the *legitimacy* of owning them. The shift, in turn, was closely related to activist activities, including a long correspondence between activist organisations and the SPK (Prosinger, Mboro, & Kisalya, 2013; Kathmann, 2014; Prosinger & Mboro, 2014; Parzinger, 2014), and the sudden cancellation of a public event at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, which No Humboldt 21! interpreted as a refusal of Humboldt Forum representatives 'to dialogue' with them in public (No Humboldt 21!, 2014a). In December 2014, *No Humboldt 21!* published a press release containing a list of the human remains and 'war loot' (*Kriegsbeute*) (No Humboldt 21!, 2014b) in the museum collection.

### Critique and complicity

In *Object Biographies*, we addressed Germany's colonial history by narrating different stories of the objects' provenance. We decided to focus on the violent history of two figures from the historic kingdom of Kom, located in present-day Cameroon (Nsom, 2005, p. 62). We understood that when provenance research identifies illegitimate modes of acquisition, the political consequences can be significant. What does it mean to display colonial loot within an organisation that has yet to take an official position on colonialism? The question points to a paradox that often confronted me in my work: the constant risk of legitimising or strengthening a contested organisation when working within it, even when that work is critical. The fear of involuntary complicity accompanied me as I prepared *Object Biographies* and thought about the possible public response.



Figure 2.4 Ever seen looted art? Poster by No Humboldt 21!

[www.africavenir.org/de/projekte/projekte-deutschland/dekoloniale-einwaende-gegen-das-humboldt-forum.html](http://www.africavenir.org/de/projekte/projekte-deutschland/dekoloniale-einwaende-gegen-das-humboldt-forum.html), consulted 04.05.2019

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Figure 2.5 Prussian Cultural Heritage? Poster by No Humboldt 21!

[www.africavenir.org/de/projekte/projekte-deutschland/dekoloniale-einwaende-gegen-das-humboldt-forum.html](http://www.africavenir.org/de/projekte/projekte-deutschland/dekoloniale-einwaende-gegen-das-humboldt-forum.html), consulted 04.05.2019

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In March 2015, HLD managing director Agnes Wegner wrote an email to the SPK's legal department (*Justizariat*) saying that she was 'troubled'. She described her unease at a public event.<sup>26</sup> Seated below several *No Humboldt 21!* posters asking 'Ever seen looted art?', she found it hard to justify the presence of war trophies in the museum collections, though she felt institutionally bound to do just that (see figure 2.4). 'I often reach my limits, and words fail me.' She asked for advice and legal consultation and attached the exhibition texts of *Object Biographies*, to inquire about the communications strategy for the exhibition.

With regards to ownership and restitution, the common ground at the SPK consisted in arguing that the collection had been legally acquired within the framework of international colonial-era law,<sup>27</sup> and that any claims on artefacts would be beyond the statute of limitations. Accordingly, restitution could occur only 'from an ethical, political or moral point of view.' The duty of the Museum was to uphold the principles of 'keeping, conserving, making accessible'. 'If we give the objects to non-museum contexts, we are breaking the law. For better or worse, the museum perspective is: What has once entered the museum stays in the museum'.<sup>28</sup>

This position expressed the legal limbo that objects acquired in the colonial era often find themselves. 'Law, by its nature, crystallizes the general consensus at a particular time', Lyndel Prott writes. 'There was no consensus on the (il)legality of colonization before 1960', when the United Nations Resolution on Decolonization was adopted (Prott, 2003, p. 103; see also Schönberger, 2016; 2018). And it was clear that legality at the time of acquisition was the decisive legal standard applied by the SPK. For instance, in 2012, Hermann Parzinger stated that 'what was right then cannot be wrong today' ('Was damals Recht war, kann heute nicht Unrecht sein') (Parzinger 2012). The problem for the SPK and the Humboldt Forum, however, was that the legitimacy of the legal argument had now come under public scrutiny (see also Förster, 2018).

The difficulty of drawing a clear line between legality and legitimacy became evident when we received the wall texts from the SPK's communication department, ten days before the exhibition was scheduled to open. As we learned, the *Justizariat* and the Humboldt Forum's communication department had the right to control and eventually amend every text that had a possible 'link with restitution' (*Restitutionsbezug*).<sup>29</sup> Words and even entire sentences had been deleted; others were added new. For example, in the phrase 'unknown and sometimes problematic histories', the SPK deleted 'and sometimes problematic'. It also expunged the question 'Which histories are told, and which ones are silenced?' In the introductory text, we claimed to shed 'critical light on the museum's networks and practices'. The



new version read that ‘we are taking a new look at the Ethnological Museum, which has long confronted itself with its own collection history and will not only be showing objects in the Humboldt Forum, but also presenting the history of those objects.’

Needless to say, I was not happy with the result. I talked with Agnes Wegner, who thought it best if she, and the two Africa curators jump into the fray. In their communications with the SPK, they argued that our texts were scientifically correct, and that the exhibition project had been approved by the Museum’s and HLD’s directors with the explicit aim of making the Museum’s collection histories ‘transparent’. They also noted that SPK was out of step with academic scholarship, which in the 1990s had begun to identify looted art in the collection. A denial or concealment of that information risked exposing the Humboldt Lab Dahlem to ridicule.<sup>30</sup>

After several exchanges, Wegner and the two Africa curators were able to reverse almost all the changes. But the process had shed a spotlight on the hierarchical nature of the SPK and its difficulty to take a public stand on the histories of its colonial collections and the issues of ownership and restitution. The emotional rollercoaster of the ordeal – I went from feeling outraged to feeling deprived of authorship – had left me exhausted.

Being affected helped me to understand the curators’ difficult position: how emotionally draining it was to engage critically with an organisation while having to defend it, especially one so complex and hierarchical, and the resulting lack of control over the final results, authorship and public communication.

## Collaboration and control

While planning the exhibition, we repeatedly reminded ourselves of our privileged role in the Museum. As part of an evaluation workshop, we invited the scholars Friedrich von Bose and Nora Sternfeld to comment on our team. They recommended that we rethink the team’s composition in order to break with conventional modes of representation. In particular, they pointed out that we failed to include a person of colour who would be ‘critical of reproduction (*reproduktionskritisch*) and able to address appropriation (*Aneignung*) from a Black, anti-racist and activist position.’<sup>31</sup>

After discussing their recommendations, we decided not to change our curatorial team. Instead, we invited two art historians with academic experience in the field, Mathias Alubafi and Romuald Tchibozo, to provide a written statement (reproduced in Alubafi, Rodatus, & von Oswald, 2018) and contribute to a larger research project on *bocios* in Benin and Berlin. Romuald

Tchiboza raised difficult questions about our position in the ‘decolonisation of research’. We examined different power asymmetries present in the project. These included the ability to acquire a visa and travel, the restricted access to the collections and the inability to move the objects beyond the walls of the museum. The control of the exhibition authorship and its products was defined by the organisation, while the budget lay in our hands (Tchiboza, 2015; von Oswald & Rodatus, 2017, pp. 218–19).

Our curatorial duo also contributed to maintaining the power asymmetry. We were only partly committed to giving up our privileged position within the project and to opening up the process (von Oswald & Rodatus, 2017, p. 218). In Bernadette Lynch’s words, despite ‘a commitment to the contact zone’, in terms of both encounter and ‘coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’ ((Mary Louise Pratt quoted in Clifford, 1997, p.192), ‘we somehow continue to face the Other with fear, and work hard to exercise control’ (Lynch, 2014, p.6). Neither Mathias Alubafi nor Romuald Tchiboza was part of the curatorial team; they had joined the project after we had defined its general concept. And though we aimed for a particular understanding of collaborative museology for the project, in which the collaborator is defined ‘as expert in a knowledge not present in the museum,’ we afforded insufficient space to this ‘right to co-determination’ (Landkammer 2017, p. 278).

Hence, despite our efforts, we risked repeating, reproducing or reinscribing colonial mechanisms and power structures. Addressing past injustices does not mean that one is sure to avoid reproducing similar injustices in the present.

## **Reflexivity and performance**

Verena Rodatus and I published an article on *Object Biographies* that pondered the challenges of decolonising research and exhibition-making. Consider the following representative passage:

We agree with Nora Landkammer, who argues that ‘decolonisation should concentrate on organisational development and on understanding community engagement as an all-encompassing practice for institutions (Landkammer, 2017, p.278).’ This would include prioritising and institutionalizing access to the collections and to the exhibition space for those who have been denied access, contribution and co-production in the making of the museum (Oswald and Rodatus, 2017, p.219).

This is all well and good, but we failed to consider that this kind of self-reflective writing about the exhibition served *us* as a curatorial team by facilitating our own positioning especially with regards to the exhibition's aftermath and academic reception. By contrast, those who had contributed from Benin, in particular those who were unable to travel – such as David Gnonhouévi, Romuald Tchibozo's student who had organised the research trip to Benin – stood to gain little.

Looking back, I feel ambivalent about our observations. Writing can be a highly performative act of self-reflectivity meant to divert responsibility. Friction and conflict remain because the consequences of such reflections are rarely taken seriously. What would 'prioritising and institutionalising access' mean for those who have been denied access?

The ambivalence lies in the fact that appropriation goes hand in hand with defensiveness, apology, reflexivity – and holding on to power. Could gestures of 'inviting' and 'collaborating', as long as they come from *within* the confines of a museum's structures and practices, be anything other than patronising? Is it possible to avoid paradoxical appropriation? Would the alternative be to *not* engage in these debates, to leave one's place to others, or to listen? Is there a possibility of sitting with and enduring these moments of fragility?

## Conclusion

Being affected enables reflection on how the colonial is imbricated in the present. Through it, I noticed how elements of our exhibition maintained and reproduced asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South despite our efforts to address them explicitly. The exhibition confronted us with the presence, reappearance, effects and continuities of the colonial past in our everyday practice and decision-making.

Being affected and using it as a research tool complicate the research of curatorial practice. In the case of *Object Biographies*, being affected shifted the analysis beyond binaries, and pointed to the paradoxes and ambivalence of working with colonial collections from within a contested organisation. By being implicated and being part, I could grasp how and why people grew weary and became defiant. I was confronted with the effects of organisational hierarchies, the anticipation of critique, the uncertainty of how my work would be publicly received and my contributions to reproducing the structures and mechanisms I was critical of. At root were questions of curatorial agency and change. When does one become complicit? When is it possible to contribute to political and organisational change?

Shortly after the exhibition's opening, in 2015, the SPK published its long-awaited statements (*Grundpositionen*) on the 'treatment of human remains' and on 'non-European collections' (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2015a; 2015b). It confirmed the SPK's focus on provenance research and the deployment of shared heritage. Critics understood 'provenance' as a way to delay questions of restitution<sup>32</sup> and interpreted 'shared heritage' as a tactic of avoiding returns (No Humboldt 21!, 2015). Then, in May 2015, Hermann Parzinger shifted course and published an article about the Humboldt Forum titled 'Berlin's Rebuilt Prussian Palace to Address Long-ignored Colonial Atrocities' (Scaturro, 2015). Announced as a 'collaborative project' a month later, the museum's curators would put into practice the abstract and undefined notions of 'shared heritage' and 'provenance'.<sup>33</sup> As in the years to come, the No Humboldt 21! coalition raised their voice in protest. In June 2015, they projected their logo and the abovementioned posters on the Humboldt Forum's shell (Figure 2.6).

Between 2013 and 2015, a process of negotiation emerged in which politicians, organisations and activists sought to identify and forge a moral consensus on German colonialism. Through this process, the behaviour of the SPK was, like the resulting consensus itself, more reactive than proactive, and often at odds with the Ethnological Museum staff. Meanwhile, the debates around the collections' fate increased awareness of Germany's colonial history (Koalitionsvertrag 2018).

I close these reflections by asking about the role that I can take as a white, privileged academic from within the Ethnological Museum, an organisation shaped by colonial ideology? To what extent can I bring about change from this position? As I have argued, curatorial struggles tend to centre around paradoxes: critique and complicity; collaboration and control; reflexivity and performance. Within complex organisational structures and mechanisms, which side becomes predominant will forever be uncertain and ambiguous. Balancing and withstanding the inherent contradictions is a central (emotional) challenge in curating contested collections. As Nanette Snoep, then director of the Ethnographic Collections of the State of Saxony, stated in 2016: 'It is not enough to talk a little bit about colonial history, put it in a small showcase, and that's it. The malaise stays.'<sup>34</sup>



Figure 2.6 Projection of the No Humboldt 21! Logo on the Humboldt Forum's building shell, 12 June 2015, No Humboldt 21!, photograph by Andreas Siekmann.

## Notes

1. The following quotes are transcriptions from the video recording of the event: *Preußischer Kulturbesitz? Postkoloniale und entwicklungspolitische Perspektiven auf das Humboldt-Forum – Zum Umgang mit Kulturgütern und Human Remains aus der Kolonialzeit (Prussian Cultural Heritage? Postcolonial Perspectives and Perspectives from Development Policies on the Humboldt-Forum – Dealing with Cultural Assets and Human Remains from the Colonial Era)* at the Werkstatt der Kulturen, 22 October 2013, organised by members of No Humboldt 21!, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEojPEqZDSY>, consulted 20 February 2020. Quotations are from Arnim Massing and Kien Nghi Ha, translation from the German: '[...] vollkommen fehlenden Sensibilität für einen verantwortlichen Umgang mit der eigenen Kolonialgeschichte'.
2. The point of view expressed in this chapter is solely mine, even if I sometimes use 'we' to describe Verena Rodatus' and my curatorial ambitions and approach with regard to *Object Biographies*.
3. The German title is 'Das Humboldt-Forum. "Soviel Welt mit sich verbinden als möglich." Aufgabe und Bedeutung des wichtigsten Kulturprojekts in Deutschland zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts'. The brochure was available in German and English, <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/newsroom/media-library/documents/document-detail/article/2013/11/27/media-the-humboldt-forum-to-be-in-touch-with-as-much-of-the-world-as-possible.html>. Last accessed 23 May 2019.
4. Examples of key literature on the relationship between museums and colonialism include Clifford (1988); Thomas (1991); Karp and Lavine (1991); Coombes (1997); Clifford (1997); and Gosden and Knowles (2001).
5. Examples of precursory and key literature on the relationship between museums and colonialism include (Stocking, 1985; Clifford, 1988; Thomas, 1991; Coombes, 1997; Clifford, 1997). Concerning Berlin's collections, notably the monographs by historians Andrew Zimmermann and Glenn Penny analyse the relation between colonialism, anthropology, and the museum; as well as Kristin Weber-Sinn's work on German East Africa (Zimmerman, 2001; Penny, 2002; Weber 2005). They were preceded and complemented by articles and dispersed research, focusing on academia and museum institutions (Krieger & Koch, 1973; Essner, 1986; Bergner, 1996; Ivanov, 2001; Penny & Bunzl, 2003; Ivanov, 2005), or particular collectors and museum staff (Gothsch, 1983; Fabian, 1998; Stelzig, 2004; Fischer, Bolz, & Kamel, 2007; Ruggendorfer & Szemethy, 2009).
6. 'Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Clara Herrmann (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) vom 28. Juni 2013 (Eingang beim Abgeordnetenhaus am 01. Juli 2013) und Antwort (Postkoloniale) Auseinandersetzung mit dem Humboldt Forum', Drucksache 17 / 12 360, <http://www.clara-herrmann.net/sites/default/files/AnfrageKolonialisierung.pdf>, published 28 June 2013, last accessed 20 April 2018.
7. 'Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Niema Movassat, Christine Buchholz, Sevim Dagdelen, Annette Groth, Heike Hänsel, Inge Höger und der Fraktion Die Linke. Weiterer Umgang mit menschlichen Gebeinen aus ehemaligen deutschen Kolonien und anderen Überseegebieten', <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/000/1800010.pdf>, published 23 October 2013, last accessed 20 April 2018.
8. The exhibition 'Anti-Humboldt-Box' was organised by *Artefakte/anti-humboldt* (Brigitta Kuster, Regina Sarreiter, Dierk Schmidt) and *AFROTAK TV cyberNomads* (Michael Küppers-Adebisi) in cooperation with Andreas Siekmann and Ute Klissenbauer, and was exhibited in different locations.
9. For more information on the organised events, see the association's website, <http://www.no-humboldt21.de/programme2/>. Last accessed 25 April 2019.

10. A special issue of the internet journal *darkmatter*, edited by *Artefakte//anti-humboldt*, was released in October 2013. 'Afterlives' brought together discussions and scholarly analysis regarding the politics of representation, restitution and historiography regarding the Humboldt Forum. Any action of No Humboldt 21! was documented and published on the initiative's website and has thus become a sort of archive of the continued resistance to the project. They also published a chronology of the events in their common publication (No Humboldt 21!, 2017).
11. Several participants at a conference in Dahlem voiced this frustration (fieldnotes from 10 December 2013).
12. Extract from my fieldnotes, 14 October 2013.
13. Extracts from my fieldnotes, from 8 November 2013, 11 November 2013 and 2 December 2013.
14. Plans for the Africa department exhibition going back to 2008 note the presence of colonial war loot in the collection (V. König, 2012, p. 24). The earliest concept of the permanent exhibition – introduced by Paola Ivanov in 2012 – states that colonial history will occupy a central role in the exhibition. This position was repeated in the exhibition plans published by Peter Junge and Paola Ivanov in 2015 (Ivanov, 2012; Ivanov & Junge, 2015).
15. Using *Beutekunst*, a colloquial term for 'looted art', instead of the official term *Raubkunst* or *Raubgut*, referenced debates concerning art that had been confiscated during National Socialist rule and to debates on contested provenance. This was no coincidence, as the Schwabing art trove of Cornelius Gurlitt had just been revealed as a 'Nazi loot discovery'.
16. Fieldnote from 11 December 2013.
17. Examples include Pataczek (2013); and Fuhr (2013). However, while the exhibitions received relatively little attention, some reviews were positive and encouraging (Wulff, 2013; J. König, 2013).
18. Fieldnotes from 23 February 2013.
19. Personal communications and conversations with the author. Fieldnotes from 23 February 2013, 17 March 2014 and a conversation in 2016.
20. See for the shifts from participant observation to observant participation, Bastien (2007).
21. Discussion of the author's presentation of her PhD project at the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac as part of the seminar 'Ecologie des collections', on 7 May 2017.
22. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I received a three-monthly scholarship that took place within the framework of the 'International fellowship programme for sabbatical leave and research residencies at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin' (Internationales Stipendienprogramm für Arbeits- und Forschungsaufenthalte an den Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin), <https://www.smb.museum/forschung/stipendienprogramme/internationales-stipendienprogramm.html>, consulted 20 February 2020. I co-organised two conferences at the Humboldt Lab to fund my research.
23. Paola Ivanov asked me to print the following statement of hers (email communication, 20 May 2022): I never agreed to become one of the protagonists of Margareta von Oswald's dissertation. In addition, I was not informed about the change of focus in terms of content and methodology. It is therefore unnecessary for me to give my consent to the publication of individual text passages (including the research agreement) in the dissertation.
24. Examples include the following: denial of the existence of human remains in the SPK's collections (Proisinger, Mboro, & Kisalya, 2013; Kathmann, 2014) and denial the existence of any museum storage in the museum's cellar (Häntzschel, 2019; Peitz, 2019).
25. Mary Elizabeth Moore describes her feelings with regard to white privilege in similar terms, fearing that her acting 'would be perceived as a racist act and could well be a racist act' (Moore, 2019, p. 254).
26. 10 March 2015, 'Blind Spots: Berlin' (Blinde Flecken: Berlin), <https://www.hebel-am-ufer.de/programm/pdetail/gesprach-blinde-flecken-berlin/>, consulted 02.05.2019.

27. For an extensive review of the legal frameworks for requesting returns, see Splettstößer (2019, pp. 57–71).
28. Fieldnotes from 08 October 2014. The representative explained the legal situation to Verena Rodatus and me during a meeting about communication strategies for *Object Biographies*.
29. Email from legal department, 12 March 2015.
30. Resumé of email exchanges from 12 to 17 March 2015.
31. Notes from Workshop I, 19 June 2014, Ethnological Museum Berlin.
32. See for example Häntzschel (2018); and Zimmerer (2019).
33. In the following years, Paola Ivanov and Jonathan Fine continued to initiate further research and curatorial projects in Tanzania, Namibia, Angola, and Cameroon.
34. This is an extract of an interview with Nanette Snoep at Leipzig's Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde, 19 April 2016.





## CHAPTER THREE

# Expanding collection histories: The museum as peopled organisation

With my arrival at the Museum, the search for archival material and, in particular, photographs documenting exhibitions started. My intention to capture the objects' lives in the Museum required understanding when and how objects moved within and beyond the Museum's walls. On my quest, I realised that the (photographic) documentation in the Ethnological Museum was dispersed and diverse in its materiality. Different museum staff whom I consulted were not necessarily aware of where to find what. The research guided me through the entire Museum, beginning with the Africa department's own photo archive, leading to the Museum's general archive, then the Museum's photo laboratory, and finally arriving at the 'Americas' archive, which stored photographs understood as 'museum history' (*Museumsgeschichte*).

What I found in search of historical documentation was scattered, unsorted, sometimes in bad condition, and usually difficult to identify and attribute to particular events, their dates, or even location. On the computer, single files of images were stored in low resolution in different folders, with names such as 'general photos historic, unsorted'. Images were not dated. The file names were unspecific ('Ausstellung Afrika\_2.jpg'; 'EM\_Afrika\_2.jpg'). The Africa photo archive consisted mainly of photographs that didn't have any relation to the collections:<sup>1</sup> the object cards as well as all the photographs relating to the collection – such as photographs documenting the 'field' – were destroyed by fire during the Second World War. The efforts of Kurt Krieger, the Africa department's director (1945–1985) and museum director (1970–1985), to document the Africa collections were reflected in laboriously staged, beautiful object photographs. They constituted an incomplete but approximate public inventory of the department's collections, published in several volumes since the mid-1960s (see figure 3.8; Krieger, 1965; 1969a; 1969b; 1990). It is in the department's

photographic archive where I found further singled-out exhibition photographs, negatives, and slides, as well as remnants from old exhibitions, such as maps used in exhibitions, which helped to trace the chronology of exhibitions in the Museum (see figure 3.4–3.8). As part of the department of visual anthropology, I watched and recorded films with the help of the anthropologist Ulrike Folie (see figure 3.1–3.2), including those stored in the so-called secret cupboard (*Geheimschrank*), and I found internal VHS recordings of the Leipzig repatriation (see figure 3.3). In the ‘official’ museum archive, I identified the documentation of more recent exhibition documentation – since the opening of the new building in the 1970s – with a row of folders documenting the different exhibitions in varying detail (see a series of photographs of the archive in the visual introduction, images 5–12). The traffic of collections to the museum’s exterior were precisely documented by loan contracts. The objects’ movement *within* the Museum was much more difficult to trace, however, because most exhibitions generally lack documentation (exhibition texts, labels, maps, etc.) and lists of the exhibited objects in particular.

Photographs understood as ‘historical’ were shelved in a room located behind the museum storage of the ‘Americas’. Referred to as the Museum’s photographic archive devoted to ‘Museum history’ by museum staff, the cupboard held one folder and a box with numerous envelopes. These included photographs on cardboard of the museum’s first exhibition, glass plates from the late nineteenth century, but also the extensive and detailed documentation of the construction sites of the Ethnological Museum’s building in the 1960s. As in exhibition catalogues, photographic documentation focused on object photography, not exhibition documentation, one of the inhouse museum photographers confirmed.

The diverse kinds of materialities, their dispersed locality, and the different qualities of conservation confirm an unsystematic and hierarchical approach to the documentation and keeping of the Museum’s organisational histories. Some histories seem to be understood and valued as ‘History’ with a capital H in the organisational self-understanding, but the attention and resources devoted to the organisation’s histories post-Second World War, including exhibition histories, are minimal at the time of research.<sup>2</sup>

The literature on the Museum focused on its early, formative period in the nineteenth century. Entire books are dedicated to the museum’s ‘founding fathers’, such as Adolf Bastian, the museum’s co-founder, and Felix von Luschan, curator for Africa and Oceania from 1885 till 1911 (see, for example, Fischer, Bolz, & Kamel, 2007; Ruggendorfer & Szemethy, 2009). The comprehensive research project on the archives of the Africa department (1873–1919), led by Christiane Stelzig, is a central reference (Stelzig

& Röhm, 2000; Stelzig, 2004). Two monographs draw in particular on the early histories of the Ethnological Museum: Glenn Penny's *Objects of culture. Ethnology and ethnographic museums in imperial Germany* (2002) and Andrew Zimmerman's *Anthropology and antihumanism in imperial Germany* (2001). Documentation of the museum's recent histories are summarised in museum guides, and particular aspects of this history are touched upon in the museum's own journal (*Baessler Archiv*), as well as in the yearly reports of the Foundation Prussian Cultural Heritage (*Jahrbuch*) or in particular articles or book chapters (see, for example, Schindlbeck, 2013; Schorch, 2018). On the recent histories, Friedrich von Bose's ethnography of the debates around the Humboldt Forum addressed the imaginations and plans of the Stadtschloss (von Bose, 2016). However, the museum's only comprehensive (self-)documentation is a special issue of the *Baessler Archiv* from 1973. The issue appeared on the occasion of the museum's hundredth birthday and traces the history of each department, as well as the museum's history itself. What is documented, what is taken care of, and how, indicates which histories are given importance and are taken seriously within the organisation.

A museum's history is not accomplished with the making of a collection. Rather, this history starts to unfold in following the collection's fate in its making: the exhibition, conservation, storage, inventory, and digitisation, as well as documentation and research. These processes continue within the Ethnological Museum. To document these museum histories meant to work, listen, and be there. Organisational knowledge was scarcely documented, but rather was incorporated by the people working in the Museum, some of them for several decades. It was only by working with museum staff that I was able to comprehend, trace, and document these histories – histories that crucially shape the organisation and its everyday, but which were also subject to rapid change in the context of organisational restructuring. Ways of knowing and being in the Museum were passed on and constructed through personal interaction in the organisation. I needed to find out who knew what and who was interested in sharing.

While the Museum is certainly centred on its collections, my observations and participation in the museum work led me to see the Museum as a 'peopled organisation' (Morse, Rex, & Richardson, 2018, p. 116). Conceiving the museum as peopled means to devote attention to particular people. In this book's case, I draw mainly on the accounts and knowledge of Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, who was responsible for the reorganisation of the Africa storage, as well as Boris Gliemann, the Museum's database manager. The history of digitisation and storing is briefly introduced here and then two chapters are entirely devoted to their contribution to the Museum in the making, focusing on the histories of inventory and taxonomy (chapter



Figures 3.1 – 3.3 Watching films from the Visual Anthropology department, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Margareta von Oswald

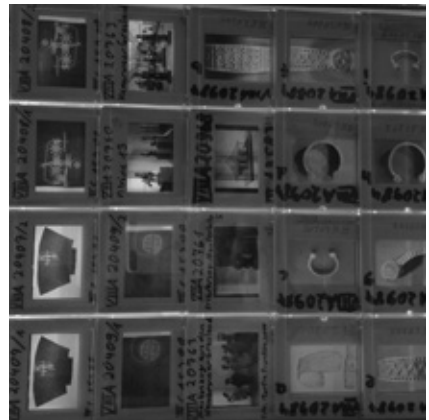
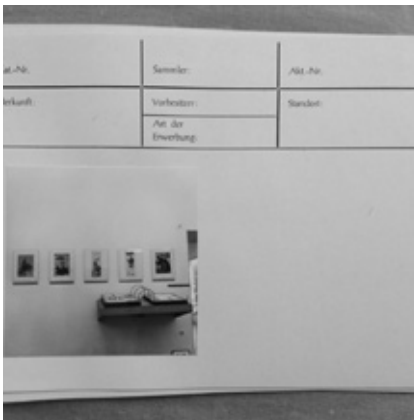
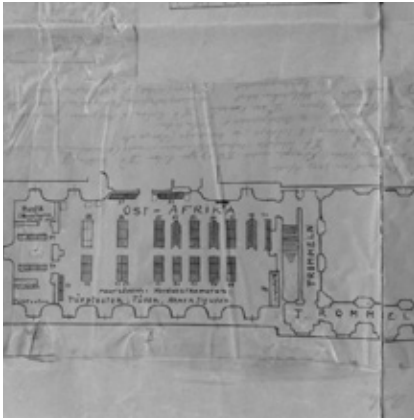


Figure 3.4 – 3.8 Different forms of existing documentation of exhibition and objects (object cards, diapositive, negatives, a map from 1926 exhibition, object photographs), Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Margareta von Oswald, except for 3.8, photographer: Anna Lisa Ramella

four) and the history of the making of the East Africa storage (chapter five). Whereas these chapters give space to their personalities and voices, the present chapter serves as an overview to the Museum's histories, presenting these in chronological order.

In this chapter, I trace the Africa department's history from its foundation to the present day. I concentrate on the multiple physical relocations and structural changes that were involved in the collection's movement. Here, I mention the history of the Africa department's permanent exhibitions only cursorily. Whereas my initial aim was to write and analyse the exhibition history of the department, including the many major exhibition projects taking place outside of the physical Museum itself, I came to realise that this was a task too large to take on at this time. In the following, I give a first impression of the richness of the Museum's archive and visual material, serving also as an invitation to deepen and work on the many gaps and blind spots in the Museum's history.

### **Building and locating a collection: The (Königliches) Museum für Völkerkunde between Mitte and Dahlem (1886–1973)**

'By 1900, Germany's leading ethnographic museum had descended into chaos.' This is how historian Glenn Penny opened his book on Berlin's Ethnological Museum (Penny, 2002, p. 1). The historian Andrew Zimmerman, in turn, foregrounded that the collection had become so large that the situation had begun to 'escape all control' by 1886, the year of the museum's foundation (Zimmerman, 2001, p. 190). Then called *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*, the Museum's collections were housed in a building in Berlin's *Königgrätzer Straße*, just next to the *Kunstgewerbemuseum*, the Museum for Decorative Arts, which today is occupied by the *Gropius Bau* (see figure 3.9).<sup>3</sup> By 1900, the museum director Adolf Bastian stated that 'the cases are overfilled so that every instructive arrangement of the collection remains impossible' (quoted in Zimmerman, 2001, p. 191). In their contemporary reading of the Museum's history, both historians describe in detail how the museum founders' mission to represent and research humanity in its completeness had failed. Instead of research, museum staff were forced to concentrate on the management and administration of what was arriving in the Museum. Curators complained about their task being reduced to working 'like handymen, to take inventory of objects as they came in from every possible part of the earth' (Fritz Graebner quoted in Zimmerman, 2001, p. 194). Researchers that came specifically to do research on the collections were forbidden access. As outlined in this book's introduction, European

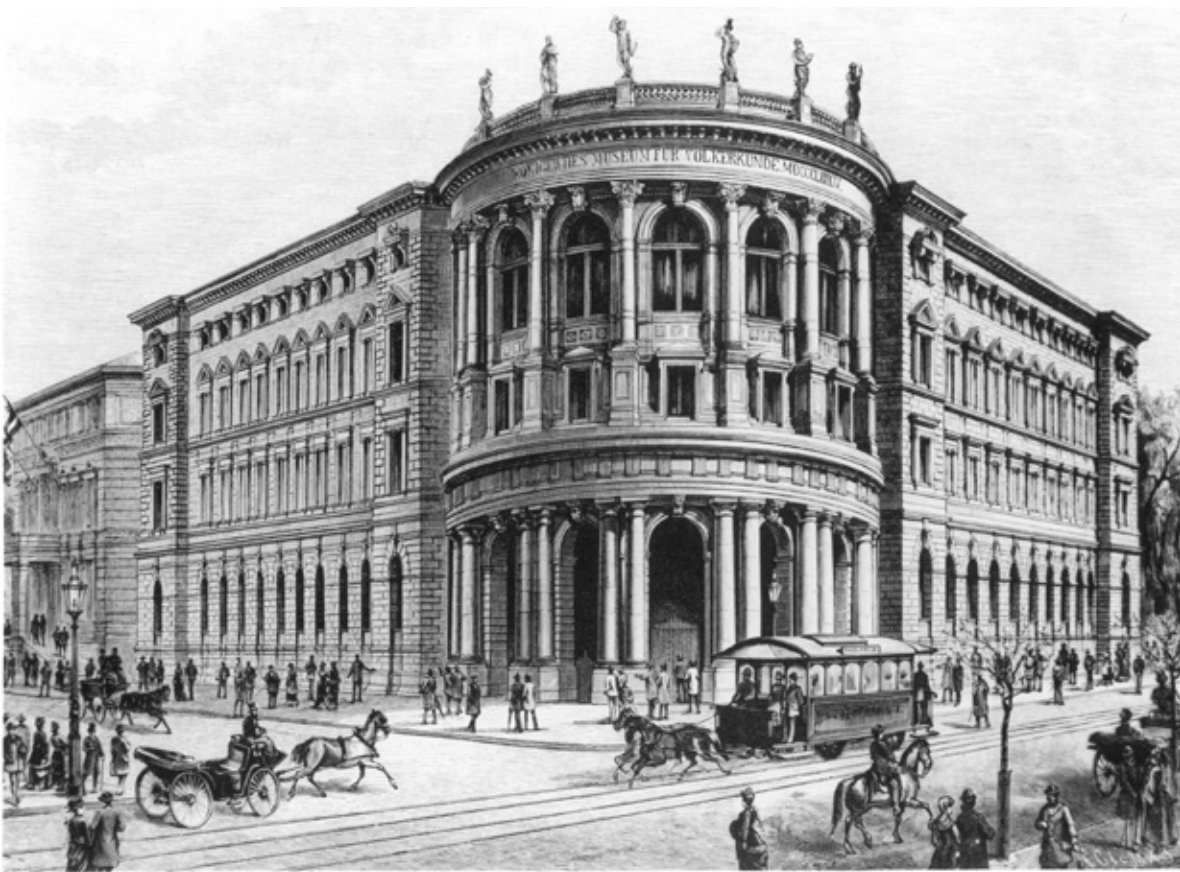


Figure 3.9 Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, at the corner of Königgrätzerstraße and Prinz-Albrecht-Straße, 1886, wood engraving from the Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung, 1886, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



colonialism enabled an overwhelming quantity of objects to arrive, adding to the already existing collections, some of which had their origins in Berlin's Royal *Kunstkammer*. The situation prompted staff to describe the condition of the Museum as 'untenable' (Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, p. 29). In 1907, the Museum was threatened with closure by the police, unless corridors and stairs were immediately cleared so that at least two people could pass each other (Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, p. 29).<sup>4</sup> All of the collections were housed within the Museum, with no separation of exhibition and storage spaces (see figures 3.10–3.11). Visitors complained about the apparent chaos. They lamented that the public interest was explicitly neglected by museum staff and demanded repayment of their admission charges (Stelzig, 2004, pp. 40–41). Adolf Bastian's fervour to represent humanity in its diversity and entirety turned out to be inherently paradoxical: the more objects arrived, the less overview researchers and visitors would get.

For years, museum staff, anthropologists, and politicians in Berlin heatedly discussed what to do with the masses of objects and how and where to construct a new museum building to properly house the collections. This included quarrels over whether to separate 'display collections' and 'study' or 'work collections' (*Schau-/Studien-/Arbeitssammlung*) as well as whether to build distinct museums representing peoples considered of 'nature' and of 'culture' (*Natur-/Kulturvölker*), and, more precisely, whether to separate the 'Asian' collections from the 'ethnological' ones (Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, pp. 18–30). A first relocation, however, of the collections was only realised in 1906. The collections were moved to a cheaply and rapidly constructed 'shack' (*Schuppen*) in Berlin's Dahlem suburb, located about twelve kilometres from the Museum. The architect Bruno Paul was commissioned to design an entirely new museum in the same area. The draft, consisting of four buildings representing four different world continents excluding Europe, was approved by the Berlin parliament (*Abgeordnetenhaus*) in 1912 (see figure 3.12; see also Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, p. 32).<sup>5</sup>

Interrupted by the First World War, the construction of the building in Dahlem, which had started in 1914, was left unfinished. It consisted only of two floors without a roof. After the war, the Museum was confronted with major financial problems: it was converted into storage spaces, whose costs were covered by selling parts of the collection itself, namely so-called *Doubletten*, objects considered doubles of other objects in the collection (Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, pp. 29–34). As a result, the exhibition spaces stayed in Berlin's centre, and the storage spaces were moved to Dahlem. The new exhibition suggested a change of paradigm with a 'singled-out' arrangement of objects, on 950m<sup>2</sup>. Exhibition and storage would from now on be separate entities. The exhibition was curated by the new department director,



Figures 3.10–3.11 Exhibition title unclear ('Africa collections') (before 1926), Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Königgrätzer Straße, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified



Figure 3.12 The planned museum buildings around 1910. View of the northern part, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Alfred Schachtzabel, the former department director, Bernhard Ankermann, and Herman Baumann, whose concept of 'cultural province' shaped the exhibition's organisation into regions (see figures 3.13–3.14; see also Krieger, 1974, pp. 119–122).<sup>6</sup> The exhibitions remained largely untouched until 1941, when the Museum closed due to the Second World War and the increasing danger from air raids.

Already in 1934, the Museum started to prepare the collections in case of war, differentiating the entire collection into 'irreplaceable' (*unersetzliche*) objects (immediate evacuation in case of war), 'especially valuable' objects (*besonders wertvoll*) (to be safely stored), and 'remaining' objects ('left to their fate', as phrased by Gerd Höpfner) (Höpfner, 1992, p. 157). During the Second World War, the Ethnological Museum set up, as did many other museums in Berlin, the relocation (*Auslagerungen*) of the collections to the Museum's cellar, as well as to other spaces considered secure in Berlin and all over Germany.<sup>7</sup> From 1942 till 1946, as the museum database manager Boris Gliemann told me, 'we can only speculate where the objects were, as they were pushed wildly all over Germany, depending on where the front was'.<sup>8</sup> The Africa collections were mainly stored in Berlin's museum cellars, in Wiesbaden, in a castle in Celle, and in a castle in Schräbsdorf. After the war, from the 1950s on, the objects slowly returned, but were moved to Dahlem.<sup>9</sup> On the grounds of the collection's lack of 'completeness' after the war, Kurt Krieger opened the exhibition *African Art*, despite his dissatisfaction with the exhibition's focus on 'art' (Krieger, 1974, p. 123). The exhibition consisted of an installation in a high-ceilinged, white cube setting with regional organisation. The exhibition lasted from 1957 until 1971, (see figure 3.18–3.19). Shortly after the exhibition opened, Kurt Krieger insisted that the future goals of the Museum für Völkerkunde would be to make the collections accessible in exhibitions of the region's cultural histories, rejecting the concept of 'exotic art' (Krieger, 1963, p. 248). As a result of war damage, the original museum building in the centre of Berlin was demolished in 1961 (see figures 3.15–3.17). Wils Ebert and Fritz Bornemann planned a new museum complex in Dahlem. The Museum für Völkerkunde opened its different permanent exhibitions and new storage spaces in stages from 1970 on.

Three years after the museum's official vernissage in 1970, paralleling the opening in stages of the Humboldt Forum (*Eröffnung in Etappen*), Kurt Krieger opened a new permanent exhibition dedicated to 'Africa' (see figures 3.20–3.21). Presented without a title, and thus suggesting a generalist view on 'Africa' via its material culture, the exhibition was organised in 'typical geographical and cultural regions', problematically making a distinction between 'White' and 'Black' Africa.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition aimed 'to show the cultural property of the population of each region [...] in its entirety and not to



Figure 3.13 Exhibition title unidentified ('Africa collections'), Benin room (1926–WWII), Museum für Völkerkunde, Königgrätzer Straße, curated by Alfred Schachtzabel, Bernhard Ankermann, Herman Baumann, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified



Figure 3.14 Exhibition title unidentified ('Africa collections'), Cameroon Grasslands room (1926–WWII), Museum für Völkerkunde, Königgrätzer Straße, curated by Alfred Schachtzabel, Bernhard Ankermann, Herman Baumann, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified



Figure 3.15 Main entrance of the former Museum für Völkerkunde, Stresemannstraße 110, corner Prinz-Albrecht-Straße 6a, 25 March 1949, F Rep. 290 Nr. 0000920, Landesarchiv Berlin, photographer: Willy Feige



Figure 3.16 Museum für Völkerkunde, undated, atrium with damaged glass ceiling, 25 March 1949, F Rep. 290 Nr. 0000923, Landesarchiv Berlin, photographer Willy Feige





Figure 3.17 Demolishing the Museum für Völkerkunde, 1961, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified



Figures 3.18–3.19 African Art (Afrikanische Kunst) (1957–1971), Museum für Völkerkunde, Dahlem, curated by Kurt Krieger, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified



Figures 3.20–3.21 Museum für Völkerkunde, April 1972, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Reinhard Friedrich



Figure 3.22 'Introduction room' (Einführungsraum), permanent exhibition, Africa department (1973–1999), Museum für Völkerkunde, Dahlem, curated by Kurt Krieger, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Reinhard Friedrich



Figure 3.23 View of 'Sahara', 'North Africa', permanent exhibition, Africa department (1973–1999), Museum für Völkerkunde, Dahlem, curated by Kurt Krieger, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Reinhard Friedrich



Figure 3.24 View of 'Grassland Cameroon', permanent exhibition, Africa department (1973–1999), Museum für Völkerkunde, Dahlem, curated by Kurt Krieger, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Reinhard Friedrich

rip it apart in single, incoherent pieces, such as with the unilateral separation of art' (Krieger, 1974, p. 123).<sup>11</sup> The focus on the use of material culture was reflected by large maps, wall-sized black-and-white photos of representatives of different cultural groups, as well as showcases integrating large numbers of objects (1,361), equally following a regional organisation (see figures 3.22–3.24). The exhibition would last for twenty-six years and thus constitutes the most permanent exhibition of the department's twentieth-century history (1973–1999).

### **Looting looted art? The histories of the Leipzig repatriation**

In 1973, after completing an approximate inventory, the curator of African collections and then museum director Kurt Krieger estimated war losses in relation to the Africa collection. The loss was estimated at approximately 50 per cent, with an original inventory of 66,953 objects, 36,656 objects lost in the war, and 30,297 objects remaining in Berlin's storage spaces (Krieger, 1973, p. 129).

This estimated amount changed drastically, when, in 1990, it was publicly revealed that Leipzig's Museum für Völkerkunde had kept 45,000 of the Ethnological Museum's objects as a state secret, with significant numbers of objects associated with the African continent. How many objects were actually lost due to wartime relocation remains unclear to date. No systematic inventory of Berlin's collections has been done yet. In his personal notes, Boris Gliessmann made the following calculation, in which he added different numbers of objects to identify the number lost through the war. Repatriation from Leipzig (18,627 objects), repatriation from Celle (30,500 objects), repatriation from Wiesbaden (2,000 objects), objects stored in Berlin (1,000), unnumbered objects (1,688): in all, there are 53,815 objects, which would mean a war loss of approximately 12,000 objects.<sup>12</sup> This confirms estimations by the curator Hans-Joachim Koloss of around 10,000 objects (Radosuboff, 2021, p. 10). After the revelation, it was decided to return the objects to Berlin (Feest, 1991; Höpfner, 1992). The Leipzig Hall (*Leipzighalle*), a storage room, was constructed to house and store the objects intermediately. The objects were then inventoried and assigned to the Museum's different departments, and stored in different locations in Berlin (see figures 3.28–3.30).<sup>13</sup>

What had happened to the collection was only slowly reconstructed – a reconstruction that has not necessarily come to an end. Some questions remain unanswered. The collections in question were presumably first relocated from Berlin to Schräbsdorf, a town located in Lower Silesia in today's Poland. Given the region's occupation by the Red Army in 1945–1946, it is

likely those collections that were taken as war booty to Leningrad, and possibly to other places in the Soviet Union. In 1975, the GDR government was approached by the Soviet Union to receive the collection. The anthropologist Philipp Schorch describes how the GDR government accepted this 'return' on German territory, 'thus metamorphosing from victory trophy over Nazi Germany to material symbol and marker of friendship between brother states in order to stabilize the Cold War' (Schorch, 2018, p. 177). With 44,561 ethnographic objects packed in 610 boxes, the transport from 1977 to 1979 to Leipzig turned out to be extremely complicated. It had taken two years to unpack and repack several hundred boxes and large and small packages in Leningrad, which were delivered in twelve truckloads to Leipzig.<sup>14</sup> What complicated the mission, however, was the fact that it was a clandestine transport, which museum staff in Berlin recounted as a 'cloak-and-dagger operation' (*eine Nacht-und-Nebel-Aktion*).<sup>15</sup> The objects were installed in a temporary exhibition space in Leipzig, which served – as objects were covered up and the exhibition space closed – as a secret storage space.<sup>16</sup>

Up to the present, museum staff grapple with the remnants and consequences of these histories of relocation, theft, and looting on a daily basis, often referred to as the collection's 'odyssey' (Haas, 2002, p. 21). The storage manager of the Africa collections, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, took the Leipzig repatriation as an occasion to reorder the entire Africa museum storages and to separate the collections into 'East Africa', located in the Museum's cellar, and 'West Africa', located on the same building's top floor. Whereas chapter five is dedicated to this history of the making of a new storage system, the following concentrates on the inventory and digitisation of the collection after the Leipzig repatriation. In the Africa department's case, the remaining objects to be inventoried laid stored in banana boxes (*Bananenkisten*) on top of the storage facility cupboards. In a conversation with museum staff, one storage manager remarked that, 'it is difficult to work if you know that it is impossible to do the job. Inventorying 30,000 objects in a few years all alone, this is completely impossible'.<sup>17</sup>

It is the Africa curator Hans-Joachim Koloss who accompanied the Leipzig repatriation, which might be one of the reasons why he only inaugurated 'his' permanent exhibition in 1999, despite the fact that he had already taken up the post in 1985 (following Kurt Krieger). *Africa: Art and Culture* was exhibited in a light-flooded space, with objects arranged in glass and metal-framed display cases, partly in a cultural or regional organisation ('Makonde in Mozambique'; 'Cameroon Grasslands'), and partly in a thematic organisation ('primitivism'; 'Elements of Design in African Art') (1999–2005) (see figures 3.25–3.26).





Figures 3.25–3.26 Africa: Art and Culture (Afrika. Kunst und Kultur) (1999–2005), Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Dahlem, curated by Hans-Joachim Koloss, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified



Figure 3.27 Construction of the so-called Leipzighalle, autumn 1990, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Dietrich Graf



Figure 3.28 Press conference in the 'Leipzighalle' of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Dahlem, undated, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Dietrich Graf



Figure 3.29 Outside the Hohenschönhausen hall, used as interim storage, 7 December 1992, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Dietrich Graf



Figure 3.30 Inside the Hohenschönhausen hall used as interim storage, 7 December 1992, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Dietrich Graf

### **After Leipzig: The history of the collection's inventory and digitisation (1990–2000s)**

Due to the arrival of these tens of thousands of objects, the digitisation of the collections in the Ethnological Museum started rather early at the beginning of the 1990s, compared to other museums in Berlin (see figure 3.31). The Africa department in particular occupied a pioneering role in the collection's digital documentation. This was not only because it was 'recorded positively',<sup>18</sup> meaning that everything that was on-site was recorded, in contrast to documenting everything listed in the books, including lost objects. It mainly concerned the digitisation process, which was to serve as a 'pilot project for the immature GOS programme',<sup>19</sup> the Museum's still-to-be-installed database, which was later (1998/1999) transferred to the Museum's current database, MuseumPlus. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff had been unsatisfied with the inventory of the Leipzig objects. He characterised the process as 'insufficient' and 'rough' (*grob*).<sup>20</sup> He subsequently developed a 'pilot project' within the Museum (Radosuboff, 2019, p. 32). Klaus Helfrich, then museum director, put him in charge of the digitisation process, in a context in which, as Hans-Joachim Radosuboff framed it, everyone reacted to the new PCs 'as if the Black Death had just broken out'.<sup>21</sup>

Boris Gliemann described the transfer from this old documentation system GOS in 2003 to MuseumPlus as a 'milestone' in his career and the Museum's history.<sup>22</sup> The process of transfer to a new database was monitored and developed together with a working group of the SMB. Boris Gliemann accompanied this digitisation process and decided to take over Hans-Joachim Radosuboff's foundation (*Grundstock*) of subject groups (*Sachgruppen*), even though it had been designed for the collections from the African continent. For Boris Gliemann, 'the vocabulary worked for about 70 or 80 per cent of the museum's collections: all collections have arrows, calabash, spears, cooking pots'. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff's attempt to order the Leipzig repatriation collections thus ultimately became formalised, generalised, and inscribed in the Museum's database.

Using MuseumPlus as the reference database didn't translate into a uniform and systematic digitisation process in the Museum. The process can rather be described as fragmentary, selective, and subjective. The digitisation process was selective, because it was mainly through external research projects that the collection was digitised, such as a European project on the inventory of musical instruments<sup>23</sup> or a research project on the Africa collection's archival files.<sup>24</sup> The digitisation was fragmentary, because the objects had been digitised at different times and with different technical support and expertise. Not all the objects were integrated in the database. Those



Figure 3.31 Inventory of 'Leipzig Repatriation', ca. 1990–1992, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified

that were digitised varied greatly in their detail, some missing photographs, measurements, or descriptions. The digitisation was subjective, because the collections' capture (*Erfassung*) and the detail of the indexation (*Erschließung*) depended on the personal engagement and interest of each regional department's employees. Put differently and somewhat provocatively, the objects which the museum staff considered important were privileged in their inventory. As a result, some parts of the Museum's collections were almost entirely available via the database while other parts of the collections were absent.<sup>25</sup>

Boris Gliemann's personal effort consisted in transforming the database – which he referred to as the 'documentation system' – into a handy working tool. The most important change from GOS to MuseumPlus, he argued, was from a 'hierarchical' to a 'relational' documentation system. Research on the objects could start from different points of departure, depending on the researcher's interest – the object, the person, the region, the material, etc. All of the data was related and included information on the transactions linked to the collections: the restoration and condition reports (*Zustandsprotokoll*), the loan procedures, the location management (*Standortverwaltung*). Establishing these relations from 2004 on had been 'manual work, work of sweat and tears' (*Schweißarbeit*). It consisted of cleaning the data (*Bereinigung*), erasing doubles, and checking the spelling of people and things. 'We had three or four Adolf Bastians [the museum's founder] in the system, and we needed to merge the information into one single data set.'

Conversing with Boris Gliemann in 2016, a transfer of MuseumPlus to a new database management system, Rich Internet Application (RIA), was envisioned to be accomplished in 2019.<sup>26</sup> The entity of the SMB were part of this process in order to develop the new database 'in conversation with the different museums'. In several workshops on the different aspects of the database – 'persons/cooperate bodies' (*Personen/Körperschaften*), 'loans' (*Leihverkehr*), etc. – they developed the core structure of the database together. Whereas there was a wish within the working group to keep the database 'neutral' to be of use for all museums, the particularity of the Ethnological Museum's database, with its 'ethnic groups' (*Ethnien*), would transform into population groups (*Bevölkerungsgruppe*) and faith or religious community (*Glaubensgemeinschaft*). The structural changes within the organisational documentation mode have not been accessible to those outside it. The publicly accessible database, *SMB Digital*, only shows a fraction of the existing digitised collections and of the available information. Despite the relative immobility of the physical collections in Dahlem, not only has their digitisation gone through several generations of technology but also the larger organisational frameworks and responsibilities have shifted significantly between the end of the 1990s and today.



### **Shifting structures, shifting collections: The Ethnological Museum, the Humboldt Forum, and the Forschungscampus (1999–2021)**

In ethnological museums, it is regional departments that continue to predominate the museum's internal organisation. Ordered geographically, the respective collections are, in turn, managed and directed by curators. In 1963, the Africa curator Kurt Krieger recalled the coming into being and functioning of the departments within the larger Museum für Völkerkunde.

At the beginning of this century (1904/1905), the mass of the collections made it necessary to divide them into independent departments, which since then have led a distinct life of their own, albeit in a changing administrative composition. Each of these eight departments [...] is a closed whole within the wider framework of the Museum für Völkerkunde. (Krieger, 1963, p. 245)<sup>27</sup>

Until 1999, the different 'closed wholes' – the departments – worked as comparatively separate entities alongside one another in a 'very decentralised' manner, as the former Africa curator Peter Junge described it.<sup>28</sup> The department's curator was provided with a storage manager, one to two restorers, and a secretary, who together guaranteed the departments' autonomous functioning. In 1999, the museum's director Klaus Helfrich (1985–2000) suggested a structural reform. The reform, also publicly visible because of the museum's name change from Museum für Völkerkunde to Ethnologisches Museum, consisted of a reshuffling of the internal structure to break with the powerful curatorial authority over the collections. Helfrich, museum staff reported, had perceived it as 'impossible' to direct the Museum with such powerful curators. He dissolved the different regional departments (*Abteilungen*) and suggested an organisation around the new departments of 'Direction', 'Collections', 'Restoration', 'Communication', 'Centralised Services', and 'Science and Research'.<sup>29</sup> The curators' status changed from that of director of an autonomous study collection (*Abteilungsleiter*) to that of a managerial position in a scientific area within the 'Research and Science' department (*Fachreferatsleiter*). Some curators perceived the consequences of the reform as a 'downgrade' and as a 'disempowerment'. In practice, some refused to accept the newly imposed hierarchies.<sup>30</sup> In particular, curators lamented the loss of each department's secretary, as it is 'so much more convenient to arrive at work and the coffee is waiting for you on your desk. And to say: "Please write this down." And it's a done job'.<sup>31</sup>

In 2000, Viola König replaced Klaus Helfrich as the new director. Some curators expected her to withdraw Helfrich's reform, which she refused to

do. Viola König rather arrived with the mission to develop a concept for the Humboldt Forum, to be realised together with the new Africa curator Peter Junge.

Despite the long envisioned move of the Ethnological Museum's collections to the Humboldt Forum, no structural decision had been taken about the relationship between the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum when I arrived in the Museum in 2013. At the time, no official representative of the Humboldt Forum was yet in place, but rather, different people took on this role on different occasions, while other potential candidates decided not to do so. In the Museum, the protagonists linking the Museum with the Humboldt Forum consisted first of its director Viola König and her team.<sup>32</sup> The Swiss cultural manager Martin Heller was commissioned in 2010 to lay out a concept for the 'Agora' – the Humboldt Forum's programme – as well as several temporary exhibition spaces. He was also named the Humboldt Lab Dahlem's artistic director (2012–2015). The Humboldt Lab Dahlem, equipped with 4,125 million euros by the Federal Cultural Heritage Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes), had been set up to 'provide impulses for the exhibition planning [...] for the future Humboldt Forum' (Humboldt Lab Project Archive–Humboldt-Forum, 2015). Finally, Hermann Parzinger, president of the SPK, had taken on the role of speaking in the name of the Humboldt Forum in public.<sup>33</sup> The director of the SMB, Michael Eissenhauer (since 2008), however, stayed in the background of debates related to the Humboldt Forum. When the conservative politician Monika Grütters took office as the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in 2013, she adopted the Humboldt Forum as her central political project. In a grand coalition of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, Monika Grütters aimed to make the Humboldt Forum 'a house out of one mold' (*ein Haus aus einem Guss*) and the 'nation's business card' (*Visitenkarte der Nation*). This would include organisation building and deciding on central recruitments (Richter & Abel, 2017; Mangold & Timm, 2018). In what follows, I chronicle the central developments concerning the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum – most of which were accompanied by controversies.

Monika Grütters was invested in building the Humboldt Forum as an independent organisation. Her first important intervention in the Humboldt Forum's organisational structure was to nominate the founding directorship (*Gründungsintendantz*) in April 2015. The founding directorship would be the first official representatives of the Humboldt Forum employed to develop its 'common vision', bringing together the Humboldt Forum's different players, consisting since early 2015 of the Site Museum (Museum des

Ortes), Humboldt University, the ‘non-European’ collections, and, in place of the Central Library, an exhibition about Berlin.<sup>34</sup> The directorship consisted of Hermann Parzinger, representing the SPK; the art historian Horst Bredekamp, representing the Humboldt University; and Neil MacGregor. The nomination of Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum, was celebrated as a diplomatic coup by the press, as ‘Chancellor Merkel’s preferred candidate’ (dpa, 2015). This positioning justified that he took the lead in what was often referred to as ‘the triumvirate’ (dpa, 2015). The Ethnological Museum’s exhibition plans were in their final stage at the time of the founding directorship’s nomination. Neil MacGregor’s intervention in the exhibition plans were pronounced<sup>35</sup> and logistically supported and financially realised by the company Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH (2016–2018), a firm created explicitly for the purpose. In December 2017, the founding directorship was replaced when the organisational and administrative structure of the Humboldt Forum was introduced.<sup>36</sup> Monika Grütters created and appointed two further leadership positions: the director of collections (*Sammlungsdirektor*), merging the directorship of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, and the general director (*Generalintendant*). Both described as ‘managers’ rather than ‘creatives’ in the press, the recruitments were internal – the new director of collections, Lars-Christian Koch, was formerly curator and interim director at the Ethnological Museum; the general director, Hartmut Dorgerloh, was the former director of the Prussian Palaces and Gardens. Their recruitment was interpreted as an emergency solution to the Humboldt Forum’s organisational constellation, which was repeatedly characterised by museum staff and the press as ‘lacking in transparency’, ‘hierarchical’, or ‘paralysed’ (Häntzschel, 2017a; 2017b; 2018a).

The Humboldt Forum was not going to become a museum as conventionally understood. As Monika Grütters stated in 2017, ‘we don’t want to do museum work, but rather use the items from the collections as a point of departure to work interdisciplinarily’.<sup>37</sup> Despite the central position attributed to the ‘non-European collections’ and recurrent comparison with other grand national organisations such as the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, the British Museum, or the Centre Pompidou (Parzinger, 2011, pp. 6–7), the Humboldt Forum’s concept and organisation were arguably different from museum organisations, notably in relation to budget distribution. In Paris, the restructuration of the museum landscape related to ethnological collections implied the inventory, digitisation, restoration, and new storage of its collections.<sup>38</sup> In Berlin, resources were only marginally devoted to the museums involved but rather to the Humboldt Forum itself. The building’s overall construction costs were originally planned to amount to 480 million euros, and were continually adjusted, for example

to 595 million euros in 2015, and were finally predicted at a total sum of 680 million euros in 2021 (Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 2; Schönball, 2019; APA, 2021). Additional resources were distributed to the programming, exhibition, and event sector of the Forum, with an estimated yearly budget of 50 million euros (Fahrn, 2016).<sup>39</sup>

In Dahlem, the Museum closed in January 2017. The last exhibition of the Africa department to be presented in Dahlem before the Museum's closure was *Art from Africa*, a black-cube exhibition using brightly lit pedestals and showcases to present the objects according to their attributed status as 'art' (2005–2016, curated by Peter Junge with Paola Ivanov).<sup>40</sup> *Art from Africa* was organised in four different categories: 'Art History', 'Figural Plastic', 'Performance', and 'Design'. Contrasting a geographical partition, this organisation emphasised its ambition to align itself with Western art history. The exhibition was controversial. For the exhibition's critics, the exhibition evoked references to Africa as 'the dark continent', bringing up associations of the primitive and the savage (Dean, 2010, p. 83; von Bose, 2016).

In 2013–2015, the Museum's official plan was to move the collections to an external storage system in Berlin's Friedrichshagen suburb by 2017, located some twenty-five kilometres from the Humboldt Forum. The site was described as providing ideal storage conditions, conservation conditions, and, importantly, enough space to host the collections. However, as museum staff stated in 2013, the SPK didn't seem to have engaged in seriously planning Friedrichshagen. The time, staff, and financial resources that were needed for the construction and move of the collections were not only unknown to museum staff, but the necessary planning didn't seem to be a priority to the SPK at the time. At a debate in the Berlin parliament in December 2013, the SPK's president, Hermann Parzinger, provided only vague answers with regard to questions concerning the future of the museum complex in Dahlem. As his answers suggested, the research, storage, and conservation of the collections were shaped by a lack of general planning, but substantially, by a lack of financial planning (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2013b, pp. 32–37). Information on these precise aspects of museum work were difficult to obtain during my stay at the Museum, and also afterwards. To my knowledge, official publications on the matter don't exist, and the information presented here is based on the accounts of those working in the Museum.

In 2017, the plan to move the collections to Friedrichshagen was abandoned. Its financing had not been secured. Museum staff had long lived with doubts about whether the move would actually take place, and finally the plans concerning Friedrichshagen were officially suspended. Instead, the idea of a 'research campus' (*Forschungscampus*) was suggested. This would entail the collections mostly staying in Dahlem, and a cooperation with the



3.32–3.33 Art from Africa ('Kunst aus Afrika') (1999–2017), Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, curated by Peter Junge with Paola Ivanov, Dahlem, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Claudia Obrocki

Freie Universität, the museum's neighbour, would be set up. The research collections would be distributed across the entire Museum, including in the former exhibition halls (Ossowski, 2017). In July 2019, the results of a 'potential assessment' (*Potenzialanalyse*) were published by an architectural firm and partly made public, announcing the anthropologist Alexis von Poser as the Museum's deputy director at the same time (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2019). As with plans announced for Friedrichshagen, however, the future of the project, and thus of the collection, remained uncertain, because the financial realisation was not guaranteed. In 2021, the research campus has its own sub-website as part of the SMB's website and is described as 'a new kind of research and presentation location emerging under the name of the Forschungscampus Dahlem'.<sup>41</sup> In the Humboldt Forum's shadow, the collection's fate remains uncertain.

## Conclusion

Working through colonial collections articulates in this chapter in my desire to understand how the collection formed and circulated. To research these histories, this chapter makes an argument for ethnography. Given the difficulties to trace internal work processes and the shifts and turns of things via written documentation, the chapter also builds on accounts of people who have worked in the Museum, indicating not only where to find and identify archival sources and literature but also how to document the employees' own histories of engagement with the collections.

The stories that gradually appear when opening boxes and folders when starting to talk to people show a profoundly instable and changing collection story. These were shaped first and foremost by the collection's constitution in colonial times. With the overwhelming quantity of objects that arrived in Berlin, the predominant question, which resonates to this day, has been, very practically: how and where to store them? What to do with all these objects, of which the large majority remains inaccessible in museum storage? And finally, with which legitimacy can they be stored here in Berlin? The history starts in the nineteenth century with a museum building in the city's centre, only a few kilometres from today's Humboldt Forum, which was already too small to house the collections at the Museum's opening in 1873. Moving towards Berlin's periphery, the First World War interrupted the ambitious plans to build a larger museum complex in Dahlem. Collections were, between the two World Wars, divided between the city's centre and Dahlem. Collections were relocated all over Germany, for their protection, before and during the Second World War. A new museum building opened

from 1970 on in Berlin-Dahlem, extending the historical buildings. The objects being repatriated from the former GDR disrupted the existing museum structures. The collection's arrival in Dahlem incited the making of new museum storage spaces, quick digitisation, and new inventory systems. After an internal restructuring in the 1990s, the move of the museum's exhibitions to the Humboldt Forum focused the debate once more on the question of periphery and centre. These histories show how profoundly the collections were touched by the central political regimes and developments of the twentieth century, affecting their movement significantly.

## Notes

1. The photographs stored in the Africa photo department consist mainly of donations from the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte. Many of these are photo albums from individuals and their travels.
2. At the time of writing, what exists of the exhibition history is inventoried and scanned, and a list documenting the exhibition history of the Africa department exists. The hierarchy of museum histories, however, is reflected in a major recent research and digitisation project, in which archival files up until 1947 are digitised to be publicly accessible, but anything after this period is not documented, 'Digitalisierung des historischen Archivs im Ethnologischen Museum – 1830–1947', <https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammelnforschen/bibliothek-und-archiv.html>, consulted 2 February 2019
3. Königgrätzer Straße was renamed Stresemannstraße in 1930.
4. My translation from the German: 'In 1907 sollte das Gebäude in der Königgrätzer Straße polizeilich geschlossen werden, falls nicht sofort Gänge und Treppe so weit geräumt wurden, dass wenigstens zwei Leute aneinander vorbeikommen konnten.'
5. The distinction of four continents was based on conversations with the directors of the museum's departments for Near Eastern and Indian collections (*Vorderasiatisch und Indisch*), East Asia, Africa and Oceania, and the Americas. These departments were founded after the death of the museum director Bastian in 1905.
6. Baumann claimed that particular cultures could be associated with particular geographical regions. He was convinced that environment, culture, and particular groups formed entities, which could be distinguished one from the other.
7. The storage places consisted of the cellar of the Museum in Prinz-Albrecht-Straße and the Königgrätzer Straße, the Flakturm Zoo and the Flakbunker Hohenschönhausen in Berlin. See a graphic and map of the different museum buildings and storage spaces during the Second World War in Berlin and Germany in Eichhorn, Grabowski, and Vanja 2005:129–131. For an overview of the history of the Museum from 1933–1945, see Schindlbeck (2013).
8. Meeting with Boris Gliemann, 21 December 2015, my translation from the German: 'Die Sammlungen wurden wild durch's Land geschoben, je nachdem, wo die Front war.'
9. The stamps in the inventory book 'Zurück aus W', 'Zurück aus C' (Back from W, Back from C), indicate the objects' trajectories as they slowly returned to Berlin (see chapter four for more detail on inventory processes).
10. Exhibition texts of the exhibition, from the archive of the Ethnological Museum. The exhibition only showed exhibits from what was depicted as 'Northern and Western Africa'.
11. From the German: 'Es wird also versucht, den Kulturbesitz der Bevölkerung jeder Region – soweit museal darstellbar – in seiner Gesamtheit zu zeigen und nicht in einzelne, zusammenhanglose Teile zu zerreißen, z.B. durch die einseitige Herauslösung der Kunst. [...] Das Ziel ist es, dem Besucher einen Überblick und einen gewissen Einblick in die Vielfalt der nord- und westafrikansichen Kulturen zu vermitteln und damit zum Verständnis der heutigen Situation der Afrikaner beizutragen, die ohne Kenntnis ihrer vielfach och lebendigen traditionellen Lebensweise für uns kaum begreiflich ist' (Krieger, 1974, p. 123).
12. Meeting with Boris Gliemann, 21 December 2015
13. The Leipzighalle served as a storage room for exhibition furniture at the time of my research.
14. Figures stem from Philipp Schorch's article, which also lists 727 wooden boxes, 505 large packages, and 293 individual packages that were repacked in Leningrad.
15. Conversation with Boris Gliemann, 21 December 2015.



16. Little information on the repatriation is available. It is mentioned and discussed in publications authored by curators and staff of the Ethnological Museum themselves, such as in Höpfner (1992); Sanner and Bolz (1999, pp. 45–49); Bolz (2003, p. 200); Haas (2002), or from external commentators and researchers such as Feest (1991); Schade (1991); Schorch (2018).
17. Field notes from 7 November 2014. The storage manager was thinking in particular of a deadline at that time. This time frame would consist of exactly three years until the collections would have to move to the external storage spaces in Friedrichshagen in 2017 after the museum's closure, still scheduled as such in 2014.
18. Interview with Boris Gliessmann, 21 December 2015.
19. Quotation from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff's diaries for 1995, [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1995/afro\\_jahr1995.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1995/afro_jahr1995.html), consulted 20 December 2017.
20. Quotation from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff's diaries for 1995, [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1995/afro\\_jahr1995.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1995/afro_jahr1995.html), consulted December 2017.
21. [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1995/afro\\_jahr1995.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1995/afro_jahr1995.html), consulted December 2017; interview with Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, 7 January 2015.
22. The quotations in the next three paragraphs related to Boris Gliessmann stem from field-notes of a training session with Boris Gliessmann, 24 October 2013.
23. The project Musical Instrument Museums Online was financed by the European Commission and ran from 2009 till 2011. The project's aim was to create a large database of public collections of musical instruments, <http://www.mimo-international.com/MIMO/accueil-ermes.aspx>, consulted 2 October 2017.
24. In the database, short summaries of each archival file were available, thanks to a research project that had inventoried all the files from the Africa department from 1873 until 1919. The archives were documented on microfilm. The research project, funded by the Volkswagen-Stiftung, was led by Christine Stelzig, whose PhD dissertation resulted from this research, see Stelzig and Röhm (2000); Stelzig (2004).
25. This observation is confirmed by the digitisation strategy of the SPK (*Digitalisierungsstrategie der Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz – inhaltliche Prioritäten der Einrichtungen der SPK 2011–2015*), released in 2010 (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2010). The strategy doesn't suggest a systematic and general approach, but rather a strategy of 'priorities' and 'foci'.
26. Interview with Boris Gliessmann, 8 November 2016.
27. Translated from the German: 'Anfang dieses Jahrhunderts machte die Masse der gesammelten Bestände die Aufteilung in selbstständige Abteilungen notwendig, die seither ein ausgeprägtes Eigenleben, wenn auch in wechselnder verwaltungstechnischer Zusammensetzung, geführt haben. Jede einzelne dieser acht Abteilungen, die im folgenden in ihrer heutigen Form dargestellt sind, ist ein geschlossenes Ganzes innerhalb des weiteren Rahmens des Museums für Völkerkunde.'
28. Interview with Peter Junge, 19 January 2021.
29. The two minor departments of Visual Anthropology and Music Ethnology existed as separate departments.
30. The quotations stem from interviews with the former storage manager, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff (7 January 2015), and a conversation and an interview with the former Africa curator, Peter Junge (8 September 2017, 19 January 2021).
31. Interview with Peter Junge, 19 January 2021.
32. During my fieldwork at the Museum (2013–2015), the *Konzeptgruppe* (concept group) consisted of the museum's director, Viola König, and Peter Junge, co-curator for the African collections (replaced by Monika Zessnik at his retirement in late 2014), and Markus Schindlbeck, curator for the Oceanic collections. The concept group was responsible for reporting and communicating the museum's developments to the SPK and the SMB.
33. That Hermann Parzinger adopted this role is testified, for example, by the publications he authored in its name (Flierl & Parzinger, 2009; Parzinger, 2011)

34. Paul Spies, former director of the Amsterdam Museum, was responsible for the Berlin exhibition for the Humboldt Forum and became the director of the Stiftung Stadtmuseum from September 2015 (Brockschmidt, 2015; City Museum Foundation). Gorch Pieken artistically directed the Humboldt University exhibition from April 2018 on, temporarily employed to create the first exhibition for the Humboldt Forum's opening (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2018).
35. About one-third of the plans for the Ethnological Museum and Museum for Asian Art changed: permanent exhibitions were transformed into temporary ones, allowing Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH to release funds, exercise control, and provide expertise (Häntzschel, 2017b; 2018a). The company, with its newly recruited staff, would integrate the future owner and operator of the *Schloss*, the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss (Humboldt Forum in Berlin's City Palace Foundation), in early 2019.
36. It consisted of a leadership system of 'four pillars' plus the directorate (*Generalintendantz*): 'Administration', 'Collections' (including the Museum of Site [Museum des Ortes], an exhibition dedicated to the history of the Schloss' site), 'Humboldt Academy' ('education'), and 'Programming' (responsibility of the Humboldt Forum's *Intendant*, director, in cooperation with region of Berlin) (Zawatka-Gerlach, 2017).
37. Translated from the German: 'Wir möchten nicht museal arbeiten, die Sammlungsgegenstände sollen vielmehr der Anlass für eine interdisziplinäre Herangehensweise sein' (quoted in Häntzschel (2017b)).
38. See, for example, Nicoletta Tiziana Beltrame's ethnography of the process (Beltrame, 2012; 2015).
39. In 2018, it was communicated that 350 people would be temporarily employed until the Humboldt Forum's opening (Kuhn, 2018a). These posts would, however, be made permanent on 1 January 2019, when the subsidiary Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH was integrated into the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss. In contrast, it was communicated that forty additional temporary recruitments were devoted to the museums (Ethnological Museum and Museum for Asian Art), mostly corresponding to the immediate need to restore and prepare objects for the move to the Forum (Kuhn, 2018a).
40. Behind the *Art from Africa* exhibition, other singled-out rooms and smaller exhibitions followed, including a room on *Africa in Berlin*, a section on *Bamum: Tradition and Innovation in the Cameroun Grassland*, and a permanent exhibition on Benin, entitled *Benin: History of a Western Kingdom*, which all opened in 2009.
41. 'What is the Forschungscampus Dahlem?', <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/dahlem/forschungscampus-dahlem/what-is-the-forschungscampus-dahlem/>, consulted 25 November 2021.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# Troubling epistemologies: On the endurance of colonial discrimination

During my first days in the Museum in October 2013, I visited Boris Gliemann's office. He was responsible for the Museum's database, MuseumPlus. I wanted to do research on a particular object, III C 14966, a 'Luba' stool. I worked with Boris Gliemann because Paola Ivanov, one of the two curators of the Museum's Africa collections, had charged me with provenance research for the Humboldt Forum. She intended to research the provenance of a specific group of objects produced by groups identified as 'Luba' or objects identified as 'Luba-ised', and she asked me to join a study she had initiated with the museum apprentice (*Volontärin*) Verena Rodatus.<sup>1</sup> Paola Ivanov suggested that I was to focus on a group of objects gifted to the Museum in 1902 by the colonial officer Werner von Grawert. Some of these objects now belong to the Museum's most valuable objects and are part of its acclaimed masterpieces. I was particularly interested in a wooden stool because it had been attributed to a specific group of authors, the 'Buli workshop' – in contrast to an overwhelming majority of objects in the collection, whose producers were undocumented and remain anonymous. As to the location of the Buli workshop, the stool had thus most probably been produced in what was then the Congo Free State, the Belgian king Leopold II's private colony, today's Democratic Republic of Congo. Paola Ivanov described that the Luba and related peoples 'regarded [the objects] as the most important objectivisation of the power of kings and chiefs', embodying 'the ancestors and the royalty represented by them' (Junge, Ivanov, & Ethnologisches Museum, 2005, p. 91).<sup>2</sup>

In Boris Gliessmann's office, several old exhibition catalogues, books, and historical files lay on different tables, ready to be worked on. Books were aligned on the wall on wooden shelves, next to historical photographs. Unlike other offices in the Museum, Boris Gliessmann's was rather dark and had a dusty, historical feel to it. Boris Gliessmann and I installed ourselves in front of the computer screen together. The research started by entering the precise object number. An interface with different tabs opened.<sup>3</sup>

The grey, sterile interface of the database suggested objectivity, order, and the uniformity of knowledge. It alluded to completeness. The look of the digital gave the impression of an almost ahistorical neutrality. The different categories seemed to be self-evident, such as the word 'inventory', which comes from the Latin word of 'to find' or 'to come upon'. Inventory was, however, the creation rather than the stumbling upon of a certain reality.

What I could observe on-screen were the accumulated results of manifold processes of naming. The processes of naming are at the core of the process of differentiating, and are never innocent, or neutral. Inventory enables groups and categories to be formed and order to be created, which, in turn, include some, but exclude others. As Bowker and Star argue,

[e]ach standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing – indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous – not bad, but dangerous (Bowker & Star, 1999a, pp. 5–6).

During the period of its foundation, institutionalisation, and professionalisation in the nineteenth century, anthropological category work was an exemplification of this danger: the ideologies that ground these categories were based on the production of differences underlying the colonial project. I refer to what results from these differentiation processes as 'colonial differences'.<sup>4</sup> These names and categorisation standards still form the core and base of the Museum's knowledge infrastructure: its database. To work within the grid means to engage with the Museum's fundamental epistemologies.

The database was part of the Museum's *knowledge* infrastructure insofar as it helped museum staff to access, administer, and order the Museum's collections. The infrastructure thus enabled the inscription and administration of knowledge assembled around the objects and so enabled their maintenance and care. At the same time, the infrastructure itself needed to be maintained, to, as Jörg Niewöhner argues, make invisible the social and ethical priorities and decisions that underly its constructions and developments (Niewöhner, 2014, pp. 343–344). Infrastructure work is characterised

by invisibility. Database work in particular is invisible when it comes to who is involved, as well as how the daily work of entering, cleaning, and controlling data is accomplished (Nadim, 2016). By describing processes of how knowledge is produced with and via the museum's database, this chapter attempts to render these processes and people tangible.

This chapter departs from what can be deciphered from this flat, flickering screen. It works through the genealogies of inventorying and cataloguing processes in the Museum and subsequently discusses the ways in which colonial pasts and presents relate. By working through the process of provenance research on this particular object, the chapter is concerned with what constitutes the Museum's most fundamental knowledge production: the practices of naming, cataloguing, and classifying collections. It scrutinises how remnants from the colonial past reappear within the Museum's infrastructures and how museum staff relate to them today. How are past ways of conceiving, imagining, and classifying cultures reflected in current ways of working with the collections? Where and how do museum staff identify problems, where do conflicts between past and present arise, and how do museum staff grapple with them? I return to the question of agency within an organisation built on colonial grounds: is it even possible to work outside of categories of colonial difference, and if so, what are the strategies?

I engage with these questions via the analysis of my own process of acquainting myself with the database via the research on a particular object. As I remark on the dependence on and trust in the Museum's historical sources, I start imagining the objects' digital counterpart as their avatar. Transformed through the accumulation and removal of data, the avatar delves into the database's restricted grid. This figure of thought helps to underline the

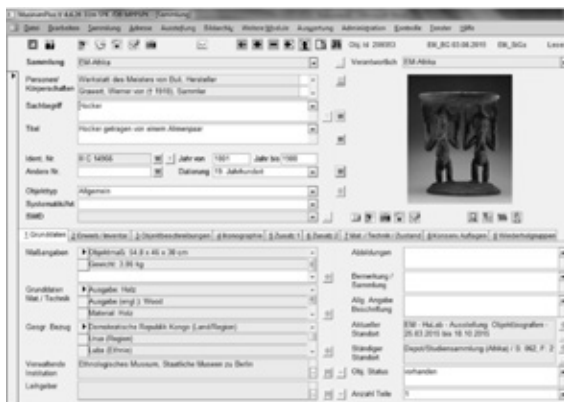


Figure 4.1 Screenshot of the database entry for III C 14966, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

interdependence of historical and contemporary processes of inventorying, ultimately pointing to the difficulty of troubling the museum's colonial epistemologies. The ethnography reveals how the Museum's practices of ordering and classifying allow categories of colonial difference and stereotypes to persist – practices that I describe as *discrimination* in their effect of recognising and marking something as different and distinct. The chapter demonstrates how historical taxonomies are maintained and continue to be privileged in the definition and interpretation of the Museum's collections. These historical taxonomies and epistemologies coincide with the foundation of anthropology as a discipline, which worked in complicity with colonial ways of conceiving the world. The database sorts and reflects how the Ethnological Museum produces knowledge, but also determines it itself. This chapter tackles these grounds of knowledge production in the Museum, showing how people grapple with the very names, words, and orders that define the collections. I discuss how, why, and when these epistemologies get challenged but resist.

### Navigating the database

Knowing how to manipulate the database was a premise for doing research in the Museum. As we sat together in front of the screen, Boris Gliemann explained that, for any research, three important sources were to be consulted – the object, the person, and the historical files from the archive. We had started with the consultation of the object, III C 14966. As Boris Gliemann referred to the stool as III C 14966, I use this ethnographic term exclusively here (and not vernacular names), also because I am interested in deciphering its position within the museum's regime and orders. He navigated quickly and securely in the database. It became obvious that navigating the database was not self-explanatory and required a detailed knowledge and trained practice of its different functions. Boris Gliemann made parts of it readable to me, but the links, relations, and associations behind each object were not easy to trace. While he already discussed details concerning the object, I was still busy accurately writing down key combinations and 'translations' for



Figure 4.2 Screenshots from MuseumPlus: 'Burning head' and 'Pot with a lid', Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

different symbols, such as what he called ‘pot with a lid’, which refers to a link to the archive, or the ‘burning head’, referring to the search functions for images (see figure 4.2).

Boris Gliemann was responsible for the process of the digitisation and documentation of the collection by himself. He occupied a quasi-monopolistic position when it came to the control, monitoring but also understanding the database’s functioning. He had co-developed the database MuseumPlus. Located in the Museum’s department ‘collections’ (*Sammlungen*), Boris Gliemann’s position was referred to as ‘museologist’ (*Museologe*).<sup>5</sup> He preferred to call himself a ‘documentalist’ (*Dokumentar*). This designation highlighted his attempts to ‘enrich’ (*anreichern*) the database with more information, ‘documenting’ it, extracting this information mainly from sources within the Museum’s archives and online research. To my surprise, when I asked him about his everyday work, which, from an outsider’s position like mine, could have been perceived as rather boring, he stated that it was ‘extremely varied’. He described his role as being at the ‘interface’ (*Schnittstelle*), occupying a ‘pivotal position’ between different departments, such as the collections, the conservation services, and the administration, as well as between regional departments of the Museum. He was one of the few people, he argued, who could get a comprehensive understanding of the Museum. Even though Boris Gliemann was constantly working with different departments and switching interlocutors – ‘in one day, it can happen that I have to switch from Africa to Oceania, from 1850 to 1979’ – he wasn’t part of a team, but could be considered the node between different teams and individuals. Boris Gliemann was in his forties and had spent most of his career in the Museum. After an education as a museologist in Berlin, he started to work in the Ethnological Museum in 1998.<sup>6</sup> A loner, he mainly worked by himself, with a discreet passion, not dusty like his office at all.

### **The interdependence of historical inventories and current digitisation**

When we started looking into III C 14966, Boris Gliemann explained that all research included going back to the historical documentation. The information in the database was based on the historical inventory, which Boris Gliemann described as the ‘database in a book’.<sup>7</sup> The direct parallel established between the physical paper and digital counterpart mirrored his description of the data set representing an ‘index card on-screen’ (*Karteikarte*). The process of digitisation had consisted in transferring the historical



information, if available, to the digital system. When III C 14966 arrived in the Museum, it was first recorded in the inventory (*Erwerbsbücher*), within the bundle in which it arrived. Then, the objects were separated regionally and were recorded one by one (*Einzelobjekterfassung*) in the 'main catalogue' (*Hauptkatalog*).<sup>8</sup> Around 1900, objects arrived in their thousands in the Museum. I could imagine the difficulty of a consistent and efficient inventory when Boris Gliemann explained that, to inventory a bundle of two thousand objects at once, which was not improbable at the time, the Museum might need between five and ten years. The process included the risk of losing sight of which object belonged to the bundle and breaking the chronology. As Boris Gliemann highlighted, 'in the best case' in addition to this two-step inventory process, an object card for each object was created and has remained as historical documentation to this day. The cards included measurements of the objects, descriptions of their usage and significance, sometimes even some drawings and bibliography. However, in the case of the Africa collections, the object cards as well as the photographs linked to the collections were destroyed by fire when the museum building was bombed during the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> The only source that remained and is still used today are reproductions of the original negatives of the inventory, printed on sheets of A4 paper and bound as a book.<sup>10</sup>

This source, or rather, its scan in the database, is what we went back to. The list resembled a listing of birthdates: once attributed a name and a number, the thing irrevocably mutated from what it used to be into a museum object. The description as a condensed characterisation of the object situated the object in a Western museum setting. As part of the list, the object was converted into a constitutive part of the Museum and became part of a whole – the collection – with the number 14966.

As we scrutinised the inventory together, Boris Gliemann stated, 'That's it. The whole documentation that we inscribe for the object now departs from the physical collection itself.' This diverged from other regional collections in the Museum, which relied on the 'original documentation'. As the inventory showed, the particular object 14966 was filed among a group of objects that had been given to the Museum by Werner von Grawert. On the left of the scan was the object number, the bundle of objects donated by von Grawert as a 'gift', starting with the object 14963. A reference to the entry book was given ('1555/02'), as well as to the collection date, 1902. III C 14966 was described as 'Chair, carried by two carved figures (man and woman)', '55 cm high', 'Urua'.<sup>11</sup> In this case, the last word referred to a geographical indication of the historical region called 'Urua', located on the west side of Lake Tanganyika. Almost disappearing, one could also see 'v. Sydow' just next to the description, which referred to an early publication

| Laufende No.           | Erwerb-<br>No. | Vor-<br>mit-<br>teil-<br>No. | Gegenstand.  |   |
|------------------------|----------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| 14960.                 |                |                              | Hämmerchen<br>Massi  | Ant. No. 255/02<br>Hawaii<br>Geobotanik   |
| 14961.                 | aus L. zurück  |                              | Holzarmring mit finger breiter<br>Messingumlage<br>7,5 cm Durchmesser 3,8 cm hoch<br>Lava  |   |
| 14962.                 | aus L. zurück  |                              | Hämmerchen aus weißer<br>Baumwolle<br>Lava, Massi  |   |
| 14963.                 | aus G. zurück  |                              | Haske aus Holz, pfannenförmig, mit<br>eingeschnittenen Verzerrungen; die<br>Verzerrungen sind meistens für<br>förmlich. 19 cm lg. 10 cm br. 10 cm hoch<br>Lava | 1555/02<br>O. B. 20, 21, 22<br>Geobotanik |
| 14964.                 | aus L. zurück  | N<br>14964                   | Haske aus Holz, unbeschichtet<br>Abg. Urua der Mangoma?  |   |
| 14965.                 | aus G. zurück  | N<br>14965                   | Ahrenfigur aus Holz<br>H. 32 cm<br>Urua  |   |
| Berlin<br>14966        | aus L. zurück  | N<br>14966                   | Stuhl, von 2 gepfeilten Figuren<br>(Mann u. Frau) getragen<br>55 cm hoch<br>Urua   |   |
| aus L. zurück<br>14967 |                |                              | Stuhl aus Holz, von einer weiblichen<br>Figur getragen<br>55 cm hoch<br>Urua.  |   |
| aus L. zurück<br>14968 |                |                              | Stuhl aus Holz, von einer weiblichen<br>Figur getragen<br>Urua.  |   |
| 14969                  |                |                              | Stuhl aus Holz, von einer weiblichen<br>Figur getragen<br>Urua.  | Ant. No. 255/02<br>Hawaii<br>Geobotanik   |

Figure 4.3 A scan of the inventory book on the page including III C 14966, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

|                 |            |  |
|-----------------|------------|--|
| Berlin<br>14966 | N<br>14966 | Stuhl, von 2 gepfeilten Figuren<br>(Mann u. Frau) getragen<br>55 cm hoch<br>Urua |
|-----------------|------------|--|

Figure 4.4 The entry for the object III C 14966, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

by the art historian and anthropologist Eckart von Sydow (von Sydow, 1923).<sup>12</sup> The 'Berlin' stamp above the object's number indicated that the object had stayed in Berlin during and after the war. The 'Berlin' stamp differed from objects stamped 'Back from C', indicating Celle (collecting point), and 'Back from L', indicating Leipzig. These stamps reveal the history of war booty and relocation of the collection during and after the Second World War. As far as the Africa collections are concerned, the only original sources that remained were this singular entry in the catalogue and the object itself. What I could see on the screen was, however, much more than that. The database indicated and was supposed to incorporate, flattened in singular tabs, the ways in which museum staff wrote, exhibited, and thought about III C 14966, and how this single line from the inventory catalogue had been interpreted and worked with since the stool's arrival in the Museum. Less visible was that the database was based on and carried along the historical inventory's modes of denominating and structuring culture.

### **Thinking with the object's digital avatar**

To think about these relations between past and present knowledge infrastructures – the inventory books, the naming and categorisation processes, the database – I started to imagine the object's digital counterpart on-screen as its 'digital avatar'. I first came across the notion in Nicoletta Tiziana Beltrame's research on the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. The object's entry in the database was an avatar in the sense that it could be regarded as 'a variant phrase or version of a continuing basic entity' (Beltrame, 2015, p. 114).<sup>13</sup> Expanding Boris Gliesmann's understanding of the object's digital presence as 'index cards on screens', the basic entity seemed to consist of the physical object and its historical inventory. These elements were constitutive of the object's existence within the Museum. One element hardly functioned without the other.

After spending more time in ethnological museums, I realised that curators usually privileged the interaction with the collection via their database entries, and not in museum storage spaces or exhibition spaces. Interacting with the objects took place via its digital counterpart. The experience of encounter was limited to switching between boxes and tabs, an experience neither sensorially engaging nor visually stimulating. If available, the object was represented by a photograph, usually taken frontally, with a black, white, or grey background, sometimes bordered by measurement instruments. The avatar could be accessed via keywords, which constituted the grid it was made of, such as 'material', the 'collector', and the 'geographical

reference'. Boris Gliessmann thus described the database as 'relational', a database 'where everything is linked'. I pictured how the different kinds of materialities related and linked through the avatar. The avatar allowed the digital object to be lifted off its two-dimensional screen and to render it three-dimensional, to see it as a figure evolving through the adding and taking away of data.

A colleague at the university objected when I mentioned the concept of the avatar to her: avatars, as she had come across them, functioned as digital incorporations of *people*, not *objects*.<sup>14</sup> But we didn't know *who* or *what* the museum collections consisted of. What kind of encounters did we have when working with the collection? For me, the avatar highlighted that we were possibly working with beings and subjects, and it underlined the collection's potential subjecthood and problematised taken-for-granted ontologies in the museum (Salmond, 2012).

### **Colonial epistemologies and trust**

Boris Gliessmann considered the comparison of the inventory books' scan and the database the crucial entry point to, first, double-check if the historical information had been documented correctly in the database. Second, it was important to understand, in case something had changed, why and how those changes had taken place. What this gesture ultimately showed was the trust invested in the historical sources, clearly structuring the object's definition and interpretation. This trust was visually encouraged by the smooth digital surface of the database, a surface constituted of a particular taxonomy. Understood in Harold Garfinkel's terms (2011 [1963]), trust is an emotion that emerges from a sense of shared reality, nurtured over time. Based on the inventory, the ways in which the object was interpreted and understood at its arrival was passed on, carried along, and further stabilised and sublimed throughout its museum and exhibition career. What was trusted, then, was the object's first recording, which coincided with several developments: the institutionalisation of an anthropology now considered problematic and 'anti-humanist' (Zimmerman, 2001); the heyday of German colonialism; and the early days of the Museum, during which chaos reigned due to the arrival of thousands of objects from, among other localities, these very colonies (Zimmerman, 2001, pp. 190–191; Penny, 2002, pp. 163–215). The Museum's taxonomy, mirrored in the database, incorporated these particular conditions. Trust is an 'often-unquestioned background whisper of well-being', only surfacing and brought to deliberation when actions or events doubt it (Broch-Due & Ystanes, 2016, pp. 1–2).

Unravelling the taxonomy meant to infuse suspicion in the familiar grid, ultimately questioning the legitimacy and thus acclaimed superiority of Western science based on colonial grounds.

### **Taxonomy and the endurance of colonial discrimination**

The Museum's database reflected the museum orders. Past and present practices of naming and categorising are condensed in each particular database entry – the avatar – which figured and was read by museum staff as a compressed characterisation of the object. The avatar, ideally, is supposed to indicate the accumulated knowledge of a particular object. In what follows, I will analyse III C 14966 as a constellation of categories that compose it, scrutinising the categories one by one. This analysis reveals how colonial imaginations – which accompanied processes and practices of ordering – were inscribed in present infrastructures and how they prevailed through these infrastructures. Specifically, it shows how the database reproduced colonial conceptions of binary difference – of 'us' and 'them', reflected in understandings of culture, time, and space – and how these differences shaped and defined the object's digital counterpart in its essence.

### **The category 'collection': Reproducing colonial binaries with the 'ethnological' and 'Africa'**

The first category in the database defined the object's affiliation to a 'collection', in this case 'EM-Afrika'. The database MuseumPlus was used in all museums governed by the SPK. An indication of a particular museum – the Ethnological Museum – and a particular collection within the Museum – 'Africa' – was necessary to locate the object. This particular indication thus situated the object within an even more important range of collections, namely Berlin's SMB. Which collections the objects had been attributed to – between the Museum for Islamic Art, the Museum for Asian Art, the Museum for Decorative Arts, the Ethnological Museum, and many more – defined the objects' primary identity. This primary identity – as 'Ethnological', 'Islamic', 'Egyptian', 'Greek', etc. – was accompanied by particular value regimes and the making of differences. Long before the Museum's opening, its founder, Adolf Bastian, excluded Europe and Asia from being the subject of 'ethnology', and thus from the Museum. He permitted only Asia's *Naturvölker* and, for Europe, 'some exceptions, which fit into a very small cupboard' to be part of his Museum's collections. Asia and Europe, he claimed, were to be



Africa (III A), as well as South Africa (III D) (Stelzig, 2004, pp. 45–46). The initial division of the continent first took place in 1865 and was later corrected. As the former Africa curator and museum director Kurt Krieger noted in 1973, even though the introduction of the categories had somehow facilitated some work processes, it brought ‘above all some substantial difficulties, because the regions had been selected too arbitrarily, so that overlaps couldn’t be avoided’ (Krieger, 1973, p. 105).<sup>15</sup>

That these categorisations are consequential becomes especially evident for III C 14966. The object was marked as III C (West Africa). The stool was identified as originating in ‘Urua’, a historical region situated today in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Geographically speaking, this region was at the threshold of East and West Africa. Precise information on where the object had been produced was lacking, but it was likely that the object had been acquired in German East Africa.<sup>16</sup> That III C 14966 was marked as stemming from West Africa, however, was probably influenced by underlying contemporary collecting conventions and aesthetic value regimes: since around 1900, objects from collections of ‘ethnology’ identified and valued as ‘art’ were mainly associated with West Africa. ‘Art’ in European conventions was synonymous with anthropomorphic and figurative elements, such as what the Luba-ised objects represented (Nooter Roberts & Roberts, 1996, p. 31; Schildkrout & Keim, 1998). Contemporary Western aesthetic values contributed to the Luba-ised objects’ early prominence in Western museums: when III C 14966 arrived in the Museum, the department’s director, Felix von Luschan, succeeded in persuading Werner von Grawert to change the object’s status from a loan to a gift. This change of status was probably motivated by the fact that von Luschan described the delivery as containing ‘beautiful monuments of African art’,<sup>17</sup> an exceptional categorisation for African artefacts at the time. Promising an exhibition with the newly acquired pieces, Felix von Luschan offered a reward of a thousand marks to acquire more of those ‘carved art pieces’.<sup>18</sup> Attributing this object a ‘III E’ would have contrasted with stereotypical ideas of eastern Africa, a region that was predominantly Muslim, and thus, in conventional conceptions of this region, not representing objects with anthropomorphic features. The categorisation of III C 14966 thus shows how the categorisation system as III C or, conversely, not as III E, discreetly introduced and cemented hierarchies between different objects and within the collection: the regional categorisation perpetuated specific colonial ideas about ‘Africa’ and added symbolic value to certain objects (III C), whereas other objects were devalorised via their association with eastern Africa.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from the opposition of East versus West Africa, another division was drawn between what was depicted as ‘North Africa’ and the rest of the

continent. This division appeared in the organisation of the departments. In the 1990s, the North Africa collections had been integrated into what used to be called the 'Islamic Orient' department (*Islamischer Orient*), which now bears the title 'North Africa, Western and Central Asia'. There was a rumour in the Museum that the reorganisation of the collections depicted as 'III' was the fruit of a personal conflict within the department. Whatever the case, the reorganisation validated and reified common images of the African continent. Stereotypical representations divide the continent into a predominantly Muslim northern part and what is sometimes problematically depicted as 'sub-Saharan Africa', or the racialised term of *Schwarzafrika* (Black Africa). These divisions result from the colonial imagination of Africa as consisting of a 'White' north, to which European colonial powers granted a certain degree of culture and history, opposed to a southern part, to which the West denied any history and culture (Arndt, 2004; Machnik, 2004; Arndt, 2012, pp. 95–96).<sup>20</sup> This demarcation was legitimised by racial theories, which originated from or were supported by contemporary anthropology. The division additionally presupposes two distinct regional entities that suggest homogeneity in general and religious homogeneity in particular: the 'North Africa' collections were integrated into the Museum's 'Islamic' collections.<sup>21</sup> Not only does this classification deny the religious multiplicity within the different, associated regions, as well as the diversity of the collections that are part of the collection. It also contrasts the 'Islamic' north with the rest of the continent, implicitly suggesting an absence of Islam and its long histories on the rest of the continent.

In practical terms, the museum staff had problems drawing clear boundaries between the different regions and thus departments: 'No one managed to determine where sub-Saharan Africa ends', the storage manager Hans-Joachim Radosuboff wrote in his diary in 1998. For him, III B, North Africa, was part of the collection 'Islamic Orient'. The clear division between north and south was challenged, however, by what he depicts as 'mixed regions' (*Mischregionen*) such as III A (north-east Africa) and the 'Tuaregs' associated with III C (West Africa). These are just two of the manifold examples that raised doubts, according to Hans-Joachim Radosuboff.<sup>22</sup>

III C 14966's avatar constituted a whole that was simultaneously part of many parts. Its primary identity as being labelled as 'EM-Afrika' (Ethnological Museum-Africa) included a multiplicity of differentiating processes. These processes were historically situated in colonial and anthropological knowledge production and could be retraced by deciphering the category's coming into being in the Museum's history. These categories and the inherent hierarchies were solidified by their continuous reproduction via the object's digital avatar.



### **'Geographical reference', Luba as 'ethnic group' and colonial continuations**

Similar to what I describe with regard to the category 'collection', the category of 'geographical reference' (*geografischer Bezug*) facilitated the continued use of anthropological concepts shaped by colonial modes of thinking. Intended to provide precise territorial indications, the category of 'geographical reference' (*Geografischer Bezug*) sustained colonial notions of temporality and culture. Subsumed under 'geographical reference', the subcategories 'Country' (*Land*), 'Region', and 'Ethnic Group' (*Ethnie*) compound historical, geographical, and cultural entities. One needed to deal with 'inaccuracy', as Boris Gliemann designated, when disentangling these different levels. The database dehistoricised contemporary and historical contexts, and finally omitted the most dominant political context of the time of the object's acquisition, namely the colonial governance of the 'Congo Free State', King Leopold II's private colony.<sup>23</sup> The 'country' was indicated as 'Demokratische Republik Kongo' (Democratic Republic of the Congo; henceforth, DRC), indicating a particular national constellation, only in place since 1997. The 'region' 'Urua' referred to a historical entity on the west of Lake Tanganyika, now located in the DRC region of Katanga. Leaving both 'Urua' and 'DRC' without particular dates or denominations trapped them in what has been famously expressed by Johannes Fabian as an 'ethnographic present', denying both historicity to those who had produced the objects in question, as well as contemporaneity to those currently living in the DRC (Fabian, 2014).

Equally part of the 'geographical reference', 'Luba' was referenced in the category *Ethnie*, which can be translated as 'ethnic group'. The attribution of names to societies in the context of European colonialism has been subject to critique: such names were ideologically accompanied by theories of social evolutionism and historical progress, and sometimes complicit with colonial governance. Similar to the notion of 'tribe', which 'is now commonly considered an ethnographic, rather than an analytical, term', attributions of 'ethnicity' continue to be contested (Sneath, 2016; see also Arndt and Hornscheidt, 2004; Arndt, 2011). Scholars in anthropology have argued that 'ethnicity' and 'tribe' can be designated as colonial inventions, part of what the anthropologist Peter Pels called an 'ontology of spatial discreteness'. Pels argues that this ontology

derives from the imaginary geography of colonial anthropology characterised by the presupposition that human diversity has to be represented in terms of discrete ethnic units that normally occupy equally discrete territories – an imagination based in the cultural presuppositions

underlying modern nation-states (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Stolcke 1995). (Pels, 2008, p. 283)

These colonial imaginations were closely entangled with and reflected by museum orderings in the metropolises. The Africa department's curator, Paola Ivanov, for instance, defined the collections as 'material fiction', stating that 'the objects acquired in the nineteenth and early twentieth century can generally be seen as part of the European colonial appropriation of Africa, and the spatial, economic and political restructuring of the continent' (Ivanov, 2005, p. 42). The collections were used to map, research, commodify, and govern populations within the colony, a politics in which the adoption of culture zones as 'artistic regions' is complicit (Fabian, 1998; Schildkrout & Keim, 1998; Bennett et al., 2017). Sarah Van Beurden argues that stylistic analysis in Western museums and academia helped to solidify and naturalise the invented categories and identities. Despite the fact that artistic styles often exceeded colonial borders, which was partly acknowledged by scholars, they were nevertheless understood as unquestionable cultural units. These 'zones' were often named after dominant ethnic groups identified and imposed by the colonial power (Van Beurden, 2013, p. 478; see also Kasfir, 1984). The mapping of 'cultures' and 'artistic styles or regions' continues to be prominently used.<sup>24</sup>

With reference to III C 14966, the origins of the attribution 'Luba' pre-date colonial governance, but were fixed within the colonial context. Mary Nooter Roberts describes Luba people as 'a wash of myriad clan and lineage groupings that were more or less consolidated as a kingdom from approximately the seventeenth to late nineteenth century' (Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 60). It was, however, not until the colonial period in the late nineteenth century that peoples referred to themselves homogeneously as 'Luba', when Arab traders and European explorers and travellers started to name them that way. As Pierre Petit notes, "'Luba" is a most ambiguous category that may refer to five thousand or five million people, depending upon its particular, situationally defined application' (quoted in Nooter Roberts & Roberts, 1996, p. 20). Based on the historical reputation of the old Kingdom of Luba and the myths of the precolonial Luba 'empire', the 'Luba' were problematically described as a 'supertribe' during the colonial period, as Crawford Young shows. Associated with important intellectual capacities and economic success, notably by Western expatriates, 'Luba' were sometimes called the 'Europeans of Africa'; comparisons sometimes going so far that their physical features were said to resemble those of Europeans (Young quoted in Roberts & Petit, 1996, p. 212). Those connotations had consequences for who decided to call themselves 'Luba'. Concerning artistic productions, stylistic devices

considered 'Luba' were judged as a 'label of quality', leading to what has been referred to as 'Luba-ised' styles, such as those of the Tabwa and Hemba peoples (Roberts & Petit, 1996, p. 236). Despite the vague definitions and colonial consolidation, the term continues to be prominently used, within and outside the museum context, including by people who identify as Luba today. This renders its use, or the search for alternatives, ever more complex.

### **Categories as 'historically situated artefacts'**

The database's different categories can be understood as 'historically situated artefacts', as defined by Bowker and Star (Bowker & Star, 1999b, p. 278). The 'historically situated' in this case concerned the categories' particular genesis in and through colonial systems of governance, reproducing categories of difference that underlie them. As 'artefacts', the Museum's processes of categorising III C 14966 materialised in the inscriptions of classifications and orderings and in the solidification of temporal conceptions and cultural entities.

The categories could be seen as the avatar's skeleton, parts of the body from which its being emerged. The categories and orderings predefined the avatar. They were consequential for how III C 14966 was understood, perceived, and valued. At the same time, contemporary anthropological imaginations such as of 'ethnic groups' continued to be confirmed by the Museum's knowledge infrastructure and were reflected in the avatar's structure. Finally, the avatar formed the prerequisite for how information gathered about the object could and would enter the database for present and future research. Conceiving the categories as the avatar's skeleton, the image of the avatar showed how the object's understanding and definition was limited by the database's grid to organise information. The avatar's room for manoeuvre to develop and grow was thus clearly delimited, a delimitation historically shaped and disciplined.

One was caught in colonial epistemologies through the everyday use of the database. The kind of difference this use entailed appeared to me as a continuation of discriminatory practices. I use 'discriminating' in the sense that it distinguishes different entities from one another, charged, however, with particular value regimes and hierarchies that rely on convictions of Western superiority and colonial modes of ordering the world. The database not only inscribed *past* conceptualisations of difference via its *present* structure. It also provided a limited framework in which *present and future* (provenance) research would be integrated.

As such, the avatar was not a mere representation of IIC 14966, a simple accumulation of data. Rather, the object's digital embodiment determined the object's reception, documentation, further production of knowledge, and ultimately, use.

### **Manoeuvring within limited infrastructures**

Museum staff, and curators in particular, were aware of the problems and historical genealogy of the Museum's database. Attempts to circumvent and challenge the categories and their limitations exist and continue to be invented in the Museum. The idea of an avatar emphasises that it could develop a life of its own beyond the Museum's constraints: avatars, when defined as virtual counterparts of the human being, can be understood as 'fantasies come to life, individual chances to step outside of one's usual self, to transcend the boundaries of one's own identity' (Khatib, 2007, p. 70). The object's avatar offered opportunities to think about the museum object outside of the museum's powerful frameworks, troubling categories, and contested names. The avatar thus foregrounds how the digital allows the potential disruption of the museum's given epistemologies. It opened possibilities for new interpretations and understandings of the object itself a priori.

So far, this chapter demonstrated how the object's avatar comes into being, and how it is composed. Departing from the historically shaped categories of the Museum's database, the remaining paragraphs of the chapter elaborates the question of what kind of transformation, or reproduction, of the avatar's identity was de facto taking place within the given framework. Two attempts to change started to be used with regard to the database when I was working in the Museum: the adding of categories and the erasure and replacement of names considered derogatory.

The adding of categories could concern the multiplication of categories that already existed, such as adding another 'geographical reference' to IIC 14966, indicating the colonial political context 'Congo Free State'. One method for challenging historical epistemologies was the introduction of the subcategory 'historical depiction' (*historische Bezeichnung*) as part of the same category 'geographical reference'. When I worked at the Museum, the category was notably used to indicate historical descriptions of locations and places. The subcategory helped to nuance and complexify the object's digital presence and to avoid confounding temporalities, such as indicated in the analysis of the 'geographical reference'. The adding of sections in the database allowed for more space to record research results: whereas in my time at the Museum, the only option to report particular research

trajectories was the ‘Notes’ field in the database, in 2016, a category devoted to ‘provenance’ was added to the database.<sup>25</sup>

In 2018, Boris Gliemann explained during a discussion on the first draft of this chapter that the category of ‘historical depiction’ was also more frequently used to engage in a ‘transfer of categories’ (*Kategorieüberführung*), in which depictions considered derogatory (*abwertend*) and offensive (*anstößig*) were replaced by depictions considered more neutral.<sup>26</sup> One of these categories, he explained, was his favourite: ‘magic’ (*Zauber*).

‘Magic’, ‘charm’, ‘holy substance’ [*Zauber, Magie, heilige Substanz*], these are the categories we are now pushing into the subfield of ‘historical depiction’. One method we pursue is to transform all of the ‘magic things’ [*Zaubersachen*] into ‘medicine things’ [*Medizinsachen*].

This was, for example, the case for a research and exhibition project in Tanzania, which featured one important object formerly depicted as ‘magic bag’ (*Zaubersack*) that the curators renamed as a ‘bag with objects used in the practice of medicine’ (*Beutel mit medizinischen Objekten*) (Reyels, Ivanov, & Weber-Sinn, 2018, pp. 84, 202).

If you type anything with magic, or anything with witchcraft into the search machine, there are several hundred things which appear. ‘Fetish device’ [*Fetischgerät*]; ‘miraculous impact’ [*wundertätige Wirkung*]; ‘amulet against malicious witchcraft’ [*Amulett gegen bössartige Hexerei*]; ‘hunt charm’ [*Jagdzauber*]; ‘something that has the power to make rain’ [*die Kraft, Regen zu machen*].

Boris Gliemann explained that it was not only difficult to replace these names with others considered more appropriate. The numerous depictions related to ‘magic’ were difficult to identify and find if your aim was to change these depictions, systematically, among so many other thousands of objects.

I hear the curators say: ‘Oh, this is a colonial use of language to depict this object, it was only used to depreciate [*abwerten*] those from who it was collected!’ I know the debates and of course, we are working on it. But pragmatically, it is difficult to tackle them, it needs a lot of time, thought, research, and expertise. And also, we cannot record the discussions in the database!

Similar problems arose with the category of *Ethnie*, which Boris Gliemann depicted as the next ‘construction site’ (*Baustelle*) he was dealing with, in particular in relation to the Africa department.

There are so many ethnic groups in Africa, more than 300 in the Congo collections alone I believe! ‘Hottentots’ [*Hottentotten*] are just one example, but there are so many more. We cannot continue to use some of these depictions, as they are ‘malicious’ [*bösartig*]. We have different categories which we use, such as ‘external designation’ [*Fremdbezeichnung*] or ‘ethnic subgroup’ [*Ethnie Untergruppe*], but all of them carry their own problems.

The attention devoted to the Ethnological Museum and its collection in the context of the Humboldt Forum heightened the pressure concerning data work, both in its quality and quantity. Boris Gliemann explained:

The Humboldt Forum has an enormous number of requests concerning the collections, and of course, in particular concerning objects which might have a problematic provenance, or a particular role. People are queuing up like at the doctor’s for these kinds of data! And sometimes, the names considered problematic are communicated to the public, when there are specific demands on objects. Then, people turn up and complain that the Museum hasn’t overcome its obsolete spirit [*altzeitlichen Geist überwunden*].

Another side effect of the preparations concerning the Humboldt Forum exhibitions was that activity around the database had grown significantly. Objects needed to enter the data system to be communicated to the exhibition designers. I smiled in surprise when Boris Gliemann said that ‘the work has accelerated, which is actually *not so good*’. He recounted how there were approximately five hundred new entries per week, with sixty people having access to the database.<sup>27</sup> However, for documenting the collections, Boris Gliemann explained, one needed time, accuracy, and care. He took on the role of what he framed as ‘data police’.

I adopt the role of a traffic policeman. I take care that no one crosses the street when it’s red and that pedestrians and cyclists have their rights, too. And that no one rides their bikes on the sidewalk, you know?

As an example, he pointed to the useful, but dangerous function of copy and paste within the database. One could copy data sets, indicating which

categories, such as the material or the location, should be repeated for the following object. This could be useful, such as when it came to the inventory of the manifold weapons in a collection. Some curators, as he noticed, just pressed the ‘yes’ button to duplicate categories and produced a lot of ‘nonsense’ by not examining the details of the objects. More data entries turned into more training, more data control, more ‘traffic policing’ for him. ‘I see the mistakes immediately. There are gaps, discrepancies, questionable assignments.’

In view of the pressure to document and inventory as many objects as possible, the risks of naming didn’t only appear with reference to object depictions considered offensive. At a workshop with museum staff, Boris Gliemann described the slippery terrain in which one navigates when labelling objects.<sup>28</sup> Boris Gliemann characterised the database’s category ‘notion’ as the object’s ‘business card’ (*Visitenkarte*). It needed to be as precise as possible, ideally deduced directly from the collection’s historical documentation. He gave ‘wooden bowl’ as an example. A wooden bowl could simply be described as a ‘container’ (*Behälter*) or a ‘vessel’ (*Gefäß*) but would lose meaning through either of these terms. By not being precise enough, one risked, he warned, turning a religious or spiritual object into a profane one. This would erase all meaning from it. As a lot of the collections were unknown to museum staff, one needed to be especially careful. With a single careless entry in the database, spirits could literally be deleted, taken away from the object and silenced. The avatars were reproduced, steadily, but deformed, recalling the situation evoked by Goethe’s ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’, in which an army of avatars created disorder, instead of its desired contrary.

Additionally, the database was not a sufficient tool to record the information available. The Museum’s present and emerging knowledge could not be accurately reflected in its documentation systems. Even the new field of ‘provenance’ was judged insufficient by museum staff: it didn’t leave the opportunity to integrate the complex itineraries, agents, and questions that accompany provenance research, or the debates and discussions that accompany it.<sup>29</sup> With the transfer from MuseumPlus to the new database management system RIA, Boris Gliemann aimed at creating more spaces within the database where free text could be added. He hoped to ‘take the chance to break open gridlocked pathways, to rethink the system, to realise new requirements and wishes. [...] The system needs to become more flexible [*beweglicher*]’.<sup>30</sup> This allowed for, in theory, the chance to transcend the rigid grids and templates imposed by the database’s framework, but the pragmatic outcome was uncertain at the time of the conversation.

‘It would be nice to have a system in how we document the collections, but we don’t have one’, Boris Gliemann stated. The different attempts to circumvent the database’s limitations and shortcomings were thus judged necessary, but insufficient, and sometimes even problematic, by museum staff, notably because of this lack of system. The current practices of making data stood as a continuation of the Museum inventory’s history, as subjective, fragmentary, and selective. Some names considered racist or derogatory were changed, while other names were kept in their historical version. As an example, Boris Gliemann said that ‘sandal’ (*Sandale*) didn’t constitute a problem, but ‘shoes of broads’, a derogatory term for women (*Weiberschuhe*) did; ‘magic figure’ (*Zauberfigur*) was changed, but ‘magician’ (*Zauberer*) wasn’t.

Characteristic of infrastructure work, the process of making data – the transfer from historical to digital inventory, the addition, erasure, and adjustment of information – became unmarked through the database’s functioning. The information entered in the database was not systematically referenced;<sup>31</sup> object descriptions were made without source; some categories changed with time, others didn’t. Inconsistencies, spelling mistakes, synonyms for similar objects, inaccuracies flourished. Defects and bugs appeared, reshaping the avatar to unexpected, and sometimes, undiscovered ends. Once entered in the database, the data was objectified, confirmed by Boris Gliemann’s image of the ‘index card on-screen’ and the avatar’s ordered surface. Despite the database being rather scattered, the progressively naturalised data was used in the museum context, cited, and passed on. Infrequently, I came across visible traces of doubt in the database – such as question marks after dates or names of people – which, however, shape the coming into being of its data. Layers of time, people, and their work overlapped, without being clearly traceable on the seemingly neutral screen. As the database smoothed doubts, it maintained trust in the data’s accuracy.

The lack of system spanned the different activities to counter the database’s drawbacks and was reflected by Boris Gliemann’s claim to have situated himself ‘at the periphery’ of the Humboldt Forum developments. That the collection’s inventory, digitisation, and documentation was not defined as a priority, but rather treated as ‘peripheral’, was significant. The lack of resources devoted to collection management, as well as the restricted access policy, implied a particular understanding of the Museum’s role and mission. This understanding of the Museum’s role prioritised representation over the museum’s other task, neglecting research, collection care, and management (see also chapter four).



## Conclusion

The deconstruction of different categories and imaginations in past and present knowledge infrastructures shows how their unstable, provisory, and fragile character was continually solidified, materialised, and perpetuated within the database, and, more broadly speaking, the Museum's infrastructure. Whereas my interlocutors struggled with these categories and names stemming from colonial thought, they nevertheless form the differentiating and discriminatory grid and order which organised the Museum. The ethnography reveals how those knowledge systems persisted and how deeply the epistemological practices were engrained in the museum's everyday – both in the past and today.

The avatar as a metaphor for the object's digital counterpart illustrates the interdependence of its historical genealogy and the object's current definition and interpretation, and emphasises how the database's grid's determines the knowledge produced within the Museum. Disciplined, the avatar emerged and was defined by the Museum's historical inventory and sources, which served as the primary reference point for how III C 14066 was understood, perceived, and valued, and how it could exist within the Museum. The different categories constituted the avatar's limbs, defining its condition and form. Similar to human's digital counterpart, 'avatars are not merely representations of bodies but forms of embodiment' (Boellstorff, 2011, p. 504). The avatar doesn't only include material ('object, inventory documents') and immaterial elements ('categories'), but also integrates practices, and processes ('naming', 'cleaning', 'enriching'). The avatar assembles and links these materialities and practices, which emerge in close relation to the museum's particular ecology. The avatar thus contrasted with the objectified character of the inventory, questioning the naturalising process of objectifying itself. Just as the material object might have changed status, form, and substance during its life within and beyond the Museum (see chapter seven), the avatar was equally yet differently multiple, instable, and mutable. However, the avatar could only dwell within the Museum's particular ecology, and was defined by the grids, frames, and work procedures of the Museum's knowledge infrastructure. Beyond being a vessel incorporating data, however, the avatar determines how this data is perceived, managed, and worked with. The avatar thus manoeuvres within particular boundaries, boundaries which were both challenged and confirmed by the museum staff through their daily work. The different attempts to extend the avatar, to adapt its form to today's anthropological understandings of culture and to respond to expectations raised by critical museum and heritage studies proved difficult to achieve, in an infrastructure shaped by colonial

thought. Possessing limiting and liberating capacities, the avatar is characterised by both enabling and detaining processes.

Using the avatar as a figure to picture the object's digital counterpart not only shows the continuities of historical categories and practices. Apart from restrictions, the figure allowed me to conceive the avatar's potential to reinvent and transcend these very categories. Conventionally, avatars are understood as a 'digital you'. Khatib describes them as 'a type of transcendent alterity which is both created and controlled *by the self*' (Khatib, 2007, p. 70; my emphasis). The virtual manifestation of the object, however, opened the possibility to extend the right to create, shape, and compose itself to multiple and diverse authors. The call for 'multiperspectivity' has been voiced frequently in relationship to ethnological collections, and has been a constitutive part of the Humboldt Forum's concept and communication strategy (von Bose, 2017b, pp. 415-416). In contrast to the practical difficulty of having access to the *material* collections themselves, the *digital* offered the potential to liberate the avatar from its constraints in order to attend to a more diverse multivocality.

The potential of the object's digital counterpart to become 'otherwise' lay beyond the adding of categories, a process which can be interpreted as extending colonial logics of ordering itself. Other ways of administering and ordering collections digitally were possible in the attempt to attend to multivocality, and ultimately, to repatriate, or, in more humble terms, to 'e-patriate' knowledge (Boast & Enoté 2013). Examples existed, and one of them had been developed within the Ethnological Museum itself (Scholz, 2017). Fundamental in these alternative database systems has been the attempt to take into account different ways of organising and naming fields of knowledge, with the aim of establishing a base for collaborative relationships. This concerns, for example, the attempt to introduce a general flexibility and multiplicity, instead of a rigidity and singularity, in the denomination of objects, the restricted access to particular objects which were not made to be viewed and used by all (Geismar & Mohns, 2011). It includes to work with images instead of text in order not to privilege one language over another when formalising object-related attributes (Scholz, 2017) or to incorporate other data, such as audio, to contribute to linguistic revitalisation efforts (Glass, Berman, & Hatoum, 2017; see also Srinivasan et al., 2010). Other measures consist in suggestions for facilitating access, such as by the digitisation and release of the museum's complete inventory catalogues and information on the objects (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). To my knowledge, no European ethnological museum has published their entire inventory, but calls to do so have gained recent public and academic attention (Öffnet die Inventare!, 2019).<sup>32</sup>

Inviting doubts and contradictions, some of which the research itself allowed, stood in for what Walther Dignolo has framed as 'epistemic disobedience' in his call for decoloniality (Dignolo, 2011, p. 9). Extending the database's grid with sub-categories didn't allow for these doubts to flourish and for disobedience to take place, revealing the endurance and persistence of the infrastructure's coloniality. The avatar still offered the possibility to imagine the database's subversive potential. Put differently, rethinking the digital storing of collections offers the means to transcend and challenge the museum's knowledge infrastructures and epistemologies, and thus to redefine the collections themselves.

## Notes

1. In November 2013, I joined Verena Rodatus in the research on the object group. Rodatus was the museum apprentice (*Volontärin*) in the Africa department and Humboldt Lab Dahlem from May 2013.
2. My translation from the German.
3. If not indicated otherwise, the quotations and observations stem from field notes of the training session with Boris Gliemann, 24 October 2013.
4. For the constitution of an ‘anthropological difference’ in relation to colonialism, and in particular in relation to visual culture, see Leeb (2016).
5. The department was created in 1998 after a general reform of the museum’s structure, which oversaw the administration of collections. On Gliemann’s public LinkedIn profile, he described his tasks as collection and archive management, programme administration, documentation system (database), data management (editing and correction), as well as project management (data recording, digitisation, online presentation), <https://de.linkedin.com/in/boris-gliemann-64503638>, consulted 13 September 2017.
6. Boris Gliemann studied museology at the Fachhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft in West Berlin, a novelty at the time. A particular education for museology had only been offered in the GDR, not in West Germany.
7. The inventory book within the Museum started in 1880 and stopped in 2003. Since 2003, the inventory has only been done online in the database. Before 1880, it was the entry books (*Eingangsbücher*) of Berlin’s cabinet of curiosities (*Kunstammer*) that served to document the object entries.
8. This two-stage process is not always the case, and in a lot of museums, Gliemann explains, the digital main catalogue is the same as the entry catalogue.
9. During the Second World War, all the specific index cards (*Karteikarten*), as well as the photographs linked to and of the objects, were hidden away in a spot considered particularly safe by the contemporary Africa curator. When the building in Königsgrätzer Straße was bombed, all those documents were destroyed. The detailed information about each object disappeared and had not been recorded elsewhere.
10. In other departments of the Museum, those cards still exist. However, the inventory books were photographed on microfilm in the 1940s and the negatives were stored elsewhere. Those microfilms were discovered only recently and by accident. For the Africa department, in contrast to other regional departments, all of these catalogues have been scanned and are accessible by museum employees. The inventory book that covered the collection entries until 1880 was deemed destroyed during the war, but was found in 1994 by accident: a researcher in the East Asia department found photocopies of the inventory book in the bin and alerted the department’s curator.
11. My translation from the German: ‘Stuhl, von 2 geschnitzten Figuren (Mann und Frau) getragen’.
12. Boris Gliemann didn’t know what the capital N indicated, email of 11 February 2019.
13. The definition of an avatar, following the *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary: (1) the incarnation of a Hindu deity (such as Vishnu), (2a) an incarnation in human form, (2b) an embodiment (as of a concept or philosophy) often in a person, (3) a variant phase or version of a continuing basic entity, (4) an electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user in a virtual space (as in a computer game or an online shopping site) and that interacts with other objects in the space, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/avatar>, consulted 30 September 2017.
14. Discussion with Tahani Nadim of an earlier version of this text.

15. See the original phrasing in German: 'Die Neuerung brachte in der Folgezeit neben einigen Arbeitererleichterungen auch erhebliche Schwierigkeiten mit sich, da die Regionen zu willkürlich gewählt waren, so dass sich Überschneidungen nicht immer vermeiden ließen' (Krieger & Koch, 1973, p. 105).
16. The object was given to the Museum by the colonial officer Werner von Grawert based in German East Africa, who had reportedly not travelled outside the colony.
17. '... schönen Denkmäler afrikanischer Kunst', E 1494/02.
18. E 1555/1902; E 1494/1902.
19. This asymmetry and hierarchy between East and West is confirmed in the Africa department's history and in the history of Western museums more generally speaking. Few exhibitions and little research have been devoted to East Africa compared to West Africa, reflected, for example, in the curators' expertise in the department, which clearly concentrated on West Africa.
20. For more discussion of racist terminology in the German language, see Arndt and Ofuatey-Alazard (2011); on the concepts of *Schwarzafrika* and *Schwarzer Kontinent*, see Arndt et al. (2004, pp. 204–208).
21. Despite the denomination of the department as 'North Africa, West and Central Asia', the depiction of the department begins with the classification as 'Islamic': 'The origins of the Islamic collection of today's Ethnologisches Museum can be dated back to the non-European holdings of the royal cabinets of art (*Kunstkammer*), which evidently contained individual items from Islamic countries from about 1830 onwards', <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/about-the-collection.html>, consulted 12 February 2019.
22. Quotations from Radosuboff's diary entry for 2 January 1998, formerly accessible online, which he sent to me.
23. After the Berlin Conference in 1884/1885, King Leopold II of Belgium was allowed by other Western powers to take charge of the territory that today is approximately synonymous with the DRC. From 1885 to 1908, he was the sovereign of the corporate state known as the Congo Free State, which he privately controlled through the non-governmental association Internationale Africaine. In contrast to propaganda about 'civilising' the region, Leopold's reign was eventually and internationally dismissed as an infamous barbarity. Public and diplomatic pressure led to the annexation of the colony to the Belgian state by 1908, when it became known as the Belgian Congo. The formation of the Belgian Congo involved the annexation of the former German-governed states of Burundi and Rwanda.
24. Numerous exhibitions of African art use the mapping of different cultural groups. Examples include Junge, Ivanov, and Ethnologisches Museum (2005); LaGamma (2012, p. xiii); Chapuis, Fine, and Ivanov (2017).
25. Interview with Boris Gliemann, 8 November 2016.
26. Notes from a conversation with Boris Gliemann, 16 April 2018.
27. Gliemann explained the situation to his colleagues at a workshop, 4 November 2013.
28. This workshop took place on 4 November 2013. Boris Gliemann initiated the workshop himself. At the time, curators and other staff were not necessarily familiar with the database, but expertise was needed because of the museum's preparation for the Humboldt Forum. He aimed to ensure 'correct data entry'.
29. Internal workshop at the Ethnological Museum with museum staff, 9 November 2017.
30. Interview with Boris Gliemann, 8 November 2016.
31. Each entry was authored by a particular person and amendments would be marked (for example, 'amendments made by B. Gliemann on a specific date'). It was not clear, however, what exactly had been amended.
32. Whereas some museums, such as Paris's Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, make their entire collections available online, they usually only give access to particular, and limited, information on the objects.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Managing plethora: Caring for colonial collections

The Museum's staff entrance was situated within the courtyard. A sign indicating 'registration' (*Anmeldung*) was written in capital letters on the big glass door. Once you entered, you found yourself in a controlled area. On your left, three to four men, sealed off behind glass, looked down at you: the security guards' room was elevated in such a way that you needed to reach up to get a list, on which you would need to fill in your name, affiliation, and the time of your arrival. When you left, you signed out the same way. Security staff frequently commented on late arrivals and absences, clearly indicating that they observed one's behaviour and work routine. In exchange for the list, slid under the window, you received your keys.

With my keys, I had access to the museum storage.<sup>1</sup> When the key manager handed them to me, I could see who had made use of the keys to access the museum storage in the last ten years. The list was short, and I knew almost all the names – access to what has been described as the 'continuously throbbing heart of a museological collection' has been highly restricted (Griesser-Stermscheg, 2012, p. 81).<sup>2</sup> Walking into the Museum's East Africa storage, located in the cellar, I felt as if this was as far as one could get in entering the Museum's backstage. A former air-raid shelter, the storage closed with an impressive and heavy metal door: the air was charged and heavy, noises muted, random interactions with other people were unlikely, and one was alone. The overwhelming number of objects seemed to conceal uncountable stories, and despite the order, it felt almost impossible to orientate oneself, to get an overview. A particular sense of discovery, similar to exploring one's grandparents' attic and thus of adventure came together with a feeling of risk, the fear of breaking things, or of disarranging the seemingly neat order.

As Mirjam Brusius and Kavitha Singh framed it, 'museum collections are, like archives, simultaneously the outcome of historical processes and the very condition for the production of historical knowledge' (Brusius & Singh, 2017, p. 7). The curator Paola Ivanov repeatedly described the historical context

we were dealing with as one of ‘collecting mania’ (Sammelwut) (Ivanov, 2005, p. 43). This frenzy would have lasting consequences for how the work of conserving and storing was organised in the Ethnological Museum. In the museum storage, the colonial collecting frenzy materialised, and the politics of the Ethnological Museum collection’s constitutions became graspable. A museum curator stated in conversation about the Museum’s collections and the difficulties of doing research with them that

[i]f we are honest, we don’t know anything about what we have here. The musealisation is an end in itself [*ein Zweck an sich*]. The whole story consisted in appropriation. The Museum put the objects in storage, for the objects to be there, with a pseudo-label, and that’s what constitutes all the knowledge. And this plethora develops agency [*Agency der Unmenge*]! The sheer mass of objects is stifling. I think that the collection is so stifling – it’s crushing us! It’s even preventing us from recording the collection.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter focuses on how museum staff handled this abundance of collections in the Museum. It focuses on one historic moment and one person’s narrative, that of storage manager Hans-Joachim Radosuboff.<sup>4</sup> After the fall of the Wall, the ethnological museum in Leipzig repatriated approximately 45,000 objects, war booty, to the Ethnological Museum (see chapter two). How does the managing and ordering of collections articulate in a context of scarce resources? How does this responsibility for the collection articulate in the Museum’s everyday – collections handed down from the past with the mission to keep it for future generations?

Through Radosuboff’s narrative of his own twenty-year-long career in the department, the chapter addresses the imbalance of resources – financial, personnel – and of attention attributed to the caring and managing of the results of colonial collecting. The chapter thus depicts the Museum as a space fragmented by hierarchies. Between different tasks and obligations, the Museum is organised along practices understood as mundane, which can be summed up as ‘care’, versus practices associated with the ‘representation’ of the Museum.

### **Collection neglect past and present**

In a personal conversation in 2018, one museum curator commented on why the situation of the museum storage was ‘symptomatic’ of what characterised, in the curator’s view, the Humboldt Forum’s general attitude: it was

‘representation’ that took a place of pride, instead of what was understood as ‘substantial’ museum work.<sup>5</sup>

The museum storage is symptomatic of what generally happens in the Humboldt Forum. Since it is not possible to profile the Forum with the museum storages, there is absolutely no investment. The situation in the museum storage is devastating and it is getting worse and worse. For me, working on a research project, this is a disaster. Only the *minimum* requirements are met. Currently, apart from objects for the Humboldt Forum, the objects considered at risk are taken out: ‘at risk’ means those objects which might become subject to restitution claims in the next few years. The rest of the objects will be covered for an indefinite amount of time under plastic tarpaulins. If insects come and devour the collections, this will hardly be noticed! If the collections are closed off, we do not have any control of what is happening in there.

The organisational prioritisation of ‘representation’ over conservation and storage was confirmed and went public with an article in 2019 entitled ‘Contaminated, Corroded, Flooded’ (‘Verseucht, zerfressen, überflutet’). The journalist Jörg Häntzschel described the conditions of museum storage in German ethnological museums, and particularly in Berlin, as ‘administrative emergencies’. Referring to the museum storage’s current operation as ‘passive de-collecting’, he criticised what he understood as a lack of transparency concerning the state of conservation of the collections, which are ‘to say the least, not ideal’ and even ‘catastrophic’ (Häntzschel, 2019).

The neglect of the care of collections in favour of what museum staff framed as ‘representation’ had a history in the Ethnological Museum. In the context of debates on the Humboldt Forum, the museum storage’s poor condition was used to argue for the collection’s move to the city centre. In 2010, when the plans for the Humboldt Forum were put at risk, the museum director Viola König argued that

[t]he storage space’s conditions don’t correspond in any way to the collections’ requirements [...] In the summer it is too hot in the uninsulated building, whereas in the winter, there is condensation running down the walls. (*Die Welt am Sonntag*, 13 June 2010 quoted in König and Scholz, 2012, p. 76)

In an article published at approximately the same time in the national newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, similar statements were made:



Bad news arrives on the director's desk every day. In addition to fire protection, the air conditioning and electrical engineering are partly in a miserable state. 'We could only bear the situation because we knew that it was not long until the collection's move' says König, who still pleads for a relocation of the collections from Dahlem to Mitte. (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8 June 2010, quoted in König and Scholz, 2012, p. 76)

In 2013–2015, during my time at the Museum, conditions had hardly changed for the better. The Africa collections were housed in a building originally constructed to show exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> The rooms were thus not suited for storing objects: the floor was made out of wood and the windows were big. With no air conditioning, the museum storage rooms were exposed to marked temperature fluctuations, going up to 35°C in the summer. Not only were these temperatures difficult to endure in terms of working conditions, but they also risked damaging the objects, such as causing cracks in wooden objects. In contrast to the museum storage's situation, the exhibition spaces were entirely air-conditioned. Probably, museum staff sometimes joked, this was to pretend that everything worked professionally in the Museum. 'What is most absurd in this context is that the objects have to be transported in so-called "climate boxes" [*Klimakisten*]', museum staff explained to me.<sup>7</sup> Alerted by the damage caused by fire to the Anna Amalia Library in Weimar in 2004 and the collapse of the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne in 2009, checks on the buildings' capacity to host the collection were carried out. If a fire broke out, 'better save yourself, don't even try to rescue the objects', members of museum staff stated. The building would simply collapse. Even though the consequent measures – the evacuation of the collections – were supposed to be realised immediately, they hadn't taken place yet. Staff concluded that the Museum's concerns were rather about 'representation than about the objects'.<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, the West Africa storages are closed for an indefinite amount of time, as fire protection is not secured.

The lack of planning, funding, and personnel (concerning the collections) was incomprehensible to some of the people working in the Museum. 'It is not as if the Humboldt Forum is a particularly new idea', one member of staff claimed. The discrepancy between what was spent on the Humboldt Forum<sup>9</sup> and external curatorial projects<sup>10</sup> in contrast to the collections' care was just too significant in museum staff's eyes. 'It is not only the museum's task to do new and costly exhibitions. The museum is also there to conserve!' another employee stated, referring to the ICOM definition of the museum's multiple roles (ICOM 2007).<sup>11</sup>

In the local news programme *Abendschau*, broadcast on 23 August 1990, the director of Leipzig's Museum für Völkerkunde, Lothar Stein, showed

himself relieved to know that ‘the objects returned finally to where they rightfully belong’. The journalist, joking, shot back – ‘Ah, to Africa or Asia?’ to which Stein responded, ‘No, this is another issue. Many conferences have been devoted to this topic. In Dahlem, the objects can finally be treated appropriately from the point of view of restoration’ (Abendschau, 1990).<sup>12</sup>

Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, responsible for the Africa storage from 1991 until 2012, was the one dealing with this precise ‘point of view of restoration’ the museum director Lothar Stein alludes to – inventorying, reorganising, cleaning, and moving objects within and between old and new storage spaces. In what follows, I depart from the particular: the history of Hans-Joachim Radosuboff and the ‘object love’ (Macdonald, 2002, p. 65), devotion, and passion that accompanied his work at the Museum. Countering the organisational neglect individually, this history not only pays homage to his achievements. It underlines the impact of individuals and their agency in the Museum’s history, opposing anonymised understandings of what constitutes the Museum.

### **The making of the East Africa storage**

When visiting and working in the East Africa storage, one constantly stumbled on Hans-Joachim Radosuboff’s traces. The cupboards were organised by topic, and similar objects were neatly arranged next to each other. Opening the cupboards, taking out the objects to properly look at them, I imagined hearing Hans-Joachim Radosuboff’s successor sigh as I had heard so many times before: once something was taken out, it was not always easy to reconstruct the complicated hanging system that Hans-Joachim Radosuboff and his assistant, Jürgen Tröster, had put in place. Beautifully installed, the objects would not touch each other; they were draped and arranged behind glass following what Hans-Joachim Radosuboff called ‘movement and aesthetics’. Jürgen Tröster contributed to these particular hanging systems significantly insofar as he had previously worked for the prominent German porcelain manufacturer Königliche Porzellan-Manufaktur and had installed their displays at fairs (*Verkaufsmessenausstatter*).

When I contacted Hans-Joachim Radosuboff to do an interview, he replied enthusiastically. He was happy to report on his ‘85,000 children’,<sup>13</sup> referring to the approximate number of objects in the Africa collection. We met in January 2015. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff had been retired for over two years, and he still knew the collections by heart. He had prepared well for the interview and had reread the diary that he had kept from 1991 to 2002. His speech was accurate and detailed, spiced with funny details.<sup>14</sup> He came to visit the Museum, ‘not so much for the Museum as for the people’.

With a likeable Berlin accent, he was always ready for repartee. He greeted everyone and quickly made appointments for a chat when we encountered museum staff during our tour. We installed ourselves in the office just next to the West Africa storage. Immediately after we sat down, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff started his narrative.

Hans-Joachim Radosuboff (HJR): I arrived here out of the blue in 1991. If you look at my CV, I am not an expert. I didn't have anything to do with Africa.

Margareta von Oswald (MO): What did you do?

HJR: I was a craftsman. At one point, I learned how to be a mason and then, for many years, I worked as a craftsman in manual sectors, in technical areas. My last job before coming here was at the Museum of Decorative Arts (Kunstgewerbemuseum), as a guard, in the guardhouse. There was a notice that the Museum für Völkerkunde was looking for a storage keeper. And I applied and it worked. And then I walked in here as we did today. The only difference was that it was somehow much less chaotic, but still, much more chaotic than it is now [laughs]. And Mr Koloss [Hans-Joachim Koloss, the Africa curator at the time] who employed me, he picked me out of 128 applications. This was the time when the Wall just had come down. One and a half years after. Anyone applied for anything. Do you understand? Koloss gave me a few brief explanations. When I started to ask interested questions, he was suddenly gone. That's how it was! In that sense, he was not an instructor! And after a few questions and a few gruff answers I told myself: 'OK, you have to do your own thing.' And very quickly, I understood why I got the job here. After a short time of working in the Museum, the door swung open, two of my colleagues stood there with these huge carts, filled with objects from Leipzig. 'Achim, your first objects are here!' So, and then of course, I had to help myself – unpacking and disinsectising and such. And then, the hall here was filled with another 25,000 objects.

When the objects arrived in Berlin, the Museum was confronted with an exceptional situation. As put by Christian Feest in 1991, '[n]o sane museum ever acquires 45,000 objects in a single stroke' (Feest, 1991, p. 32). Of the objects acquired, 25,000 belonged to the Africa collections. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff was most directly and immediately confronted with this situation (see figures 5.1 and 5.2).



Figures 5.1 and 5.2 Photographs of 'emergency cupboards' (Notregale) as interim storage for the collections, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff

When I arrived at the Museum, I had *a lot* of ideas in a short period of time. But then I realised, that every single idea I have, I need to keep up 65,000 times. Do you understand? If I don't keep this particular idea, I create more disorder than anything else.

In his diaries, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff wrote: 'Only the humble question remains: "Where to put things?" It certainly doesn't fit in a hat-box.'<sup>15</sup> He found a timely solution. Given that the museum's air-raid shelter in the cellar was out of use due to the end of the Cold War, he decided to reuse it as storage space. To have clearly distinct entities in the two different storage spaces – one located in the building's cellar, the other one under the same building's roof – Hans-Joachim Radosuboff separated the regional collections within the Africa collection. He dedicated one space to the East Africa collections and the other to the rest of the Africa collections, which consisted mainly of objects from West Africa and today is commonly referred to as the West Africa storage.

When the 25,000 objects arrived, I started to get an idea of the amount and the kind of work that I was going to be confronted with. Mr Koloss said to me: 'Well, this will keep you occupied for approximately four years, won't it?' [Hans-Joachim Radosuboff looks at me, and laughs out loud.] As I said, I didn't have much of an idea of what I was doing. I also had no one to talk to. I was what you call an autodidact. However, I knew that in four years, I could never deal with this amount of objects [laughs again]. I had a little bit of experience already and if I did my job correctly, I knew that I could only do twenty-five objects a week. At the most! That's one hundred objects per month, and then we have to consider vacation and sick leave. This added up to about one thousand objects a year. I had twenty-seven years left, there are 25,000 objects. So then, I said to my boss, Koloss, everything would work out: by the time I retired, he would have his two study collections. This information blew him away! Koloss was a Cameroon fan and of course he wanted to see and process everything that concerned Cameroon right away. And this is how I got him to get help. Koloss organised assistants to support me.

And I said to myself: 'OK, the East Africa collection holds approximately as many objects as what has been returned from Leipzig as repatriations.' One didn't have any measure in terms of physical mass. An object could be a pearl or a drum. Still, I knew that the quantity of inventory numbers from the East Africa collection was about 25,000, and thus,

the number of objects that were returned. So I said to myself: 'We need to get a whole region out of here. If not, we'll have a mess again.' And this turned out to be East Africa.

As a non-professional, I had a dream: I wanted to create a study collection, where you can see possibly everything, but where you do not need to touch anything and where no object touches another object. This was the most important rule. And then there was the question – what motivates the object's arrangement? Well, I said to myself, by topic: It's organised a bit like a thesaurus.

MO: And how did you assign the objects to each category?

HR: I actually created a thesaurus. When I added objects, they appeared immediately in the database, but only as a list of names. I then I assigned certain functions to those objects, and functional groups appeared. [...] As a result, one could say that this museum's database's Mama, the Ur-Mama ('great-mother'), comes from me.

The Leipzig repatriation incited the Museum to start the collection's digitisation earlier than other SMB museums. The collections from Leipzig were all inventoried when they arrived. However, as Hans-Joachim Radosuboff explained, it was done in a rough way.

If an object came back from Leipzig which was made out of wood, they would just write 'piece of wood'. Then, the object was assigned a Leipzig number [*Leipzignummer*] and that's it. For me, that was an insufficient procedure.

As a reaction, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff expanded the Museum's current database GOS and started to define notions (*Sachbegriff*) and subject groups (*Sachgruppen*), departing from the collections themselves. In the old storage system, the objects had already been sorted by subject groups. This meant that the different regions represented in the collection were mixed up (see chapter four for details of the geographical division of objects). Hans-Joachim Radosuboff thus had to go through all the cupboards in the old storage system as well as through all the war repatriations, to first identify objects marked 'III E', designating East Africa. He then physically laid out the objects according to his self-defined subject group in the museum's hallways and prepared cupboards for those objects in the basement. Jürgen Tröster, his assistant, then sorted the objects into the cupboards.

In the cupboards, the objects were arranged by subject group, such as ‘masks’ or ‘dress’, and then, within those thematic cupboards, by region, for example, ‘Tanzania’ (see figures 5.3 and 5.4).

In addition to expanding GOS as a database, a system that would be taken over by the entire Museum at the end of the 1990s, he created another thesaurus at home to acquaint himself further with the collections. He said that he didn’t know anything about the collections, of terms ‘of which I don’t even know if it’s a river, a country, a region, or an ethnic group’. A database would help to orientate himself in the thousands of objects. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff designed an *Ethniendatenbank*, a database of ethnic groups, based on the works of international and German anthropologists William J. Waterman Roome, Herrmann Baumann, George Peter Murdock, and Walter Hirschberg. He kept and continued this database during his entire career, but it never entered the museum system. The database of ethnic groups, he admitted disappointedly, was conspicuously ignored in the Museum.<sup>16</sup> Despite the inventory and database work, it was still difficult to find his way around in the collections, as he noted in his 1994 diary:

I want to mention it once more. It’s not easy for someone like me to identify where the objects come from, as I have just started to get a feeling for the appearance of an object. The old collection with its narrow shelves stuffed up to the farthest corner was roughly sorted according to subject groups. But that was also the only comprehensible order that existed in this storage. The object catalogues as well as the fragmentary index cards are sorted by sequence numbers. This didn’t say anything about the origin and locations of the objects. A 1,000m<sup>2</sup> storage area with several hundred cupboards of approximately eighty metres of shelves, stuffed with war repatriations. Here I had to do the trick of bringing all East Africa objects together, according to subject groups. If I were to overlook some, there would be problems later in the East Africa study collection because of too narrow space calculation.<sup>17</sup>

The challenges inherent in creating systematised ordering structures – imposing names, establishing hierarchies, creating meaning – became evident when I addressed the topic directly. He explained the genealogy of the different categories, listed on the East Africa storage plan – ranging from ‘toys’ to ‘dancing tools’ (*Tanzgeräte*) to ‘extrasensory’ (*übersinnlich*).

MO: Could you explain how the ascription in functional groups worked exactly?

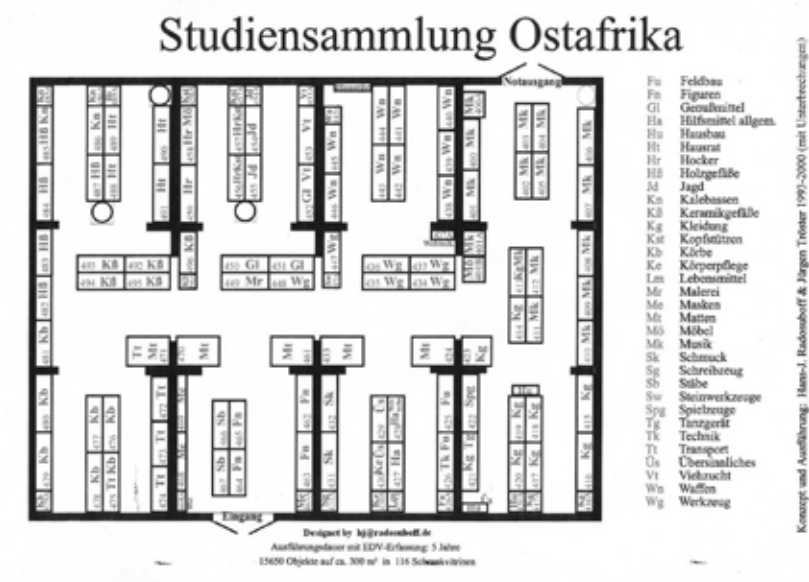


Figure 5.3 Map of the East Africa storage, designed by Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1993/afro\\_jahr1993.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1993/afro_jahr1993.html), consulted 20 December 2017, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



Figure 5.4 Hans-Joachim Radosuboff in his office, as 'Proud administrator of the study collections, with two connected computers', 1995, [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1995/afro\\_jahr1995.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1995/afro_jahr1995.html), consulted 20 December 2017, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff



HJR: That resulted first from what was there as a collection. For example, there is hunting [*Jagd*]. You can add hunting to livelihood [*Lebensunterhalt*]. There is active hunting, when you shoot with bow and arrow. And there is passive hunting. But at one point, I dropped passive hunting because anyway, passive hunting consists in traps. So it becomes 'active hunting' and 'traps'. Then we went on. The 'traps' group consists of forty or fifty traps. This is confusing. When you have more than ten terms in a group, you create a subdivision: traps for small animals, traps for big animals.

And so it went on and on. No one wanted to talk with me about this treasure. There was no one here to discuss with me, they all dodged when the topic came up [...] So I consulted dictionaries or experts. For example, 'What is the difference between medicine [*Medizin*] and drug [*Arznei*]?' Well, I talked to my dentist. Actually, I talked to different people all the time. And later on, when this information was needed for MuseumPlus, every one, constantly, had demands. And they mocked me, in particular for those 'magical objects'. Just to explain to you. For me, 'magic' was not an obvious category. If someone has a crucifix hanging on the wall, it's religion for me. When an African in Cameroon has got his object of faith in his hut – what does that mean to me? Is it 'magic' [*Magie*] or 'bewitchment' [*Zauberei*] or what-do-I-know? But this is an unfair perspective [*ungerecht*]! Why would a crucifix be 'religion' and the Cameroonian object be 'magic' or 'bewitchment'? So, for me, this whole area was simply extrasensory [*übersinnlich*]. Why? It is something that my senses cannot perceive, so for me it's 'extrasensory'. Later on, it became 'spiritual' [laughs]. This is how such things emerged. With this expression, without being unfair, this African spiritual object could be on equal terms with a European spiritual object. This is how I thought about those issues.

MO: And how did you associate objects with functions? There exists so little detail about most of the objects...

HJR: Yes, but when you're here for ten, fifteen years, then you know how to assign what. What comes up sometimes, for example, is that an axe is a tool but might also have a magical purpose. One can make cross-references in the database: 'see also'. So that works as well.

MO: But in that case, you put the axe in a cupboard for tools?

HJR: Yes, exactly.

MO: So, you have created a hierarchy concerning the assignment?

HJR: Right.

MO: You have to, I guess.

HJR: Yes, you do. As I said, there are about 65,000 objects in the collection. You have to keep track, not only physically but also mentally. If they come and say that they want to have an exhibition about hairdressers, you need to be able to go to the cupboards with 'body hygiene'.

In 1999, parts of Hans-Joachim Radosuboff's dream to create a functioning study collection, at least for East Africa, were realised. In his account of this time on his website, he recalled the situation in detail.

Today, I can add up. A full-time and a part-time position have jointly set up a study collection of 16,500 objects in five and a half years and entered them into the PC with all relevant information. Since there was no experience for such an undertaking, we had to create a concept (learning by doing) and sometimes adapt completed works to new experiences.<sup>18</sup>

The East Africa storage can be framed as a personal success within an organisational framework that would not prioritise care of collections. As Hans-Joachim Radosuboff described, it was thanks to his personal commitment to the collections and his determined will to realise the storage that he was able to accomplish the task. In his narrative, he continuously described his efforts as 'autodidactic', with little support from either the curator or other museum staff in the Museum. This narrative of 'learning by doing' is repeatedly confirmed by committed employees in different departments within the Museum – in which knowledge gained through experience and time in the Museum is not documented nor passed on for and to future generations of museum employees. Both Africa museum storages are generally speaking referred to as comparably well organised, but the East Africa storage in particular is described as standing out in the museum's different storages.

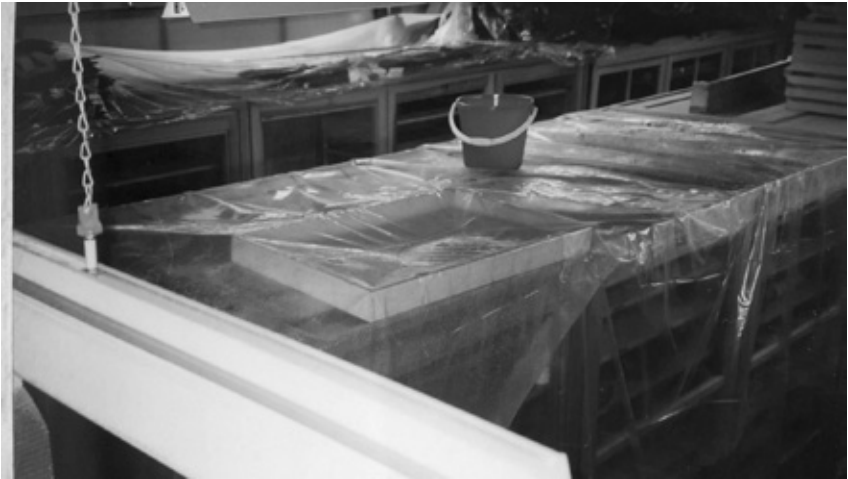
### **'Object love' to circumvent neglect**

The work of inventorying, ordering, and classifying didn't stop with the process of finishing the East Africa department. Until he left in 2012, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff continued working on the organisation of the

West Africa department. Since then, his successors have been in charge of the inventory job, which has not been accomplished to date. This is testified to by the different accounts of the number of objects that are part of the Africa collection. The official number communicated to the public is a collection of 75,000 objects.<sup>19</sup> In 2014, the curator Peter Junge talked about 42,000 to 45,000 objects already inventoried in the database, with approximately 30,000 still to be done.<sup>20</sup> However, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff would talk of his '85,000 children', then referring to '65,000 objects' to be dealt with. In a meeting with Boris Gliemann, the database manager, we added up the different accounts and protocols for the department's war reparations (Leipzig, Wiesbaden, Berlin, Celle). The calculation amounted to 53,815 objects, with a loss due to war of approximately 12,000 objects.<sup>21</sup> The number of objects is not only imprecise because of the absence of an overview of the collection, but is further distorted by an inconsistent inventory system, which has not been agreed on and has been realised differently and unsystematically in the different departments, depending on the individuals responsible for the inventory. The precise number of objects can thus not be determined.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas, on the organisational level, the constant lack of resources devoted to collection care can be framed as a history of neglect, on an individual level, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff expressed 'object love'. Object love, as used by Sharon Macdonald in the context of curatorial work, translates into a general commitment to the collection, a feeling of responsibility, honour, and the need to care for the objects (Macdonald, 2002, p. 65; see also Geoghegan & Hess, 2015). Radosuboff attested to his particular relation to the objects through his personalised narrative and choice of metaphors and words. He referred to the objects as 'my children', or framed it as his duty 'to protect' the collections. In 1996, he commented on the leaking roof, stating that 'Sometimes, something swashed in the storage which would burden my soul.' To counteract 'lakes of water' causing damage, he was forced to install internal gutters, which drained into buckets that he needed to empty daily. Keeping the storage tidy, organised, and neat was, for him, a 'matter of honour' (*Ehrensache*) (see figures 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7 for care practices and solutions within the storage).

Care for the object also translated in a diversity of sometimes improvised practices. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff always had a pen and paper lying beside his bed. 'Sometimes I would wake up at 4 a.m. and would say to myself: "Ah, this is how I am going to do it!" And I would write it down immediately.' When walking around in storage, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff pointed to the different techniques he had invented to store the objects safely. In the context of what he described as a lack of budget, 'I needed to



**Figure 5.5** Protecting objects from the leaking roof, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff



**Figure 5.6** The installation of internal gutters, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff

have a lot of energy and ideas!’ One prominent example was the placing of yoghurt cups in the cupboards, which I had repeatedly come across while working in storage. The cups had been filled with camphor, a chemical solid that had historically been used as a pesticide. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff had put camphor in every single cupboard to protect the objects from what the museum staff described as infestation (*Befall*), an invasion of insects in a particular group of objects.

It was always the question: How do I protect the objects best? Because there was the story about the insects. A danger for the Museum, it was said. And there was always so much drama around this topic, because I had taken over the tradition from colleagues of putting a spoon of camphor in the cupboards. Maybe you can still notice it, when you open the cupboard doors, there’s maybe still a bit of a smell of menthol. I mean, I felt it was successful, I did have very little infestation! But it was very much disliked by my colleagues. Well, it’s true, the smell, camphor, is an insult to the nose. But then people said it was harmful. But come on, this stuff is part of baby lotion!



Figure 5.7 Buckets of dirty water that needed to be emptied daily, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff

Whereas the use of camphor was controversial in the Museum, as Radosuboff acknowledged himself, he pointed to further procedures for protecting the objects in the context of scarce resources. After lengthy negotiations, he had managed to convince the curator Hans-Joachim Koloss that new storage cupboards were needed. When he received them, however, they had no fittings or shelves. So that he could install the objects, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff asked all his friends to give him old cardboard tubes and clothes hangers from the dry-cleaner. He pushed his colleague, a wine drinker, to never throw away the cork. Wedges made out of cork would avoid putting objects directly on the shelves and would stabilise them.

The list of his solutions and inventions continued. As an entire part of the Museum's histories and presents, those stories and names, if mentioned at all, usually disappear into the footnotes of those doing archival work or fieldwork in the Museum. Radosuboff's career and narrative stand in for the many untold histories of personal passion, engagement, and effort that shape the making of these organisations profoundly.

## Conclusion

'A treasure too big is no treasure no more.' Hans-Joachim Radosuboff opened his diary with this observation, pronounced in 1991 at the time of the press conference on the Leipzig repatriations by Gerd Höpfner, then curator of South East Asia collections.<sup>23</sup> Dealing with the 'treasure' over the course of his entire career, Radosuboff embodies both the pleasures and difficulties of what the responsibility of keeping a collection entails from a practical point of view. The chapter thus devoted attention to the objects' museum life and what it means to 'be kept' in the museum storage, an aspect hardly taken into account when talking about museum objects, although this life concerns the greater part of the collections (as opposed to being exhibited) and the lion's share of their lifespan.

Working through colonial legacies articulates here as an individual attempt to reckon, in very practical terms, with the ambitious project of collecting the world. His story stands in for the many untold stories about museum life and careers, which remain undocumented and unrecognised. In this chapter, I decided to let Radosuboff's narrative stand on its own to give room to his personality and life. Radosuboff's personal narrative reveals how managing shortage (lack of budget, resources, and knowledge) results in improvisation, and how it leaves its personal marks in the organisation's structure and materiality.

## Notes

1. I received the keys once my research stipend had been confirmed.
2. My translation from the German: 'das kontinuierlich pochende Herzstück einer musealen Sammlung'.
3. Field notes from 27 November 2013, with the demand not to be quoted directly.
4. If not otherwise indicated, all quotations from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff have been transcribed and translated from an interview I conducted with him on 7 January 2014. Other interlocutors are quoted anonymously here.
5. Field notes from the conversation between the curator and me, 25 April 2018.
6. In conversations with both storage managers from the Africa department, they could not tell me why this was the case, email from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, 23 August 2018, and conversation with current storage manager, 17 July 2019.
7. Field notes from 27 November 2013.
8. Field notes from 27 November 2013 and 21 March 2014.
9. See the introduction for details.
10. The critique concerned, for example, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, which received more than 4 million euros for its projects between 2012 and 2015.
11. Field notes 6 November 2014.
12. My translation from the German: 'Das ist eine andere Frage, da sind schon ganze Konferenzen abgehalten worden zu dieser Frage. In Dahlem können die Objekte restauratorisch angemessen behandelt werden.'
13. Quotation from an email exchange with Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, 11 August 2014.
14. Since then, he has printed his memoirs (including photographs), bound them as books, and deposited the diaries in the museum library under the title 'Museographie', in several volumes. The books are consultable in the museum's library. The accounts here are based on his website, which was accessible at <http://www.radosuboff.de/starttage/indexMi.html>, and consulted on 20 December 2017, but which he has since deleted.
15. Quotation from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff's 1991 diaries, [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1991/afro\\_jahr1991.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1991/afro_jahr1991.html), consulted 20 December 2017.
16. Phone conversation with Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, 8 October 2019.
17. Quotation from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff's 1994 diaries, [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1994/afro\\_jahr1994.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1994/afro_jahr1994.html), consulted 20 December 2017.
18. [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1999/afro\\_jahr1999.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1999/afro_jahr1999.html), consulted 20 December 2017.
19. <https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/sammlung.html>, consulted 25 February 2019.
20. Field notes from a guided tour with the curator, 20 November 2014.
21. Meeting with Boris Gliemann, 21 December 2015.
22. This is exemplified when it comes to the inventory of object bundles. What to do and how to categorise object bundles that consist of several parts, such as a quiver with arrows? This question was addressed to Boris Gliemann during a museum workshop with staff. Even though Boris Gliemann insisted on describing an object bundle as one object consisting of several parts (one object number), other museum employees suggested inventorying every single object (several object numbers), while others suggested categorising the object parts with 'a, b, c, ...' (one object with parts a, b, c, ...). Field notes from a workshop with Boris Gliemann, 4 November 2013.
23. Quotation from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff's 1991 diaries, [http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1991/afro\\_jahr1991.html](http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1991/afro_jahr1991.html), consulted 20 December 2017.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Researching provenance: The politics of writing history

I only realised how little the Museum knew about its own collections when I started working there. ‘This museum focused on collecting, but little research has been done’, the then Africa curator Peter Junge stated during a conversation.<sup>1</sup> In the Africa department alone, out of the 80,200 objects identified, only 54,000 were inventoried in the database, which the Museum’s data base manager Boris Gliemann reported in 2019.<sup>2</sup> ‘No time’ was allocated to engage in research about the collections.<sup>3</sup>

Provenance research has always figured as one of the museum curators’ prominent tasks. Provenance is commonly understood as the reconstruction of the former use and significance of an object, as well as identifying the chain of ownership related to the object (Förster, 2019, pp. 80–81). As soon as provenance research reveals that processes within the chain of ownership raise ethical or moral doubts, however, it can be politically consequential, as it can lead to claims for restitution. In the context of mounting critique against the Humboldt Forum, provenance research gained additional political signification. The focus shifted towards the objects’ modes of acquisition and the contextualisation within colonial modes of governance in light of claims for ‘the disclosure of ownership’ (No Humboldt 21!, 2013), relating provenance to restitution.

Throughout my fieldwork in the Museum, ‘provenance research’ became a key term in the Ethnological Museum’s engagement with its colonial histories. Whereas ‘restitution’ was still a concept used mainly by to activists between 2013 and 2015, the commitment to provenance research had been repeatedly communicated by SPK representatives as well as by Monika Grütters, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media: in 2015, she stated that the SPK collections shouldn’t own collections ‘unlawfully acquired’ (*unrechtmäßig erworben*), research on provenance was to be ‘made transparent’ (Deutscher Bundestag, 2015, pp. 2–3). Provenance research became the prerequisite for objects to be displayed and, ultimately, to be kept in the collections.<sup>4</sup> This concerned approximately seven thousand



objects from the Ethnological Museum, with almost 1,500 objects from the Africa department.<sup>5</sup> The museum's data base manager Boris Gliemann considered the 'simple documentation' of the objects to be exhibited in the Humboldt Forum as an 'ambitious goal to achieve'.<sup>6</sup> He estimated that only 10 per cent of the entire collection was 'well documented' (*dokumentiert*) (2016). Proving rightful acquisition, in addition, aimed even higher and was, at the time, a responsibility carried on the shoulders of the then present museum staff alone.<sup>7</sup>

In the midst of activist claims, political promises, and structural limitations imposed by the lack of staff and time, this chapter takes a step back and scrutinises how provenance research unfolded in the Museum. How did the attempt to document object histories articulate? What did the process of research reveal about the politics of producing knowledge and writing histories?

The chapter departs from a provenance research project initiated by Paola Ivanov. She asked me to join the project that she had been working on with the museum apprentice Verena Rodatus. A precursor to disclosing the museum's colonial entanglements (Ivanov, 2005; Ivanov, 2007), Paola Ivanov's worked on the new permanent exhibition for the Humboldt Forum. The exhibition was planned to prominently address the collection's colonial provenance, and the research was to ground her approach. The research focused on objects produced by a group referred to as 'Luba', located in today's Democratic Republic of Congo (see chapter four); these objects were part of the Africa department's most exhibited and valuable pieces. Paola Ivanov's research hypothesis departed from the observation that the distance between the objects' assumed location of production and of acquisition was important. Paola Ivanov suggested that the circulation of objects, people, and ideas must have taken place before the objects were sent from German East Africa to Berlin. Accompanied by Boris Gliemann, the database manager, we found out more about the provenance of one particular object, IIC 14966. This stool, commonly described as a 'caryatid stool' in the Museum, was supposedly produced in the workshop of the Master of Buli. It entered the Museum as a gift by the German military officer Werner von Grawert in 1902 as part of a group of objects. This chapter follows the research journey throughout the Museum – its archive, library, and networks of experts.

In this chapter, I elaborate on a prominent paradox of provenance research of colonial collections. The unravelling and production of a provenance for each object is a prerequisite to situate the Museum's embedding in and dependence on colonial systems of governance. Provenance research also creates value; it produces further knowledge about the object. This value ultimately served the organisation that possesses the object. The access to,

exchange and ownership of knowledge about the collections continued to be centralised in the Ethnological Museum itself. Many research projects, including in the Ethnological Museum, have modified the conditions of knowledge production about collection provenance ever since. However, if the conditions of knowledge production remain as they were at the time, provenance research risks contributing to the structural inequity between the Global North and the Global South, beyond questions related to ownership.

### **Of presences and absences in the Museum's archive**

This is my favourite thing to do, the documentation of the collection. In other words: the documentation of the collectors! The people. To enrich the database with information on them, this is my passion, my playground. But it is extremely time consuming!

During our initial training session, Boris Gliemann told me how he approached 'the documentation of collections'. Boris Gliemann's priority was to identify people individually, to give them a profile, a character, a face. He was engaged in the lengthy process of humanising the collection – and objectifying the human. The process consisted of pinning down key information, such as researching birthdates or locations. Practically speaking, the research comprised the consultation, transcription, and analysis of the Museum's historical files, information that was subsequently expanded by bibliographical and online research. Boris Gliemann's approach also pointed to a seemingly natural mechanism omnipresent in provenance research in ethnological collections: for lack of other kinds of indications, the object is above all defined by the person who had *collected* it, not the person who had *produced, owned, or used* it.

Boris Gliemann distinguished between a 'collector' (*Sammler*) and a 'transferer' (*Veräußerer*). For him, a collector was not a gallerist with commercial intentions, nor 'Miss Erna from Steglitz' (a district in Berlin) who gives three objects to the Museum. His understanding of a collector was someone who went on expeditions, someone usually employed by the colonial system. It implied understandings of the collection as disciplined, and possibly 'complete', reflecting scientific conventions of collecting in the nineteenth century, suggested by the Museum's 'Instructions for Ethnographic Observing and Collecting' (von Luschan, 1904; Ankermann & von Luschan, 1914).

The provenance research was thus shaped by the presence of particular sources – produced within, for, and in dialogue with the colony – contrasted

by the significant absence of local subjects, their voices, and perspectives. To retrace the object's trajectory meant identifying sources retracing the coloniser's trajectories. Then, in the case of III C 14966, this primarily translated as understanding the trajectories and life of Werner von Grawert. Here, we departed from basic information provided in the database. Werner von Grawert (1867–1918) had been colonial commander of the town of Ujiji in 1898/1899. Ujiji was then located in the administrative district on Lake Tanganyika, now part of western Tanzania. Known for the fact that Henry Morton Stanley 'discovered' Dr Livingstone there in 1871, Ujiji had been a trading hub in the region since the 1820s (Roberts, 2013, p. 203; Sheriff, 1987). Von Grawert then moved to become colonial commander of 'Station Usumbara' (from 1898 to 1902 and from 1904 to 1907), a town now located in the northeast of Tanzania. Several historical files (*Akte*) in relation to Werner von Grawert exist.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the historical inventory, which is available as scans, the historical records are only accessible physically and stored in the Museum's archive.<sup>9</sup>

### Archival encounters

We changed location from Boris Gliemann's office, walking through the labyrinth of the Museum to reach the archive, still located within the Museum. This was exceptional then and is currently changing, because most museum archives had been transferred to the SMB's Central Archive.<sup>10</sup> The transfer to the Central Archive, some museum staff hoped, would finally put the files in 'ideal', standard conservation conditions.<sup>11</sup>

When I looked around, I saw that the archive had been a cosy workplace for some of the Museum's employees once: even though not in use any more, personal items, such as a radio and ashtrays were lying around. It was obvious that people had worked in and with the archive intensively, taking their time. Some museum staff described the conditions in the archive as 'dilettante' (*dilettantisch*), as unprofessional and amateurish: the files were stored in wooden cupboards, with significant air and light exposure because of the old wooden windows.<sup>12</sup> The archive was located in two rooms, roughly separated by chronological order. The majority of 'old' files (up to 1947) were stored in one room with five different cupboards, which reflected four continents as well as 'museum history'. The absence of 'Europe' as a continent, and thus a particular cupboard, exemplified the historical self-understanding of the Museum as being about 'others' (see a series of photographs of the archive in the visual introduction, images 5–12).

As Boris Gliemann highlighted, III C 14966 was collected during ‘Prussian rule’, which implied, in his understanding, an accurate documentation of the Museum’s activities. In 1906, responsibility for documenting the collection’s traffic and growth had been transferred to the regional departments, which thereby gained in power and independence.<sup>13</sup> Whereas this shift of responsibility didn’t change the accuracy of the documentation at the time, the documentation became fragmentary after the Second World War. The systematic approach was replaced by the curator’s individual responsibility to document their own work, and thus depended on personality and will. Even though physically separated, the collections of objects and historical files reflected each other. The files related to III C 14966 were recorded and bundled chronologically as well as regionally: like the collection inventory, the system followed the same two-step sequence (inventory followed by regional attribution; see chapter four).

Several archival files were registered under von Grawert’s name, of which some were directly linked to the objects.<sup>14</sup> Boris Gliemann helped read the files’ content. Through his reading, not only was the writing made easier to decipher thanks to his trained eye, he also explained and disentangled the colonial and administrative apparatus behind the delivery. He located the different people who signed the reports and letters in the colony (Dar es Salaam), as well as in Berlin, rendering the process more comprehensible. Boris Gliemann knew and imagined the people. His anecdotes about the Museum’s employees in Berlin, illustrating their personal characteristics, were followed by detailed accounts of the colonial administrative system in German East Africa. By spending several years of his life within the archive, Boris Gliemann seemed to navigate the archive via a kind of cartography of objects, people, networks, and processes. ‘Sometimes, it’s like a crime novel here!’ Boris Gliemann liked to exclaim.<sup>15</sup> When I learned to work with the archival files myself, I realised how some people’s shape appeared more clearly, and others less so. The form and style of the handwriting,<sup>16</sup> the choice of words, the order of paragraphs made me project the person’s characteristics (‘sloppy’, ‘condescending’, ‘neat’). It was a trigger for the imagination during a lengthy and tedious work process. It also provoked emotional reactions, more or less welcome. Sometimes I giggled when encountering the people’s eccentricities. Or I remained in shock or disgust when coming across traces or even detailed descriptions of colonial violence.<sup>17</sup>

The file linked to Werner von Grawert contained drafts of letters from Felix von Luschan to the collector, as well as a report on the arrival of the objects, object lists, and calculations of transportation costs. Werner von Grawert’s letters to the Museum were not documented in the file. III C 14966 had been part of an important shipment of 108 objects that arrived in Berlin

in 1902 and 1903, but no information about the object's circulation and mode of acquisition on-site was identifiable.<sup>18</sup> With few results on the object's circulation, we reached out to external experts and secondary literature.

The research in yet another of the museum's locations – the library, with its primary and secondary sources – also led to insufficient evidence. Within the research team, we consulted primary sources in the library to find traces of von Grawert, such as the German *Kolonialblatt*, which reported on missions in the colonies, that were archived in the library. Given that no reports on any mission were available, we assumed that von Grawert didn't travel westwards, which is where the objects that had entered the collections had probably been produced. The information available on Werner von Grawert in relation to our research request was thus minimal, even though several letters existed. We still didn't know where the object had been acquired and how.

### Reading the archive along the grain

These research results echo Arlette Farge's descriptions of what defines archival research, namely as 'forever incomplete' (Farge, 2013, p. 55). The archives were incomplete in relation to local voices in particular. This absence pointed to the denial of the locals' agency, presence, and even existence, as well as the omission of the function, production, or transaction of III C 14966. By contrast, reading the archive along the grain (Stoler, 2009), what *was* documented were traces of a colonial apparatus of extracting the material culture from the colonies; this process was logistically sophisticated and financially well equipped. The (minimal) documentation of shipping, transport costs, and the department director's appraisal and request for more objects show the entanglement of colonialism with museums and academia. This documentation reflects the contemporary department director Felix von Luschan's ambitions to 'systematically' collect 'to raise an inventory, as it were, of the complete cultural heritage' (Ankermann & von Luschan, 1914, p. 9).<sup>19</sup>

To complement these fragments, we reached out to experts in different universities and museums. We asked whether they were aware of archival traces that mentioned the circulation of objects in the region (German East Africa and Congo Free State), and in particular, whether they were aware of any, possibly violent, transactions. Whereas all researchers – historians and anthropologists alike – approved Paola Ivanov's hypothesis that the objects may have circulated via Swahili trade caravans or as diplomatic gifts or trophies, none of them had come across specific sources that could confirm it.<sup>20</sup>

### **On the circulation of ideas, peoples, and things**

The first hypothesis we worked on concerned the circulation of the object itself. We were looking for traces that could prove that people had transported and exchanged objects at the time, both locals and colonisers. The objects could have been acquired by sale, barter, confiscation, or looting, all common forms of acquisition, but we were particularly interested in how the trade was organised around Lake Tanganyika and the functioning of local markets. Paola Ivanov argued that the object might have reached German East Africa through widespread caravans and slave traders. This would imply that the object might already have had the status of commodity then. Research had shown that a market of 'ethnographica' was emerging at the time in the same region (Schildkrout & Keim, 1998). Allan Roberts, professor at University of California, Los Angeles, extended the hypothesis by raising the possibility that objects could have been used as diplomatic gifts. He pointed to the prominent figure of the slave trader Tippo Tip, who might have been involved in such diplomatic exchanges.<sup>21</sup> Another possibility was the objects' movement via European colonial officials and trade or exchange *among* European colonial staff and 'explorers'. The curator and anthropologist Barbara Plankensteiner quotes the German 'explorer' Hans Meyer, who complemented his 'travel collection' with collections or individual pieces by European residents (1998, p. 120). Other than the circulation of the object via Europeans, another option is circulation by those who produced the objects, as well as the circulation of ideas. A prerequisite for all of these kinds of circulations was the pronounced caravan and slave trade in the region. Artists could wander from place to place and produce objects wherever they happened to be. Victims of the slave trade from Congo were transported long distances to achieve higher prices, mainly to Tanzania. Allan Roberts argues that slaves continued to produce objects in different places and that religious practices and aesthetic forms from Congo circulated supra-regionally, citing the Tabwa as an example. The central position of and admiration for the Kingdom of Luba in the region encouraged the circulation of ideas and adoption of their style. The royal aesthetics, expressed through body art, sculpture, and performance, were highly regarded and embraced by immediate neighbours, as well as more distant societies, such as in Tanzania, Zambia, and Malawi. These practices spread because of hierarchical relationships and by force, but also through what Roberts depicts as 'prestige through association' (Roberts, 2013, p. 201).

The finding of any source could lead to great excitement, which could subsequently be dampened just as quickly. The finding of a drawing was such a case, which Julien Volper, keeper at the Royal Museum for Central Africa,

referred to in a conversation. Julien Volper had researched the circulation of a Luba mask. He had come across an early drawing by V. L. Cameron from 1877, in which a child is carrying an object on the right-hand side of the image (Volper, 2010, p. 13). In discussion of the image with Pierre Petit, a professor at Université Libre de Bruxelles in Brussels and an expert in Luba culture, he advised approaching the validity of colonial imagery with great caution. Drawings especially, he warned, were often the product of colonial imaginations and risked having little to do with local realities – a risk made all the more probable by the fact that the drawing was by Daniel Oliver and not the book’s author.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 6.1 Image of a slave caravan, with the caption 'Slave-Gang', taken from V. L. Cameron, *Across Africa* (1877) (Cameron & Oliver, 1877, p. 357)

### Research results: Speculation and fragmentation

External secondary sources and experts further confirmed Paola Ivanov’s hypothesis on the circulation of people, things, and ideas in the region. Nevertheless, the results remained speculative as a result of insufficient evidence. The scant particular traces of how the object might have been acquired were diffuse in time and space (Cameron & Oliver, 1877; Meyer, 1913 in Plankensteiner, 1998). Direct evidence in relation to III C 14966 didn’t exist. Whereas the research is summarised in a short paragraph here, virtually and physically, it ranged widely: in the attempt to reconstruct and understand past relationships, new relationships were constructed in the present, and people and things linked and were reshuffled in different ways. The research involved the bringing together of sources that were spatially spread and materially diverse, locating them in their historicity. We physically and virtually moved through offices, computer screens, the archive, the library. These movements enabled different encounters with the available materials:

historical documents in their fragility; scans of the historical inventory, flattened on screens; digitally assembled information; printed scans of historical originals, which turned into ‘originals’ themselves via the stamps and notes added to them. The time-consuming research process left us with archive transcriptions, a collection of publications, and email correspondence with external experts. We manoeuvred within the boundaries of the restricted sources and resources that the Museum provided. The diversity of data was linked through the database. Through the transfer of the physical to the virtual, or from one digital source to another, the museum’s temporalities, spaces, and materials were assembled and blurred into a virtual whole, the data base entry of IIC 14966.

### **Unequal access to sources**

The Ethnological Museum’s collections and archives remained largely inaccessible to outsiders. This complicates any form of knowledge production from the Museum’s outsides to take place. The Museum’s public database was exemplary. Of the approximately 495,000 data sets that have been inventoried in the Ethnological Museum, only 71,500 data sets were accessible online in 2019.<sup>23</sup> What was published online, what was not, and why, was not traceable on the website. In conversation, Boris Gliemann confirmed that the database had a showcase character, focusing on the Museum’s ‘masterpieces’. This meant, in turn, that users – be they academics, curators, artists, activists – were victims of the Museum’s priorities, as well as its understanding and definition of what was considered ‘presentable’ or not.

When one typed IIC 14966 on the SMB’s digital platform, the provided information was minimal (see figure 4.1 in chapter four for a screenshot of the database’s surface for comparison). The ‘collector’, the ‘producer’, and the different regional and cultural classifications were indicated. Date and mode of acquisition of the stool were lacking. As for all entries, the information was only available in German. Whereas the archives were freely accessible on location,<sup>24</sup> access to the Museum’s complete database and thus its collections were reserved to museum staff. Functioning as gatekeepers, the museum curators were responsible for – among an overwhelming amount of other tasks – responding to requests addressed at the Museum. The fact that the curators’ names and contacts were not identifiable on the Museum’s website further restricted access. An updated inventory catalogue, or a simple listing of the Museum’s current collection, didn’t exist.<sup>25</sup> Access to the collection thus remained reserved to those who had the financial, linguistic, and symbolic capital to access it from *within* the Museum.



### **Inequity in the production of knowledge**

Analysing this *process* of provenance research shows an *inequity* concerning where and how knowledge about the object was and could be produced. In other words, conditions for producing knowledge depend on where the resources (financial, personnel) and sources (library, archives, collections) are concentrated. In view of the lack of or limited access to both collections and archives, the disparity of access doesn't only show a *difference* and *asymmetry*, but an *inequality*, even *injustice*. Pointing to unequal distribution here, I don't aim to question the validity of expertise in Western institutions nor to reduce their position to their geographical location solely. Rather, I want to indicate the ongoing disparity of who is consulted, who is given a voice, who is given access, and thus the right and opportunity to write these histories and to own the resulting knowledge. In the conventional paths of provenance research I was involved in, this concentration of knowledge within the Museum was encouraged because there was no attempt to complement the analysis of established European, colonial sources located in museums and universities and the consultation of 'experts' in these same organisations.<sup>26</sup>

The dissemination, accessibility, and sustainability of provenance research results were further challenged by the insufficiency of the Museum's database system to record the available information: concerning the research on III C 14966, the research ultimately resulted in a paper folder, securely stored in the curator's office. Initiating the research translated thus into monopolising and basically owning the research and its results, involuntarily or not. Through this lack of systematic documentation, the curator's role was thus further valorised as centralising the knowledge on the collections. The Museum's power and authority has thus been conspicuously upheld – with the Museum keeping and owning the collections, as well as centralising and controlling the knowledge produced around them. This unequal distribution and concentration of knowledge further raised questions of sustainability and about the transfer and documentation *within* the Museum. In a context with more project-based funded provenance research, there was the risk of losing knowledge with the departure of staff. Knowledge transfer seemed urgent in the current digital context, as the documentation of email exchanges seemed all the more difficult and ever more dependent on the curator's personality and stance towards the issue. Transcending this access policy was thus especially possible for 'insiders' – curators and researchers acknowledged for their museum research. Any kind of 'outsider', and notably those unable to speak German and decode the Museum's mechanisms, faced important restrictions.

## The invention of masters

Provenance research on museum collections, within and beyond museum's archives, is often a frustrating endeavour, as the preceding sections show. Sources are scarce, and documentation is scattered. IIC 14966 is an exceptional object with regards to provenance insofar as art historians and anthropologists identified a 'producer' for this and similar objects, the 'Buli workshop'. Generally speaking, those who are the origin of and have produced the objects in ethnological collections remain anonymous. Implicit in the lack of the contemporary documenting of producers, and individuals more generally speaking, was a denial of individual creativity in societies considered localised, collective, nature-bound, and isolated as cultural entities by colonial governance and complicit knowledge production.

IIC 14966 belonged to a group of objects, to which the Belgian anthropologist Frans M. Olbrechts had attributed a particular author since the 1930s, the 'master of the long-faced style', also known as the 'Buli Master'. The 'Buli' style is characterised by what has been described as oversized long hands and faces, also depicted as 'Disneyesque' by the prominent British anthropologist William Fagg (quoted in de Grunne, 2011). The Buli Master was named after the village where two sculptures were acquired (Vogel, 1980, p. 133; Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 61). Olbrechts is acknowledged as the founder of the method of morphological analysis when it comes to collections of African origin. His method consisted of stylistic criticism and comparison, identifying the artistic styles of different objects kept in Western museums. This retrospective identification and attribution of 'masters', 'workshops', or simply 'artists' continues to be used extensively and increasingly.<sup>27</sup>

## The paradoxes of naming

The fabrication of provenance by inventing an object's maker, the 'artist', have paradoxical consequences. Mary Nooter Roberts describes these politics of naming as 'both an appropriation of identity and an imposition of it. To withhold a person's identity may be a form of protection or of subjugation. To impose a name may be a form of repression or of elevation' (Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 56). This paradox of naming was reflected in the reception history of III C 14966.

Challenging the alleged anonymity of African artists and showing an interest in the artist's style and characteristics reflects a political standpoint. It testifies to the contemporary attempt to counter colonial epistemologies, to write African art history, and to recognise individual creativity and artistic

genius within African cultures. Olbrechts built his thinking on the anthropologist Franz Boas's concept of culture areas and his conviction of racial equality, a conviction that rejected evolutionist theories dominant at the time. Paired with art historical methods aimed at identifying artist's 'hands' (Giovanni Morelli, nineteenth century), this theoretical background allowed for the recognition of individual artists in the study of groups and societies that had long been denied individual authorship and style by Western academia. Predecessors of stylistic classification, such as Eckart von Sydow, had already worked with III C 14966 (von Sydow, 1923). That 'von Sydow' was prominently marked in the object's first historical inventory highlighted the importance of the shift of perception concerning African artefacts, as well as the object's continuous recognition as 'art' (Petridis, 2001, p. 123). The Buli Master was the first individual artist to be retroactively assigned to a group of African objects, followed by the invention of a number other 'masters', such as the Master of the Cascade Headdress or the Warua Master, all proposed by Western scholars, dealers, and collectors (Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 61).

The reassessment of 'anonymous' to authored and singular pieces of art, however, has contributed to the transformation of the museum's collection to 'another exceptional resource of the colony' (Van Beurden, 2013, p. 483). Objects identified as 'Buli', and III C 14966 in particular, have been outstanding examples of processes of value production interlinking museum, market, and academia. In its more than hundred years in the Museum in Berlin, III C 14966 has been exhibited in museums and private institutions in Europe (Paris in 1964, Maastricht in 1991, Paris in 1993, and Brussels in 2001), the United States (New York in 1990), and South America (Rio de Janeiro in 2004, Santiago in 2013).<sup>28</sup> Publications and the Museum's photo archives show how the object's exhibition and international publication history have continuously confirmed its exceptional reception, which had started with its denomination as 'art' upon its arrival in the Museum in 1902 by Felix von Luschan.<sup>29</sup>

### **Fabricating provenance, producing value**

The subsequent symbolic value encouraged the object's commodification and translated into financial value. The perceived rarity, both of the object and of the occasion to acquire such an object, is reflected in the record prices that objects associated with 'Buli' reached on the auction market. In 1979, one object was sold for £249,000 (Sotheby's, 1979); in 2010, a similar stool fetched 5.4 million euros at auction (Sotheby's, 2010a; 2010b).

Disputes over ‘Buli’ have been ongoing. They concern the particularity of the artistic identity (is it one artist, a workshop, a generation?), but also which object is considered ‘Buli’ or not, and thus exceptionally valuable or not.<sup>30</sup> The number of ‘Buli’ objects has continuously risen from twelve objects identified by Frans M. Olbrechts in the 1930s to twenty-nine under scrutiny in 2011.<sup>31</sup> As the stakes are high, the agents involved in these disputes are diverse. The ‘Buli’ stool sold in 2010 exemplifies the interrelated process of value production, as the auction house not only published a glossy catalogue and released a video praising the object but also entrusted the catalogue entry to François Neyt, professor emeritus in anthropology at Université catholique de Louvain and acclaimed expert in Luba societies. By reason of his academic reputation, he thus automatically authenticated and valued the piece (Neyt, 2010). In Berlin’s Ethnological Museum, the market felt rather absent, notably in contrast to my fieldwork in museums in Paris and Brussels, trade capitals of what dealers continue to call *arts primitifs*. Still, the Ethnological Museum was not exempt from these dynamics. In 2001, III C 14966 went on loan to be exhibited in a bank in the major exhibition *Masterhands* in Brussels, co-organised by the dealer and collector Bernard de Grunne, himself in possession of a Buli sculpture (de Grunne & Bassani, 2001). The disputes about the identity of ‘Buli’ are also ongoing, because naming as a practice is valuable in itself: the acknowledgement of an individual author accentuates the absence of an identified individual – an absence, Sarah Van Beurden argues, that was subsequently occupied by either the collector, scholar, or dealer who had ‘discovered’ the master or the museum in charge of keeping it (Van Beurden, 2013, p. 483).

Assigning an individual artist to III C 14966 contradicts Luba definitions of authorship. The attribution reveals, on the contrary, a modern Western understanding about the status of art. Mary Nooter Roberts, in her fieldwork about the Luba in the then Republic of Zaire, never came across court historians who mentioned individual artists (Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 56). She demonstrates that, during the conception and production of a sculpture, the Luba’s concept of remembrance was at play, which integrated several people and spirits. In contrast to the individual artist, Nooter Roberts refers to how Luba artists participate in a ‘transpersonal identity’, ‘the phenomenon whereby artists become subsumed by the larger network of relationships – both social and spiritual – of which they are part’ (Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 67). As James Clifford noted, the Western understanding of individual artistry cannot simply be imposed upon non-Western cultures, as definitions of originality, authenticity, and authorship differ. He stated that “‘culture’ and ‘art’ can no longer be simply extended to non-Western peoples and things.

They can at worst be imposed, at best translated – both historically and politically contingent operations’ (Clifford, 1988, p. 236).

Understanding the naming of Buli as such a form of imposition, these processes of producing provenance can be considered in terms of *appropriation*. As Benoît de L’Estoile has argued, ‘colonial relations, often stamped by domination and violence, are however more aptly characterised by a multifarious process of appropriation than by the sheer negation of the colonised’ (de L’Estoile, 2008, p. 268). Whereas naming can be interpreted as an attempt to repair and engage in the nuanced and complex character of colonial relations, the appropriation seems also to result here in a second expropriation, as the symbolic and financial value generated ultimately continue to serve Western institutions.

## Conclusion

Provenance research is slow and limited; it risks resulting in no further answers to the questions addressed, but rather, more questions raised. If defined conventionally as retracing the chains of ownership, the results of our research on III C 14966 could be summarised as follows. We assumed that the stool had been acquired by the colonial officer Werner von Grawert in either Ujiji or Usumbara in German East Africa, where he had been stationed. As the object had presumably been produced in or around Buli, a village in the then Congo Free State, it must have travelled long distances to reach German East Africa. The objects might have reached the trade centres of Ujiji or Usumbara via the prominent caravan or slave trade, as diplomatic gifts or as commodities. A specific group of objects, including III C 14966, had been separated out of a group of 108 objects that had been shipped from Dar es Salaam to Berlin. A selection of these objects had been, since their arrival in the Museum in 1902, hailed as ‘art’ by Felix von Luschan, the Africa department’s director at the time. With regard to III C 14966’s itineraries after arriving in Berlin, it has held a special status because of a stylistic resemblance with other objects, a style that had been associated with ‘the master of Buli’ since the 1930s. Whereas the association with a ‘master’ confirmed and generalised the object’s status as ‘art’, the attribution of a singular artist contradicted conceptions of ‘Luba’ authorship, who understand the artist as partaking in a ‘transpersonal identity’ (Nooter Roberts, 1998).

Provenance research discloses collection and museum histories. It points to absences and presences in the archive, which reflect who and what has been given attention and power in the museum’s past – and who has been neglected, silenced, excluded. This chapter not only looked at what

can be found, or not found, as part of provenance research, but focused on research in process. Unravelling research processes shows how provenance research risks, despite its good intentions, to stabilise historically established asymmetries of power; reflected in how knowledge is produced and shared.

Provenance research creates value. Beyond IIC 14966's particular history of appreciation, knowing through which hands the object passed, which places it travelled, and where it was shown fed back into the object's financial and symbolic value. The organisation continued to know its collection better, but also profited by profiling itself publicly of doing so. The openly accessible documentation of the collection – its online database – served representational rather than research purposes. The internal museum infrastructures were insufficient to record research results and to document and transfer the knowledge sustainably. As the histories were accessed, researched, written, and shared among Western organisations, the research sustained the hierarchies of knowledge production and thus inequities between the Global North and South – especially because most knowledge produced within the Museum remained there.

It is thus not only the laying open of the histories that count. Whom does the research, gained knowledge and subsequent value serve? In order to go beyond mechanisms of further appropriation, it is the way in which scholars research, document, share, and disseminate the knowledge they produce within museums that requires further attention. Recent academic and political projects – including in the Ethnological Museum – demonstrate this ambition; ambitions hindered so far, however, by the lack of a structural rethinking and support.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

1. I was allowed to be present at the conversation between the two Africa curators, Paola Ivanov and Peter Junge, and the researcher Friedrich von Bose, 31 October 2013.
2. In February 2019, the account was the following: III A 5,700 (out of which 3,650 were indexed); III C 45,600 objects identified (out of which 26,700 were indexed); III D 7,450 objects identified (out of which 4,315 were indexed); III E 21,900 objects identified (out of which 19,330 were indexed). Additionally, there were 2,500 objects without object numbers, as well as some permanent loans, objects not owned by the Museum (*Fremdbesitz*), historical documents (*Zeitdokument*), and numbers of so-called duplicates (*Dublettennummern*), email from Boris Gliemann, 11 February 2019.
3. Conversation with museum staff, 26 November 2013, and during a tour of the depot, 1 November 2013 (see also von Oswald & Rodatus, 2017, p. 214).
4. The objects to be displayed were prioritised in the ongoing research on provenance in the Museum. In the responses to the 'little request' (*kleine Anfrage*) of the Green politician Claudia Hermann, the city's mayor gave assurances that the objects' provenance was to be researched 'in depth' as well as exhibited in 'several exhibitions'; see Claudia Hermann, 'Kleine Anfrage', 28 June 2013 (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2013a). This claim was reinforced in January 2015 by Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters (Deutscher Bundestag, 2015, pp. 2–3). In 2018, as a reaction to Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr's 'restitution report', Hartmut Dorgerloh confirmed that 'looted art must always be returned' (Hunt, Thomas, & Dorgerloh, 2018).
5. The precise figures communicated by Gliemann consisted of 6,840 objects for the entire Museum and 1,457 for the Africa collection (email 11 February 2019). This number contradicts the number communicated by the director of collections Lars-Christian Koch in 2018. Koch claimed that the number of objects on display in the Humboldt Forum from the Ethnological Museum and the Museum for Asian Art would be twenty thousand, doubling the number of objects that had been displayed in Dahlem, with ten thousand objects on display from the Ethnological Museum and two thousand objects from the Museum for Asian Art (Kuhn, 2018b). A year later, Gliemann confirmed that nine thousand objects from both the Ethnological Museum and the Museum for Asian Art were officially to be exhibited in the Humboldt Forum (email 15 January 2020).
6. 'Documented', for him, meant the identification and subsequent integration of the related (internal and museum) historical sources in the database, as well as situating the object in the current state of the art of the literature. Interview with Boris Gliemann, 8 November 2016.
7. This concerns only the period of my research period in the Museum, 2013–2015. With the foundation of the Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH in 2015, more staff were employed, also to support curators. Since November 2019, there are four permanent researchers with permanent contracts, who are responsible for provenance research, with two researchers – Kristin Weber-Sinn and Julia Binter – being responsible for the African collections alone.
8. E 1555/1902; E 1494/1902.
9. In the long run, this will change, as the Museum will scan and make publicly available all of its archival files up to 1947. See also note 45.
10. Only the archive of the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte was still accessible on site, but, as I was told, disposed of more staff than the Ethnological Museum to look after it.
11. Still undefined at the time, the definite move of the archive to the Central Archive has now been planned. It is accompanied by the cleaning and digitisation of what are understood as the archive's historical files (up to 1947), with the aim of making them accessible online in 2021, <https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/bibliothek-und-archiv.html>, consulted 2

February 2019. At the same time, this entailed that the files were only accessible as microfiche at the Central Archive and that the physical files would be kept afterwards in a 'silent archive' (*stilles Archiv*), protecting them from any further damage through physical interaction.

12. See for example field notes from 22 July 2014.
13. Field notes from discussion with Boris Gliemann in response to a first draft of the chapter, 16 April 2018.
14. E 1555/1902; E 1494/1902.
15. Boris Gliemann, field notes from 23 February 2015.
16. A lot of the letters were written by anonymous museum staff as copies of original letters or dictated. Still, exceptions in individuals' handwriting existed.
17. One letter stayed in my memory: the department's director, Felix von Luschan, ironically commented on an offer to the Museum to buy several objects, in red. His depictions of the prices as 'exorbitant' and exclamations indicating 'Aha! I knew that already!', describing the person as the 'great Unknown' literally made me laugh (E 1078/1900). Paola Ivanov and Kristin Weber-Sinn, on the contrary, depicted their encounter with archival files linked to colonial wars as causing 'shock and anger' (Ivanov & Weber-Sinn, 2018, p.118).
18. The consignment was split and III C 14966 arrived with other highly valued objects in the collection directly from Ballenstedt in the Harz region, where Werner von Grawert resided at the time. Today, sixty-six of these objects are still in the Berlin database. Twenty-two objects were given to the Linden-Museum Stuttgart as *Doubletten* (doubles), and Herr Gliemann assumed that the twelve missing objects could be considered lost.
19. My translation from the German: 'Wo es sich aber nicht nur um die Beschaffung einzelner Gegenstände handelt, da sammle man systematisch, d.h. so, dass die Sammlung ein möglichst erschöpfendes Bild der Kultur des betreffenden Stammes gibt. [...] Diese sind also in erster Linie zu sammeln; es ist gewissermaßen ein Inventar des gesamten Kulturbesitzes aufzunehmen.'
20. Email exchanges: Margareta von Oswald with Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, professor emeritus of African history at Paris Diderot, 1 September 2014; with Philip Gooding, PhD candidate at SOAS London, 18 July 2014; with Adrian S. Wisnicki, director of the Livingstone Online project, 20 August 2014; with Katharina Zöller, junior fellow and historian at Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies, 13 May 2015/16 July 2015; email exchange between Verena Rodatus and Allen F. Roberts, 25 June 2014.
21. Email exchange between Verena Rodatus and Allen F. Roberts, 25 June 2014.
22. Conversation with Pierre Petit, 25 November 2015. The book can be consulted as a high-quality scan at <https://archive.org/details/acrossafricaocame/page/357>, consulted 29 September 2019.
23. SMB database consulted 11 February 2019, email from Boris Gliemann, 11 February 2019.
24. Visitors and researchers had access to the files through the Museum's library. The Museum's curators, however, had priority of access to the files. They could keep the files for longer periods of time and had the privilege of reading and keeping the files in their offices or working in the archive space itself.
25. In August 2021, scans of the Museum's historical inventory books were made accessible online.
26. This lack of a search for sources 'elsewhere' was justified by us as a team of researchers by reference to a lack of time, networks, contacts, or a presumed absence of local institutions and experts, as well as by the difficulty of working and doing fieldwork in war-torn Congo. Research including fieldwork existed, but was dated (Nooter Roberts 1991). Pierre Petit had equally done fieldwork in the 1990s, but had not published his dissertation. Since then, I was told, fieldwork had been difficult due to the political circumstances in the DRC.



27. In an interview with the art consultant and expert in the art market for African art Bruno Claessens, he confirmed the explosion in ‘masters’ in the last two decades, notably in relation to the auction market, Antwerp, 5 November 2015.
28. This list of exhibitions is not exhaustive. It includes examples of exhibitions I could trace in the Museum’s database and archive (loan procedures). Early publications include those of prominent scholars Carl von Eistein and Eckhart Sydow, as well as an exhibition and publications by the German artist collective Berliner Secession (Einstein, 1921; von Sydow, 1923; Berliner Secession, 1932), and exhibitions in London, Paris, and New York, among others. See for example Fagg (1964), Fagg (1966), Koloss, Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin, & Metropolitan Museum of Art (1990).
29. ‘[...] schönen Denkmäler afrikanischer Kunst’, E 1494/02.
30. For an overview of the ongoing debate, see LaGamma (2012, pp. 263–265). Different positions include the following: Neyt (1994, pp. 216–217), Pirat (1996), de Strycker & de Grunne (1996) and Pirat (2001).
31. In his initial analysis, Olbrechts identified twelve sculptures as originating from the Buli Master, confirmed by the British anthropologist William Fagg in 1948 (quoted in Pirat, 1996, p. 56). In 1980, the art historian Susan Vogel identified twenty objects authored by the master; in 1996, Claude-Henri Pirat produced a *catalogue raisonné* with nineteen identified Buli pieces. In 2011, Alisa LaGamma mentions twenty-nine objects that have been scrutinised for evidence of belonging to the Buli legacy (Vogel, 1980, p. 133; Pirat, 1996, pp. 56–57; LaGamma, 2012, pp. 263).
32. I point in particular to the work of Yann LeGall, currently part of the project “The Restitution of Knowledge. Artefacts as archives in the (post)colonial museum” (TU Berlin/University of Oxford), who has been prioritising modalities of sharing knowledge and authorship with research partners throughout his entire research trajectory. The ‘German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts’, <https://www.cp3c.org/>, is part of the political projects to render museum collections in Germany more accessible. Similarly, the database ‘Collections from Colonial Contexts’, part of the German Digital Library, (<https://ccc.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/>), is designed as a research tool. For example, however, the collections of the State Museum Berlin only figure in fragments as part of this database with 795 objects accessible from their entire collection, consulted 12 December 2021.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Probing materiality: Collections as amalgams of their histories

During a research trip to the Republic of Benin in the context of the exhibition *Object Biographies* in December 2014, our interlocutor Mondicaho Bachalou, a former employee of the museum in Abomey (Benin), talked about the ongoing force of so-called *bocio*, protective figures that are usually stuck upright in the earth by the entrances of homes, alongside roads, or as parts of shrines.

To stop a *bocio*, you first have to kill it. Kill it how? You aren't going to kill it with a knife or a gun. There are things that will prevent you from killing it for good so it has no power anymore. And it's not dead, you take it in [your museum], it's alive, in your country. That creates problems. Do you understand?

Mondicaho Bachalou warned us. Despite our definition of the *bocio* as a museum object, it still had forces beyond our control. It was not 'killed' when it entered the museum, and thus, it was not 'dead' or 'frozen', as material cultural heritage is sometimes referred to, but alive. Despite the West's conviction of controlling the matter, he seemed to claim, the ignorance of the *bocio*'s power would harm us at some point.

This chapter discusses the collections as active and agentive matter as it analyses the shifts from subjects to museum objects, and museum objects to subjects. The chapter builds on ethnographic observations from those museum practitioners responsible for conservation. The museum's obligation to keep things, built on Western conceptions of heritage as stable and durable, is framed here as the attempt to master materiality. Once they enter the museum, things become national cultural heritage and thus subject to particular legal rules and social practices. Museums are obliged to conserve these collections of objects as heritage, ideally keeping objects fixed, stable,

and unchanging in order to enable them to be kept for future generations (see Macdonald, 2018). As Laurajane Smith argues, heritage ‘doesn’t exist’ but rather is ‘a cultural practice, involved in the construction and regulation of a range of values and understandings’ – values that museums have been promoting as being universally applicable and valid (Smith, 2006, p. 11). With regards to ethnological museums and collecting, this ‘keeping’ of cultures is closely related to the practice of salvage anthropology in the nineteenth century. Constructed by contemporary anthropology as traditional, ‘primitive’, and static, particular cultures were perceived by Western anthropologists as ‘endangered’ to change and ultimately deemed to disappear due to the colonial encounter. It has been critiqued how this practice created a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, which further materialised in the knowledge production and exhibitions within museums as part of colonial anthropology.<sup>1</sup> How do these values and associated practices, informed by a Western definition of heritage, manifest in the everyday working with objects? Which implications does the obligation and desire to *keep* have on the working with and circulation of collections?

The practice of musealisation denies the collections other forms of existence and life than those imposed by the museum’s rules and regulations. Constructing these collections as heritage, then, was only possible because of the growing knowledge about chemical conservation techniques at the time. Museum professionals since the nineteenth century have treated collections with pesticides. They adopted pesticides developed for industrial use, such as in agriculture and as part of the war industry, and were adopted for museum purposes (Tello, 2021).<sup>2</sup> Very practically, these understandings of heritage continue to be enacted through what I call the paradigm of conservation. This paradigm determines the way in which collections are handled, and thus, researched, exhibited, or thought about.

In this chapter, working through articulates an engagement with the collection’s materiality itself. It shows how both the attempt to turn subjects into objects, the insistence on the paradigm of conservation, and objects’ unexpected agency as toxic assemblages makes the handling of objects difficult and finally impedes their restitution and possible resocialisation.

### **From subject to object: Musealisation and the paradigm of conservation**

Many objects in the Ethnological Museum have a status that resembles more a person, a subject, or a creature than what is commonly defined as a simple object. However, once these objects enter the Museum, the status of a subject

is usually described as having been obliterated. They are turned into immobile museum objects – controlled, restricted, and confined by the museum’s rules and legal regulations. As Hilke Doering and Stefan Hirschauer write, conserving objects means that ‘the normal biography of a thing is decelerated, if not halted completely. Aging and decay are replaced by a fixing of the actual state, a kind of eternal youth’ (Hirschauer & Doering, 1997, p. 297).<sup>3</sup> Other scholars rather compare this ‘eternal youth’ derogatorily to an act of killing or freezing (and thus depriving the object of its life). The ‘museum effect’, for example, is considered to have such consequences, ‘a phenomenon observed by museologists whereby an object is radically dislocated from its point of origin, wrenched from its context and rendered a frozen work of art in the surrounds of the museum’ (Alberti, 2007, p. 373).

When I depicted the museum storage as a ‘graveyard for objects’, insisting on the fact that the museum objects were ‘dead’ and ‘deactivated’ in museum storage, the department’s storage manager strongly disagreed. He referred to the objects as not being ‘dead’ but rather being ‘kept’ – situating conservation not as a passive activity of the museum, but as an active, crucial, and resource-demanding part of museum work.

### **The bocios as an example for the paradigm of conservation**

Throughout our work on *Object Biographies*, working with the objects revealed the limits the paradigm of conservation imposed, particularly in relation to the *bocios*. In the exhibition, we wanted to address the multiple transformations and trajectories of the *bocios* throughout their lives, especially highlighting their status as ‘stored museum objects’, inaccessible and invisible to a general public.

Vis-à-vis the role and signification of a *bocio*, the argument of the ‘deactivated’ was significant in a particular way. Their use endows them with a psychological potency and role. In her monography on *bocio*, the American art historian Suzanne Preston Blier situates the potency of the *bocio* between art, psychology, and political power. Etymologically, a *bocio* refers to its liminal status between that of an object and subject, between life and death. As ‘empowered (*bo*) cadaver (*cio*)’, it ‘comprises any activating object (*bo*) taking the shape of the human body, more accurately a “cadaver” (*cio*)’ (Preston Blier, 1996, p. 95). An incarnation of a person, a *bocio* is a figural sculpture through which power is anthropomorphised and visualised. The *bocio* thus enables residents to somehow gain a sense of control of sometimes onerous social, political, and physical conditions. It helps to respond personally and socially to the wrongs they are going through and to

dissipate attendant anxiety around hardship and loss. This is why, Preston Blier claims, the figures were especially significant during the slave trade, which shaped the lives of people in the region of *bocio* production for several centuries (Preston Blier, 1996, pp. 26–27).

The *bocio* in our exhibition *Object Biographies* would serve as an example to both shift attention towards the Museum's politics of access and storage and as a point of departure for an exploratory research and cooperation project. We wanted to visually implement our argument by installing the objects in their storage setting. More particularly, we planned to display the objects in the exact way in which we had first encountered them, together with the Beninese art historian Romuald Tchibozo, our collaborator on this section of the exhibition. Probably arranged by the former storage manager Hans-Joachim Radosuboff or his assistant (see chapter five), the *bocio* – 'visible' and 'aesthetically arranged' – had literally been hanged. With strings attached to their heads, around their bodies, and with object labels wrapped around their necks, the figures were dangling inside the museum storage cupboards. This image of the lynched object, deprived of life by its move to the museum and kept like this for decades, seemed just too literal of an embodiment of what we were investigating: we wanted to address the effects of turning things considered and lived with as subjects into museum objects. However, one conservator was shocked when we talked about our plans: the way of storing the objects was *obviously* derogatory according to basic standards. The conservator claimed that there was a risk of losing a good reputation if colleagues were to see that the objects were stored *like this* in the Ethnological Museum. The following day, we found the objects arranged in new boxes, wrapped in silky, acid-free paper, laid down horizontally to prevent any damage from hanging, and protected from light. Regretfully, but understanding of the conservator's professional impetus, we would exhibit them that way.<sup>4</sup>

The *bocio* would be part of a collaborative research project, sketched and realised together with Romuald Tchibozo. Considering the *bocio*'s low purchase value, we thought that it would be possible to make the objects part of the research project. We suggested taking them to Benin and Togo.<sup>5</sup> When negotiating the issue, however, the responsible conservator explained that the objects needed to be packed in expensive, so-called climate crates (*Klimakisten*) when travelling. These would protect the objects from any damage and temperature change, such as when using air freight. The *bocio* needed to be accompanied by official museum staff to ensure their 'appropriate' treatment, as well as their unpacking and repacking on location. The conservator calculated the costs of this move at several thousand euros. This sum far exceeded our project budget. We decided to take



Figure 7.1 – 7.2 'Lynched' bocio in the museum storage, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Margareta von Oswald



Figure 7.3 Extract from the video installation: Preparing bocio to be photographed, *Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, photographer: Anna Lisa Ramella



Figure 7.4 Extract from the video installation: Marion Benoit taking photographs of the bocio, *Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, photographer: Anna Lisa Ramella



Figure 7.5 Example of the object images taken by Marion Benoit for the research trip, *Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, photographer: *Marion Benoit*



Figure 7.6 Extract from the video installation: *Working with the images in Benin* with Gimassè Gabin, photographer: *Anna Lisa Ramella*



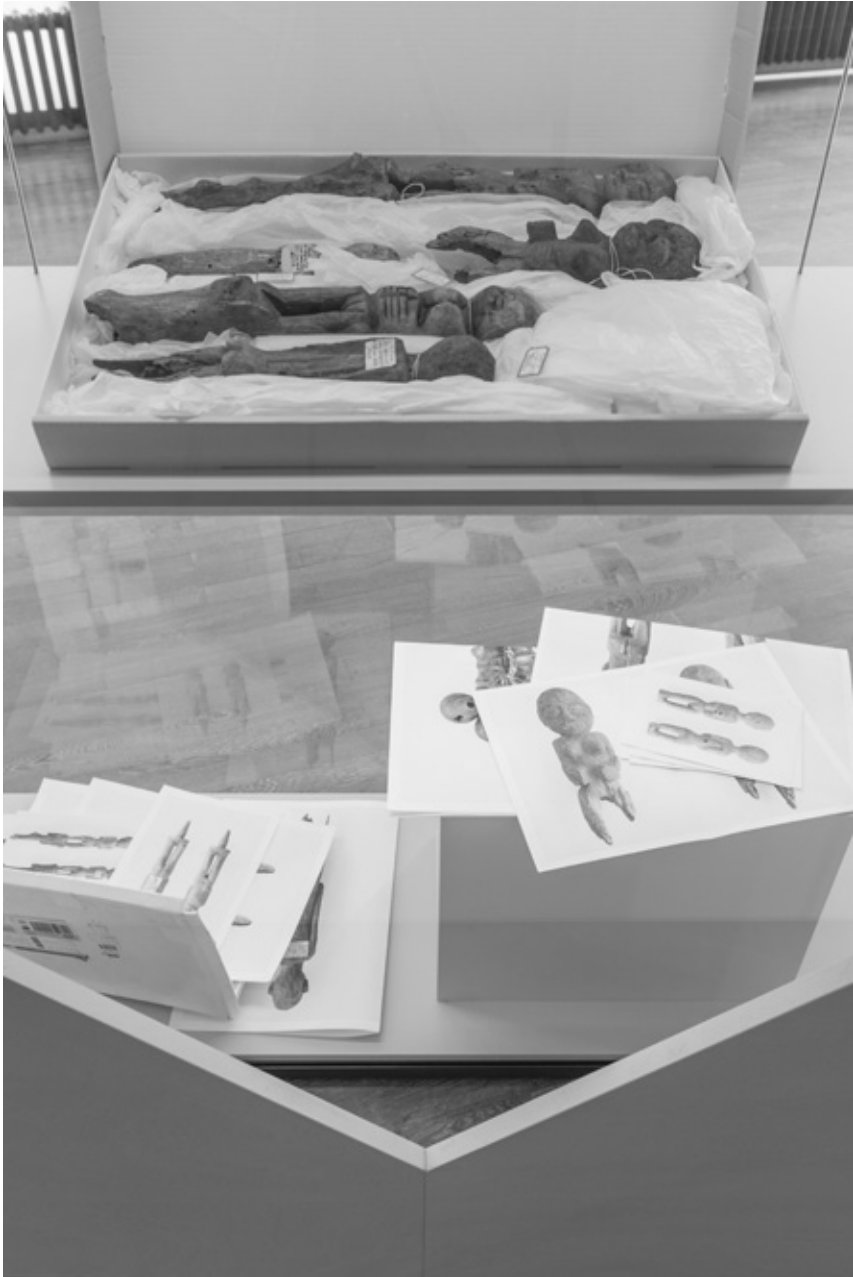


Figure 7.7 Installation view of the bocio in the *Object Biographies* exhibition, *Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, photographer: Marion Benoit



Figure 7.8 Installation view of the bocío in the *Object Biographies* exhibition, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Jens Ziehe

high-resolution images of the objects instead. Despite the importance of the objects' physical presence on-site and their particular materiality, we followed this common, internationally established but limiting way of dealing with museum regulations.<sup>6</sup>

Working within the paradigm of conservation, the translocation of things from one context to a museum context translates in their definition and treatment as museum objects. Their previous status, function, and role – possibly also as a subject, a living being – are overshadowed by their integration in a regime defined and determined by the museum's rules and regulations. These regulations impose particular limits on the way these objects can be handled on the museum site, but also restrict their circulation and mobility more generally speaking. Being a museum object entails being denied other forms of lives – and thus implies the difficulties of engaging with the plural kinds of relationships people and things can establish.

The call for the restitution of museum objects housed in Western museums has been voiced with more pressure recently, especially after the release of the 'restitution report' in 2018 by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). Regardless of whether this call will be reasserted in the future, within the paradigm of conservation, the exploration of the multiplicities of possible thing–human relations that already exist or are to be developed remains unlikely, or at least controlled and limited. Even if restitution is imposed, to break with the Western understanding of heritage, to 'resocialise and resamentise', as Sarr and Savoy suggest, sometimes seems even more difficult. Once a museum object, always a museum object.

At the same time, the process of musealising things also entails that they themselves might have become dangerous for their surroundings. The products once used to protect the objects have turned the objects into active subjects that humans need protection from.

### **From object to subject: *Entwesen* and becoming agentive through toxicity**

Visitor: In which storage areas is it especially dangerous to work without protection?

Storage manager: In all of them. You are always obliged to wear protective workwear when you approach the objects. In theory, it's OK to work in the storage areas when the cupboards are closed, but as soon as you start rearranging objects, it becomes dangerous.

Visitor: So you shouldn't spend more than eight hours in these rooms?

Textile restorer: You shouldn't work more than eight hours anyways!<sup>7</sup>

As a consequence of the objects' treatment with pesticides and heavy metals, the Museum's collection has become poisonous. The official German term for the practice of disinfecting is *entwesen*, which can literally be translated as 'de-being'. The term describes the attempt to erase anything living within the object. However, the process of *entwesen* implies not only the taking away of lives. Through the process of disinfecting and treating the collection with poisonous substances, the objects are endowed with another, and not only metaphorical, toxic and disturbing kind of subjectivity and agency. In the following, I show how repeated treatment with chemicals transformed the objects into poisonous agents – these treatments have not only had effects on the objects' substance but also constitute a danger for those who work with the objects. The objects' new composition has an impact on their present and future sociability, restricting the way in which one can work, live with, and resocialise the objects. Following up on the question of what the objects do, instead of what they represent or symbolise, the chapter's last section discusses the transformation, effects, and potential agency of the object's very materiality in the museum's everyday.

### **Killing to preserve: *Entwesen* and the objects' new forms of agency**

Killing or paralysing an object doesn't only seem to occur when taking it out of its original context, where it might have 'lived', and imprisoning it behind glass or placing the object in anonymous storage. The killing also becomes physical and literal, because conserving means killing. Today, conservation is ensured by either freezing the object or closing it off from oxygen. The disinfection takes place either in the 'freezing chamber' (*Gefrierkammer*) or the nitrogen tent. In both places, objects persist for some time, isolated from their surroundings, to eradicate those living beings that might harm them.

Historically, however, the objects were literally intoxicated by the application or injection of pesticides and heavy metal compounds. Even though this method was common in all Western museums, ethnological objects were especially vulnerable, because they consist mainly of 'natural' materials, such as wood, leather, textiles, or feathers. These materials are extremely fragile and prone to infestation, but few are aware of this history. Catherine Hawks described that, while in the natural sciences, information about conservation techniques has been widespread, it has been 'naively' assumed that

organic material in ethnological and historical collections could survive without being contaminated (2001, p. 8). Research by the Ethnological Museum's conservator Helene Tello suggests that two-thirds of the Museum's collections are contaminated and that the objects were treated 'extensively and continuously' with heavy metal compounds and pesticides from early on, some of them even in their place of production (Tello, 2006, pp. 12, 136). The documentation and archival traces of the use of pesticides and heavy metal compounds are scarce, but guidelines for pest control date as early as 1898 and 1924 (Tello, 2006, pp. 36–39). Tello's research equally shows that the objects that were subject to relocation – such as those stored secretly in Leipzig, in temporary storage spaces during the war, and in particular in Celle – bear additional traces of treatment (Tello, 2006, pp. 44–47).

After complaints from museum staff, an analysis in 2001 by an external company assessed the effects of the objects' contamination. Based on random samples, the company analysed the quality of indoor air, the composition of dust, and the concentration of pesticides within selected objects. The results of the analysis confirmed that the health risk for museum employees was 'relatively high' (Tello, 2006, p. 67). As a consequence, before entering the collections, visitors and researchers were required to sign a document to confirm that any visits were at their own risk.<sup>8</sup> Different materials represent different degrees of contamination and thus risk. Textiles, for example, are especially charged with chemicals, while metals are less apt to absorb them. Usually, the collections are kept within closed cupboards, reducing the degree of pesticides and heavy metals in the air. Once the cabinets are opened, however, researchers, curators, or conservators need to protect themselves, wearing full-body suits and breathing masks.

Despite the results of this analysis, the degree of protection depends on the museum<sup>9</sup> as well as on the will (or lack thereof) to protect oneself. In the Ethnological Museum, older generations of staff didn't take the new obligations seriously but rather joked about them. When I commented on the fact that the textile conservator didn't wear any protection, she just dismissively turned away from me, smiling. She was close to retirement and had breathed among dresses, puppets, carpets, or flags her entire life. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff confirmed this attitude. 'I didn't die from it. If the DDT made me infertile, I wouldn't know, because I don't want children anymore in any case.'

The presence of pesticides and heavy metals was clearly felt when working in the storage. The rooms were charged. Headaches and nausea were recurrent after the visits, especially for infrequent visitors. 'You get used to it after a while', the storage manager claimed.<sup>10</sup> The particular smell within the storage, which consisted of old traces of camphor, the lack of air

conditioning, the narrow rows, and the artificial lighting made working in the storage space a unique experience, losing a sense of time and place. The treatments had, however, not only an effect on those working with them but also on the objects themselves. As Helene Tello writes:

It is an undeniable fact that damage such as fading or changing of colours, yellowing of paper, black spots and/or blooming on works of art or in entire collections are residues of former treatments with pesticides. Hence, besides destruction, these pesticides must be considered an additional potential cause of damage by conservators in their daily work. (Tello, 2006, p. 136)

In an essay on decay and transience, Joshua Pollard depicts the change of an object's materiality as 'the transformation of substance' (Pollard, 2004). While it might prevent or delay the processes of decay, the practice of *Entwesung* doesn't keep the object stable and fixed. The treated objects transform differently, but in equally substantial terms. Countering the idea of the immortal and durable quality of objects, the observation of these processes allows the redefinition of the understanding of objects. As such, ethnographies of processes of conservation, as the work of scholars such as Fernando Domínguez Rubio at New York's Museum of Modern Art or Tiziana Nicoletta Beltrame at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris shows, shed light on the way the works' temporalities are constructed: by observing attempts to stabilise heritage in a material way, the very notions of the stable and perpetual destabilise (Domínguez Rubio, 2014; Beltrame, 2017). The objects become inseparable from those who manipulate them, as well as from the infrastructures, technologies, digital and physical environments – the invisible substances that conserve but also transform them. Taking into consideration the transformative potential of the material, museum collections can be conceptualised 'as collections of processes rather than as collections of "objects"' (Domínguez Rubio, 2014).

### **Unruly agents: The afterlives of residues**

As part of these processes, the substances turn the collections into agents by rendering them toxic. At the same time, through the continuous and seething presence of these compounds, the objects disturb the regulated procedure and supposedly sterile environment of the Museum. Some of the objects contrasted with what Fernando Domínguez Rubio depicts as 'docile objects': 'artworks that diligently occupy their designated "object-positions"'

and comply with the set of tasks and functions that have been entrusted to' (Domínguez Rubio, 2014). On the contrary, these objects were unruly, because they were leaving marks, as if exhaling their venomous breath.

The residues of treatments left visible traces. What's inside the objects, such as the chemical DDT or fatty acid, has been leaking out on the objects' surface and materialises in the form of a shiny dust. The objects 'blossom out' (*ausblühen*). Sometimes white crystals, similar to ice, appear. To remove the chemicals, visible or not, one 'aspirates' (*absaugen*) the objects, a lengthy and unsatisfying job:<sup>11</sup>

It's not like cleaning the living room. You aspirate those tiny objects for hours, the machine is extremely loud and you most probably won't see the result of your work. It's also unsatisfying because it's a superficial treatment. The objects are thoroughly contaminated and the remnants of treatments will continue to leak.<sup>12</sup>

The removal of pesticides and heavy metals, however, could only ever be superficial because these substance completely become part of the object's physical and material constitution. Whereas 'wet methods' for cleaning the objects would remove dust and soiling from the objects' surfaces, it would have 'little impact on the matrix of artifacts' (Tello & Unger, 2010, p. 37).

During the deinstallation of an exhibition, one conservator suddenly started to swear. An object had unexpectedly left lasting, yellow traces in the form of the sculpture on the expensive neon-lit plinth. This object had come from museum storage to replace an object that would now return. As if it wanted to annoy and leave a trace in the exhibition before being reintegrated into storage, the object left its mark on the exhibition furniture.

'Damn it!' the conservator exclaimed, 'this is the first time something like this has happened! I should have put a piece of protective foil underneath the object. But usually, the plastic of the plinth is resistant!' The conservator tried to remove the stain but the traces stayed. The conservator explained that these happened to be traces, evaporation (*Ausdünstungen*), consisting usually of fat that originated in the objects' patina. Trying different products, the conservator got increasingly aggressive and anxious. Only after rubbing hard could the spot be removed.<sup>13</sup>

Continuing our work, the conservator explained that there was a diversity of different forms of dust in the Museum that they were working with, which could come from multiple contexts and regions. Dust is a matter, as the anthropologist Tiziana Nicoletta Beltrame describes, that ties elements and entities in the museum together: it is a sign of the objects' physical histories and treatments, carrying traces from where they have been and what

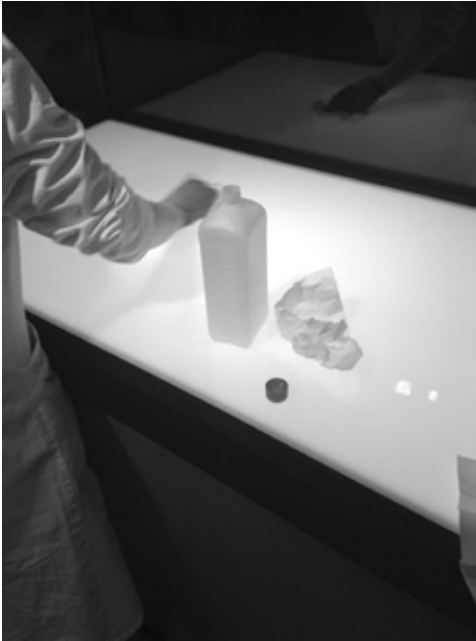


Figure 7.9 The yellow traces left by the object and the attempt to remove it with methylated spirits (Brennspiritus), 19 October 2015, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Margareta von Oswald

has been done to them. Dust also allows the insects' presence in storage and exhibition areas to be mapped: it is a supplier of food for the insects and fungi to nourish themselves (Beltrame, 2016). The conservator pointed out a particularly persistent dust, which drove museum employees crazy. This dust would appear *inside* the glass showcase, even if the objects were perfectly isolated by the glass, as if the object was sweating.<sup>14</sup>

Cleaning the showcases from the inside after the object had been removed, the conservator smiled when mentioning the high number of profession-specific articles that mentioned this kind of miraculous dust, which seemed to appear out of nowhere.

'Museum dust' was another kind of dust that I encountered, and it was always described derogatively in the Museum - a disturbing dust to be eradicated. In a working session with a conservator in the museum storage, we were looking at so-called Swahili mats, deciding which of them were to be exhibited in the new permanent exhibition. Inspecting several of these mats, the conservator stressed that one of the mats would not be exhibited because of the 'ugly black museum dust' it bore. When I asked what this meant, the conservator explained, speculating that this dust presumably came from either 'Russia, Leipzig, or simply from here. This dust looks very much like dust from a museum to me.' 'Museum dust' in this context referred to the former



use of coal stoves, blackening the objects with soot.<sup>15</sup> During our tour with Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, we learned how ‘museum dust’ could become a source of conflict.

When Peter Junge [curator for African collections 2001–2014] wanted to give things on loan, sometimes we had war. The conservator’s priority was always to know whether an object was apt to be put on loan [*ausleihfähig*]. Sometimes, I said to Mr Junge. ‘No, this object looks dingy [*schäbig*], we can’t give it on loan.’ And he answered, ‘But these are just signs of use!’ No, this is not a sign of use. This has been damaged when it was in Leningrad or Leipzig. This is *our* fault. Not the African’s traces. And that’s why we can’t give it on loan. We are making fools of ourselves! And then Junge told the conservator to come. I basically threw myself on my children, protecting, shielding them from any harm.<sup>16</sup>

The objects’ ‘signs of use’, also described as ‘wear and tear’, are essential in ethnological collections. As a proof of ‘ethnographic authenticity’, value is attributed to the objects. The signs of use are judged to be an integral part of the objects’ identity.<sup>17</sup> The object is supposed to physically carry the magic it is imagined to transmit. As Hans-Joachim Radosuboff pointed out, judgements of the ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ came into conflict with the traces of the collection’s museum career, traces that were devalued and made to disappear.

At the same time, however, the conflict points to the simultaneous agencies, the ‘vibratory quivering of material’ (Beltrame, 2016) that is dealt with in the museum. The ongoing attempt to control the object results in the paradigm of conservation overshadowing the object’s former subjectivities and spirits while endowing it with new kinds of agency – toxic and disturbing – which significantly impact museum employees’ work conditions. Conservation then always remains an *attempt*: Mondicaho Bachalou highlighted that the *bocio* wasn’t dead, but very much alive, creating problems.

## Conclusion

Commenting on the much-discussed and controversial ‘restitution report’ in an interview, its co-author Felwine Sarr came back to the significance of objects in Africa for their former owners.

All the objects that came from Africa had a meaning, a role in the community. These artefacts were not objects, they were subjects. They have an identity, they emanate power and the ability to act. In the cosmology

of Africa, they brought the invisible into the visible. Rituals gave them influence. The identity of these objects changed when they entered museums. They were given a new identity. This metamorphic identity made them hybrids. They encompass both Europe and Africa, they stand at the border between the two cultures. This now defines their very essence. (Felwine Sarr quoted in Bloch, 2019).<sup>18</sup>

Whereas Felwine Sarr argues from a purely historical and symbolic point of view, this chapter has shown that museum objects are physically, and thus irreversibly, an amalgam of their different histories. The making and returning things into museum objects has had material, lasting, and irreversible consequences on objects' physical and symbolic constitutions and identities. As 'hybrids with a metamorphic identity', as Felwine Sarr characterises museum objects, the layers of histories are living and working within the objects, added through human (creative) intention, encouraged by the different materials, liquids, and chemicals that they have absorbed, shaped by the technologies and environments that surround them. Observing the objects' life of 'being kept' in the Museum shows how much the objects are subject to change, if only through the objects' transformation of substance.

The object thus counters simple understandings of the 'here' and 'there', the 'us' and 'them'. Through its materiality, it defies understandings of identities as singular or pure. Rather, to put it in Paul Basu's words, the object can be understood as intrinsically 'in-between' worlds and systems of knowledge production (Basu, 2017). The object challenges notions of authenticity and of the original, as it incorporates the multiplicity of existences it has gone through, being part of both African and European universes. With a view to the virulent discussions on restitution, return, and the rearticulation and reanimation of ethnological collections and archives, this chapter raises questions about the paradigms in which the object will be and can be thought about and worked with. The implications for restitution for contaminated objects then depend on those who request the return, who are free to decide whether and how to handle these objects. Central here is the question whether the paradigm of conservation will continue to be privileged in the treatment and definition of the museum's collections. This includes interrogations on whether the museum's primary goal should be to keep things for future generations, or rather if its aim should be to use its collections for present ones. Do these two options exclude each other? And if not, how can the paradigm of conversation be made compatible with the objects' former uses and roles, and thus with the option to be resocialised in 'ecologies' that are 'necessarily plural', as Sarr and Savoy suggest (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 27)?

## Notes

1. For an insightful overview on the relation between ethnographic collections, modernity and toxicity in museum collections, see Arndt 2022.
2. I thank Eva Ritz for highlighting this point to me.
3. My translation from the German: 'die Normalbiographie eines Dinges zu verlangsamen, wenn nicht zum Stillstand zu bringen. An die Stelle von Alterung und Verfall tritt eine Fixierung des Ist-Zustandes, eine Art ewiger Jugend.'
4. Field notes from conversations on 18 and 20 July 2014.
5. The objects had been sold to the museum in 1967 by 'Dr. Otto A. Jäger', a collector about whom we couldn't find more information. We speculated that the contemporary curator Kurt Krieger had been obliged to buy the collector's entire collection for 24,000 DM, as it was only the collection's masks that were subsequently exhibited in a temporary exhibition entitled *Gelede masks from Dahomey (Gelede-Masken aus Dahomey)* (1967). Compared to the masks, whose prices went up to 1,500 DM apiece, the *bocios* were comparatively cheap, costing between 45 and 50 DM at the time.
6. In many collaborative museum projects, one sees people on-site working and dealing with images, instead of material objects. The promotional image for the collaborative project Tanzania–Germany: Shared Object Histories? (2016–2019), which worked with the Ethnological Museum's East Africa collections, was just one example of such image use, see <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/research/tanzania-germany-shared-object-histories.html>, consulted 12 October 2019.
7. Dialogue from field notes, 19 November 2013. The hourly guidelines also have to do with the health and safety aspects of the FFP 3 masks the museum staff uses; staff should only work with these masks for a certain amount of time and then take a break or do work that does not require a mask. I am grateful to Eva Ritz for this precision.
8. The document confirmed that '[the c]ontamination with PCP (pentachlorophenol), lindane and DDT (dichlorodiphenyl-trichloroethane) as well as the elements arsenic and mercury has been determined' (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2017).
9. In 2015, Tervuren's Royal Museum for Central Africa, no protection was used when entering the collections, and staff were didn't know about the degree and kind of chemicals used on the objects.
10. Field notes from 4 November 2014.
11. Field notes from 26 November 2013.
12. Conversation with museum storage manager, 30 October 2013.
13. Field notes from 19 October 2015.
14. The traces within show cases can also come from evaporation, blossom-out, and precipitation (*Ausdünstungen, Ausblühungen, Niederschläge*), either originating from within the objects (not only from pesticides, but also fats, oils, or colouring), but also from unsuited materials used in the construction of the show cases (wood material, colours, seals).
15. Field notes from a restoration session, 20 March 2014.
16. My translation from the German: 'Und so habe ich mich quasi schützend über meine Kinder geschmissen.'
17. The 'wear and tear' is quoted here from an interview with the Belgian collector Marc Felix (Corbey, 2000, p. 174). See also the monograph by Christopher B. Steiner on the trade in African art for definitions of 'ethnographic authenticity' (Steiner, 1994, pp. 100–103).
18. My translation from the German.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Repairing representations: Curatorial cultures and change in the Ethnological Museum

In 2012, a year before I would enter the Ethnological Museum to start my fieldwork, I attended a round-table talk in Paris on the occasion of the exhibition *La Triennale: Intense Proximity*.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition addressed the relationship between art and the ethnographic. Okwui Enwezor, the *Triennale*'s creative director, had recently been part of the Humboldt Forum's international advisory board and commented on the role and futures of ethnological museums and their collections.

I am of the opinion that ethnographic museums always get it wrong and therefore they are the most experimental museological spaces at this particular time. How do objects signify things beyond the limited framework in which they are placed? I find ethnographic museums are really interesting places to think about the role and the nature of cultural objects and the possibility of experimenting curating or what I would call 'curatography' – theorising through curating.<sup>2</sup>

By problematising the role of the curatorial within ethnological museums, Enwezor raised two issues, which form points of departure for the reflections and analysis pursued in this chapter. His expression 'Always getting it wrong' referred, first, to the decades of critique with which ethnological museums have been confronted, making these museums' representations possibly the most discussed and problematised exhibition genre in the fields of museum anthropology, art history, and postcolonial critique. Depicting them as 'limited frameworks in which these objects are placed', he alluded to the disciplinary and organisational framings that the objects are exposed to. Within these framings, the objects take on a particular significance of 'difference', defined by anthropological theory and

ethnographic research, because they are part of an ethnological museum's collection and their exhibitions. Second, the quotation allows us to think about how to work and analyse the representations produced by and within ethnographic museums. Enwezor highlights that ethnographic museums are good 'to *think about* the role of curating'. This thinking about and the critique of representation have been at the core of the analysis of curatorial practices and in relation to ethnological museums in particular. Whereas the critique of representation in regard to finished exhibitions, and thus, put simply, the *thinking* about past wrongdoings and possible futures has dominated the analysis of exhibitions, what curators actually *do* in ethnological museums has not been taken into account as much.

This chapter addresses how curators engage and struggle to break with the legacies of representation in the Ethnological Museum by looking at processes that *produce* representations – instead of analysing representations, and thus exhibitions themselves. How are conventional tropes of representation in the Ethnological Museum, closely related to colonial epistemologies, engaged with? How do they get challenged? Why and how are they reproduced in contemporary exhibition practice?

The observation of exhibition making processes facilitates the deconstruction and understanding of dominant power dynamics and their undergirding structures. In the Ethnological Museum, I observed these processes up until 2015, which is when Neil MacGregor was appointed as the Humboldt Forum's Founding Director (*Gründungsintendant*). Neil MacGregor suggested and realised substantial changes in the exhibitions' layout in the Humboldt Forum. At the Humboldt Forum's opening in 2020 and 2021, few of the particular planning processes I observed left visible traces in the new set of permanent exhibitions. Nevertheless, the analysis of the *how* of exhibition making matters. Long-established curatorial cultures – ways of making museum – impeded innovative curatorial work. 'Structures' acted on the maintenance of conventional museal orders, confirming the Ethnological Museum's role as fundamentally concerned with the definition, demarcation, and representation of cultural difference and alterity.

One curator once exclaimed in despair:

When you enter the reconstructed Royal Palace, situated opposite of the museums of 'the Great Civilisations', pass its foyer with an overwhelming display styled like a chamber of curiosity, learn about the glories of Western science and explorers, move up several floors until you find the exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum, compartmentalised in regional areas – what room to manoeuvre does one have to challenge all of these framings? <sup>3</sup>

This quote stands here a perennial reminder: the restorative representational and symbolic politics of the Humboldt Forum framed and obstructed the attempt to transform representations.

### **Repair as curatorial approach, its ambivalences and ruptures**

Focusing on the fieldwork in Berlin, this chapter is also based on learnings from numerous interviews with curators and museum directors in ethnological museums,<sup>4</sup> as well as further observation of curatorial practice in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, where I spent time between June and December 2015. The chapter begins with the observation that curating in ethnological museums has been characterised by the reckoning with legacies of representations in those museums, and more broadly speaking, of colonial imaginaries. Exhibitions in ethnological museums contributed to forging racist visual tropes, which rely on colonial imaginaries of the 'Black Man' as 'the ultimate sign of the dissimilar', as Achille Mbembe has put it (Mbembe, 2017, p. 11). Today, curators often position themselves in relation, and more specifically, *against* the histories of exhibiting and representing 'Africa' in ethnological museums.

These imaginaries closely relate to broader colonial constructions of otherness in that such representations rely on binary differences. These binaries usually entail a strong hierarchy, because they were constructed to establish and maintain relations of colonial dominance. Exemplary binaries have been opposing 'nature' versus 'culture', 'tribal' or 'primitive' versus 'modern' or 'civilised'. Small-scale societies isolated in space and time are put in juxtaposition with great civilisations with deep and long histories, or localised, rural, and immobile societies contrast with global, interconnected, cosmopolitan, urban, and mobile ones. Anthropologists have been criticised for locking the people they claim to represent in a 'non-historical time' (Clifford, 1988, p.202) and an eternal 'ethnographic present' that denies these subjects 'coevalness' in exhibition displays (Fabian, 2014).

How to contend with the legacies of the colonial representation of Black history and the history of Africa has been interrogated by scholars and cultural practitioners through fictional and factual accounts and narratives. Notions of 'healing', or 'countering' have been suggested in order to engage with histories of conquest, domination, and misrepresentation.<sup>5</sup> Sadyia Hartman, reflecting on her own practice as a writer addressing slavery in the US context, problematised the role of authorship and positioning, and wondered how to

do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story ... without committing further violence in my own act of narration. (Hartman, 2008, pp. 2–3)

In relation to the European colonial project and its reverberations, the artist Kader Attia centralises his practice around the notion of repair. ‘Intentionally fractured’, as Clémentine Deliss describes his practice, Attia’s understanding of repair involves the rendering visible of the wound and its stitching. This intentional fracture allows the histories and presents formerly erased, neglected or downplayed to be addressed and divulged (Deliss, 2016, see also Vergès, 2019).

In my observation of curatorial practices in museums, I understand some of the responses to stereotypical representations of Africa as an expression of the notion of repair. Repair usually departs from a particular given, and implies the explicit will to fix, to cure, or improve. Yaëlle Biro, then Associate Curator for the Arts of Africa at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, identified the challenges associated with the curation of African collections in the ‘danger of the single story’, referring to the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The difficulty for her consisted in defying essentialist and simplifying ideas of what constitutes Africa and the histories conveyed through objects. Kevin Dumouchelle, then Associate Curator of the Arts of Africa and the Pacific Islands at New York’s Brooklyn Museum, stated in June 2016:

I want visitors to understand that Africa has a deep history, that it is a place that is not cut off from the world and cut off from history but very much a constitutive part of that story. And a part of the art historical story particularly.<sup>6</sup>

In Berlin’s Ethnological Museum, Paola Ivanov, one of the two curators responsible for its ‘Africa’ collections, proposed an exhibition which focused on countering the established narratives and accompanying modes of display. The exhibition aimed at challenging the stereotypes confirmed in anthropology’s historiography, and thus subverting the museum’s own histories of exhibiting and producing knowledge.

In the first published concept of the planned exhibition for the Humboldt Forum, Paola Ivanov distanced herself from representational tropes of ‘Africa’ and expressed her objective to counteract those: she aimed at ‘taking a decidedly “southern” point of view and to turn established perspectives on their head’ (Ivanov & Junge, 2015, p.12).

. To this end, she developed an exhibition format that was informed by research from ‘new relational global historiography’ and its conceptual tools – a theoretic angle she had also employed for her anthropological research, notably for her research project on aesthetics and consumerism in Zanzibar (Ivanov & Junge, 2015, p. 13, see also Ivanov, 2012b; 2013).

Repair, more than similar notions such as redress or recovery, is a material practice. An exhibition, then, functions here as a temporary but materialised argument in order to correct or shift perspectives. At the same time, however, to repair often implies restoring. Particularly in the context of ethnological museum collections, this easy kinship between repair and restoration leads to a problematic ambivalence within curatorial work since the restorative aspect of repair engenders a risk as much as a redress. Whilst attempts to heal articulate themselves in particular curatorial strategies, they run the risk of reproducing representations perceived as violent, or, of stabilising and legitimising an organisation otherwise contested.

In the following, with Berlin’s Ethnological Museum as an example, I will argue that analysing how exhibitions are conceived and produced matters as much as looking at the resulting representations. I depict how what I call the ‘curatorial cultures’ in the Ethnological Museum obstructed attempts to change – cultures which I regard as particular and locally-grown but which find resonance and counterparts in other European ethnological museums.

### **Curatorial cultures in the Ethnological Museum**

Within the process of developing and producing exhibitions in the Ethnological Museum, a particular ‘curatorial culture of the ethnological’ prevailed. The notion of the ‘culture of the curatorial’ has been elaborated in different publications on the curatorial. In these publications, the authors point to the emergence and establishment of a professionalised field of ‘the curatorial’, rather than foregrounding the notion of ‘culture’ (von Bismarck, Schaff, & Weski, 2012; O’Neill, 2012). Here, in contrast, I use ‘culture’ to elaborate on a particular, habitual way of doing things. Using the notion of ‘curatorial culture’ thus points to the routine, practice-based, historically embedded, and customary character of exhibition making, as well as to the difficulties of escaping it. A ‘curatorial culture’ implies particular ways of doing the museum through exhibition making, informed by the organisational frame of ‘the ethnological’. The analysis of curatorial culture, then, highlights the importance of taking into account *how* exhibitions – and thus representations – are produced.



The curatorial culture in the Ethnological Museum was characterised by different practices, three of which I elaborate in what follows: (1) being authoritative, (2) being research-based and -focused, and (3) being collection-centred. As the analysis shows, this particular culture risked reproducing the stereotypes and narratives curators intended to resist, concerning what the museum is, what it contains, and who it is to serve.

### **Curating as an authoritative practice**

The first element of the ‘culture of the ethnological’ was the maintaining of scientific authority over the collections and the Museum’s exhibition. This implies an emphasis on the curator as *custos*, which, etymologically speaking, focuses on questions of keeping and guarding. ‘Keeping’ collections implies the understanding of a custodian as gatekeeper or guard, defining and deciding who has the right to access to and interpretation over the collections (and who doesn’t). The definition of the curator’s role as *custos* has been closely linked to the internal organisational structure of the Ethnological Museum. The understanding of departments as ‘curatorial kingdoms’, historically grown through the regional departmentalisation of the Museum, persisted during my fieldwork, despite attempts to break open and reform the Museum’s structure (see chapter three).<sup>7</sup>

At the time, the Ethnological Museum continued to be predominantly defined by its collections – which continued to be regionally confined.<sup>8</sup> During my fieldwork, the recurrent talk of ‘my collection’ or the implicit maintenance of regional restorers stood for the de facto persistence of what was recurrently described as ‘curatorial kingdoms’. Whereas a generational change within the Museum encouraged the progressive decomposition of the different departments, the workflow continued to principally take place within the respective departments, despite the formal abandonment of this structure.

The lack of exchange was further facilitated by the regional organisation within the Humboldt Forum. Curators worked on the exhibitions involving ‘their’ collections by themselves. Up to the point where the exhibition projects were handed to the exhibition designers, no justification about the exhibition concept had been necessary, except in direct exchange with the Museum’s director Viola König.<sup>9</sup> Most of the curators thus prepared ‘their’ exhibition for the Humboldt Forum individually, and often with the same method and theoretical references as they had always done. Some of the curators had been working in the Ethnological Museum for more than twenty years. The curators were also not informed about the other curators’

exhibition projects, although most exhibitions were already at the stage of being drawn by the exhibition designers when the discussions of and exchange on the different exhibitions started in early 2014. Solely in dialogue with ‘their’ collection, most curators were not involved in working groups within the Museum or any other kind of collaboration. Speaking on behalf of the collections and keeping authorship thus remained in the hands of the curator. The curators would subsequently be defined as (and often see themselves) as the legitimate and sole authority over the respective collections.

The Ethnological Museum’s conceptual limbo fostered the authoritative character of curatorial processes at the time. In 2008, the Ethnological Museum’s director Viola König handed in her first concept of the Ethnological Museum’s position in the Humboldt Forum, a mission she had been explicitly employed for in 2001 (König, 2012a, pp. 9–11). However, this and following concepts and drafts were de facto never recognised or referred to as such within the Museum.

The process of developing a concept ‘failed’, Peter Junge retrospectively claimed. Peter Junge was one of the Africa curators at the time, but also guaranteed the liaison between the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum.<sup>10</sup> He explained that this was due to ‘desinterest about a conceptual discussion within the Museum itself’, as well as the Museum’s ‘very bad social climate’. In the working process, König’s concept was boiled down to three keywords – ‘multiperspectivity’ (*Multiperspektivität*), ‘audience’ (*Publikum*), ‘contemporaneity’ (*Gegenwart*). The curators didn’t take these ideas as guidelines or references for their exhibitions.<sup>11</sup> With a view to the longer history of how the Ethnological Museum was to exist within the Humboldt Forum, despite countless working groups, conferences, consultation groups, advisory boards, published and unpublished concepts, preliminary exhibition projects, and different moratoria, there was no agreement within the Museum on the Ethnological Museum’s mission, vision, and contribution to Berlin’s museum landscape, and the Humboldt Forum in particular.<sup>12</sup>

The understanding of the custodians as sole authors of the exhibition not only enhanced their authority, but simultaneously charged them to deal with a substantial number of expectations and tasks. One aspect of the expertise required in the context of ethnological museums is engagement with people who identify with the collections or come from places where the objects have been produced. In 2011, Robin Boast had already stated in an article that

[d]ialogue and collaboration is the name of the game these days and there are few museums with anthropological, or even archaeological,

collections that would consider an exhibition that did not include some form of consultation. (Boast, 2011, p. 56)

Ien Ang, in 2005, identified a ‘predicament of diversity’ in museums (Ang, 2005). Whereas this predicament might apply in Anglo-Saxon museum contexts, the Ethnological Museum did not provide a framework for processes of consultation, cooperation, or collaboration to take place. Processes of collaboration became lengthy and administratively difficult processes, without any resources – personnel or financial – available. Working alone was not challenged from within the Museum at this stage, despite the repeated organisational injunction to ‘let go of’ or ‘share interpretational power’ (*Deutungsmacht aufgeben/teilen*).<sup>13</sup> Curatorial authority and authorship were thus maintained, without any particular questioning of this authority within the frames of the Museum. This raised the question whether and how the Museum’s aim to engage in ‘multiperspectivity’ would be possible from *within* the organisation solely.

### **Curating as a research-focused practice**

The curatorial authority was accentuated by some of the exhibitions’ mission to translate scientific findings into the exhibition. A prerequisite for this kind of exhibition making was that it was research-based, aiming at translating current theoretical arguments and research findings (about the Museum, about the objects, on the region of origin) into an exhibition that reflected these arguments.

Scientific accuracy, and the depiction of the research findings in the exhibition – in all their complexity – was a high priority for many curators. The focus on the translation of research into the exhibition rested on assumptions that define the museum as a scientific organisation. Peter Junge explained that the need to ‘turn scientific ideas into curatorial concepts’ was not resolved throughout the exhibition making process, resulting in curatorial concepts ‘difficult to exhibit in their scientific complexity’.<sup>14</sup> The exhibitions, at least at their conceptual state, presupposed a considerable familiarity with the concepts and terms employed by the curators, giving way to the impression that the exhibition’s primary audience was expected to be a scientific community. Said differently, the exhibitions remained research-focused.

The exhibition format can of course serve multiple communities, including a scientific one. However, the role of experts in museum education and learning – in the German context labelled as ‘mediation’ (*Vermittlung*)

– was barely existent in the exhibition’s planning process. With a view to the Museum’s infrastructure, the absence of a department of mediation in the Museum signalled that the need for and existence of a professional expertise for processes of translation, transmission, or mediation was not considered at an early stage of the exhibition-making process.<sup>15</sup> Rather, this process was expected to be fulfilled by the exhibition designers alone. The designers, for their part, were themselves struggling to understand and transmit the key arguments, and continuously characterised some of the exhibitions as academic and difficult to understand.<sup>16</sup>

‘Education and Outreach’ (BV – *Bildung und Vermittlung*) was, in contrast to the expressed needs for mediation, defined in particular terms: the responsible person’s tasks were limited to (and at the same time overwhelmed by) ‘junior spaces’. BV was embodied by a single person, responsible for the entire space of the Ethnological Museum and Museum for Asian Art in the Humboldt Forum. The implicit assumption was thus that only children and teenagers needed ‘mediated’ content. In contrast to identifying and defining the process of exhibition-making as a collaborative and multi-authored one, different kinds of expertise were not equally valued during the work process. Whereas the curators’ claim of scientificity was enhanced, the person responsible for BV was deprived of the acknowledgement for being scientific, and thus, necessary: the almost complete absence of BV during the exhibition-making process testified to this prioritisation.<sup>17</sup> Despite calls for a greater acknowledgement of the – usually female – workforce and expertise of museum educators, it continued to be absent from exhibition-making processes, maintaining its role as ‘a secondary activity that only communicates pre-existing content’ (Landkammer, 2019, p. 2).

This understanding of the museum has been repeatedly challenged in light of recurrent calls to democratise the museum, such as within the concepts of the ‘new museology’. Reducing the exhibitionary format to a focus on ‘scientificity’ (*Wissenschaftlichkeit*) has been criticised for reproducing the status of the museum as a place for the few, excluding large numbers of the museum’s potential users.<sup>18</sup> These critiques, some of which have been developed within the recent ‘educational turn’ and build on constructivism and ideas of critical pedagogy, question the museum’s approach to learning as a top-down endeavour, in which the museum represents the knowledgeable and objective instructor – the transmitter of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Promoters of alternative approaches to learning in the museum rather suggest the museum as a place in which knowledge is co-produced in interaction, where it is possible to ‘un-learn’ its established modes of interacting, or to go further, in which the museum might even learn from those who use it (Kamel & Gerbich, 2014; Gerbich, n.d.; see also Sternfeld, 2016; Landkammer, 2019).

The maintenance of the exhibition as a research-based and research-focused practice can be understood as part of the cultures of the ethnological in the sense that it repeated and sustained historical understandings of the Museum as an organisation by and for research. Whereas the continuation of research on collections and the display of this research is of course necessary, it nevertheless challenged, in its present form, current understandings of the museum as ‘audience-orientated’ (*publikumsorientiert*) and the way that this aim was put into practice in the museum. Recent approaches to the museum and results from visitor research concerning the role of museums were disregarded, such as defining it as a place for life-long learning or taking into account the variety of motivations that shape how people experience exhibitions (Gibbs, Sani, & Thompson, 2007; Falk, 2009). In relation to this contradiction stands another, in which the central role of collections – both with regard to research and exhibition – called into question the museum’s claim to be ‘contemporary’ (*Gegenwartsbezug*).

### **Curating as a collection-centred practice**

In museums, exhibition making is usually focused on the presentation of material culture, and thus is collection-centred. This means that the curator uses collections to illustrate, evidence, or demonstrate an argument with objects. In ethnological museums, as pointed out by Henrietta Lidchi, museum objects are used as generalising and representative examples of the represented culture, rather than being singular and specific in space and time. The collections are thus employed as material proof and manifestation – as a ‘representation’ – of this precise culture framed as ‘different’ (Lidchi, 1997, pp. 161, 171–172). Adopting the ‘format of contextualising and reconstructing’, this representational paradigm claims the entitlement and right to display otherness, a kind of otherness shaped by anthropological theory and ethnographic research. The entitlement to represent otherness has been subject to critique at least since the writing culture debate in anthropology. It always implies the risk of producing representations that limit, generalise, essentialise, and homogenise those it claims to represent – and usually, without their involvement. However, this essentialism was difficult to escape. For instance, the draft for the future Africa exhibition reproduced the exact stereotypes and representational tropes it aimed at deconstructing. The claim to adopt a ‘consistent southern perspective and the change of perspective’ contradicted the fact that no partners were involved in the exhibition making process. In the draft, the attempt to exhibit distinct and entire cultures resonated in its title, *The World of the Swahili*. Doing so over

a consistent number of years, as the exhibition module *Cities and Aesthetics of the Swahili (19th–21st centuries)* illustrated (Ivanov & Junge, 2015, p. 13–14), revealed the contradictions regarding temporality that the curators were confronted with. They were working with collections dating in their major parts from the 19th century, but they were also bound to the guiding principle of ‘contemporaneity’ in the Museum.

Viola König, in the Museum’s mission statement, endorsed contemporaneity alongside the key concepts of ‘publics’ and ‘multiperspectivity’ (König, 2012c). The so-called *Gegenwartsbezug* ran counter to the collection-centred practice of the Ethnological Museum on two accounts: first, the Museum’s collection hardly contained any contemporary material and lacked the funds to acquire it. If so, the acquired objects were part of a global circuit of ‘contemporary art’, difficult to be categorised and thus equally integrated into the regionalised taxonomies of the Museum. And second, the self-understanding of the Humboldt Forum, with which the Ethnological Museum would integrate, was not historical. According to its online pitch, the Humboldt Forum didn’t claim to be a museum of cultural history, nor did it speak of its collection as historical. Presentations of the Humboldt Forum rather depicted it as a ‘new cultural district [...] that brings together diverse cultures and perspectives and seeks new insights into topical issues such as migration, religion and globalisation’.<sup>20</sup> This was not a problem in and of itself. Of course, topical issues do not preclude historical contextualisation as such. But in the case of the Humboldt Forum, this positioning implied an implicit refusal to define and mark the grand majority of the exhibited collections as historical. This incoherence – resulting, once again, from the failure to develop a stringent overall museum mission – enhanced the risk of locking cultures into what Johannes Fabian famously described as an ‘ethnographic present’ (Fabian, 2014), which the abovementioned exhibition draft illustrated. As such, the collection-centred culture of the Ethnological Museum conflicted with its aim to represent the contemporary; in turn, this focus encouraged the museum’s self-styled and historical task to represent ‘culture’ as decontextualised and invariant – and as something that was limited to that considered and marked as ‘other’.

The characteristics of the curatorial culture spelled out and identified here – as research-orientated, built on collections, and dominated by curatorial authority – probably don’t come as a surprise. They concern, in some way or another, a lot and different kinds of museums: museums were conceived in this way (see, for example, Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). However, aiming at change and transformation, the ‘fixing’ of representations clearly involves *what* is shown, but also *how* exhibitions are conceived and produced. The next part of the chapter explores possible reasons to explain the

resilience of the curatorial cultures that impair the curators' ability to challenge the Museum and its practices.

### **Cultures in 'structures'**

In what follows, I offer attempts to understand how the curatorial culture was sustained by describing and situating what the museum employees usually framed as 'structures'. These 'structures' referred to that which seemed uncontrollable and autonomous from their very position as museum staff: a constellation difficult to grasp and to describe, consisting of numerous players, decision-making processes, diverging interests, and, finally, what museum staff described as the 'unwritten rules' of the SPK – the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, which held the majority of Berlin's museum collection.

Describing my difficulties writing about the Museum, and the positionality of curators within these constellations, one employee vividly disagreed when I pondered on whether to put particular agents at the centre of my analysis.

We are all victims of the structures. The hierarchies are so important and massive when working in the SPK. Just look at what the structures produce. This is what you should concentrate on in your analysis of the Museum, not single persons. In your analysis, you have to always ask yourself: Is it about power, or is it about content [*Geht es um Macht oder um die Sache*]? The relation between power and content is out of balance in the Humboldt Forum: it is not about content, it's about representation, and how to keep or promote your own position. To be honest: every time I look in the mirror, I ask myself: 'Why am I doing this? Can I still stand up for what is actually happening here?'<sup>21</sup>

The following description of the 'structures', condensed into a vignette, is an attempt to further understand why change in the curatorial culture was difficult. Museum staff described and experienced the Museum's structures and ways of working as lacking transparency and as being overbearing and all-encompassing. The chapter thus finishes by arguing that, until the Museum's structures and ways of working are intelligently rethought and substantially addressed, changes on the level of representation are unlikely to take place. The successive deconstruction of the process of producing representations in this chapter thus reveals how attention needs to be devoted not only to what one will see in the exhibition, how these representations

are produced, but also how these modes of working are structurally embedded in the Museum as an organisation.

### **Agency within the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation: A vignette**

Questions of agency, responsibility, and accountability were discussed with the notion of ‘structures’ by staff at the Ethnological Museum. In Berlin, the quantity of organisations, stakeholders, and interests involved in the Humboldt Forum project as well as the importance of its budget set the level for a high degree of complexity – a complexity that was dismissed as ‘non-transparent’ and ‘entangled’ not only by internal museum staff but also by external players, including the press (see, for example, Savoy in Hüntzschel, 2017a).

The following conversation is composed of several discussions between museum staff and I during fieldwork, reflecting the museum staff’s own analysis and struggle with positioning their work within the SPK and within the Humboldt Forum.<sup>22</sup> I situate the conversation in the Museum’s canteen at lunch, the place and time of day where museum employees would meet regularly to discuss. Employee A and Employee B sit with me, as we just come out of a meeting. We have our lunch while discussing.

Employee A [sighing]: Well, it is obvious that there is a failure of leadership on all levels. Once you notice that such a bad atmosphere is dominant, you need to organise a meeting, an event. You then need to understand what’s going on to be able to counter it. But those responsible for the planning process in the Humboldt Forum don’t even notice this atmosphere [*Stimmung*] anymore. For them, it has become the normal kind and vibe to communicate.

Employee B [agreeing]: They don’t perceive these moods anymore. I feel that I’m foreign to this culture [*kulturfremd*]. I actually tried to decipher the unwritten rules which reign here. What can you still discuss? At what point do I need to shut up? I sometimes asked questions to which I got three different, insufficient answers. I needed to pretend, however, that this answer was an answer, because at that point, we couldn’t go any further. There is no set of rules which defines where we will be in the near future. It’s unspoken, there is a dynamic which carries you along. Of course, things also change – such as when new people come – but at its base, there is a certain standard pitch [*Kammerton*] – sometimes it



goes up, sometimes down. But in essence, it is about control, power, and money. This is the general dynamic and it continues.

Employee A: These are the wrong working conditions. I am convinced that one of the main reasons for the bad atmosphere at the Museum is the limited agency, coupled with arbitrariness [*Willkür*] and intransparency of the decision-making structures: ultimately, this is a problem of the SPK's hierarchical structure, and this limited agency is also present on the higher levels. The leaders of the SPK, the SMB, and the museums are subject to a very bad contract with the exhibition designers, which was decided by the Ministry of Construction. And a stupid building, completely unsuitable for museum presentations! Instead of constructing solidarity structures, the frustration is handed on 'downwards', and the curators and storage managers and restorers are in a situation of entirely limited and limiting possibilities; at the same time, they are supposed to do 'everything': the exhibitions! This doesn't only generate frustration, but also anger and cynicism.

Employee B: And on top of that, we have wrong working contracts. It's simply a bad framework to work in. And it's impossible to be creative in these circumstances.

Employee A: Yes, but one just continues. No one tells the director that the Emperor is naked.

Employee B: Yes. It's actually like a marriage, where at one point you realise: Oh! This was a mistake! [They start laughing.]

Employee A: Until the bitter end!

Employee B: And we stay together because of the children!

Laughing, we get ourselves some coffee. Employee B addresses me directly: 'So you are writing about ethnological museums and [...]', and I jump in 'And their transformations, yes. And I also wanted to consider the structural implications, but actually this information is not very easy to get.'

Employee A [nodding]: You're right. But you know, that's part of the secret society which reigns here. This is anthropological theory. You create secrets if you refuse to communicate information. [Employee A pauses and looks at us.] It's as simple as that. The information can be

whatever. The sky is blue. The point is that you create power by withholding information.

Employee B [disagreeing]: Well, they do give you information. When I arrived, the first thing I did is ask for an organigram. And the administrative department [*Stabsstelle*] provided me with one.<sup>23</sup> But it takes a lot of time to understand what is *actually* going on, to grasp the conflicted constellations and relations [*Gemengelage*] of actors and interests. Still, and here I agree with you, one has to work oneself through. Despite the help and allies in the field, there are unwritten rules. The project has its own culture. There are rules which reproduce the institution. And institutions do also produce quite some botch [*Murks*].

Employee A [laughing in agreement]: Yes, one thing it produces is that actors within the Forum don't work target-orientated. I mean, they do of course pursue some sort of target, but not the target that they are supposed to pursue. Namely, that the Humboldt Forum becomes a success. They pursue their individual interests. It's not about the Humboldt Forum. And this is why I tell you, Margareta, what you can study really well here is demotivation. How to demotivate people. I am also completely demotivated. A meeting like the one today demotivates me. And then people do things that get on their nerves a little bit less.

Employee B: Yes, as I like to say: the consensus has settled into resignation. It actually feels as if you are jumping off a plane onto a huge terrain. But somehow, they didn't give you a compass and you don't have time to orientate; but you need to take decisions immediately! On basic principles that you can only guess at. And when you try to understand what's going on, you need to be careful not to waste your energy with all these many, many small things. Things with which you get entangled. Things that wear you out, in which you get caught, that make you run aground, that carry you off. And then the day is gone and no time is left to *really* work. There is a sediment of structural problems which has been dragged along. Either people leave, or they accommodate themselves to them. And these problems are so huge, no one dares to approach them. Every single employee here, with time, develops her own strategy. She secures herself in her own subsection, or subsubsection, with horse blinders. I think it does have something to do with the SPK's size, and with how single individuals carry way too much responsibility with way too little resources. But they handle it anyway because they think that they have to. I think that's one of the keys to understand the situation. Because

what this produces is resignation, and a lot of ‘as if’. You just pretend ‘as if’ you do the work, but everyone knows that you don’t do it. You serve the level of representation. You just satisfy the surface, the crust, the real work is not done. So the ‘as if’, in my opinion, is a big issue because the paradigm still is representation.

The employees’ analysis reflected findings from the anthropology of bureaucracy and work on organisations more generally, which challenge popular understandings of public organisations and bureaucracy. These popular readings see bureaucracy as the rule of the rationale, of objectivity, of neutrality, of impersonality, of professionalism, including the belief in centralised coordination and a basis in paper- and rule-based governance (Mathur, 2017). The employees’ reflections revealed the gap between what public administrations are imagined to achieve and what they actually produce. Max Weber described this gap as ‘irrationality’, a gap that may produce ‘absurdity’, to reference Nayanika Mathur’s accounts of state bureaucracy in rural India (2016, p. 2). Museum staff frequently described the organisational constellation in exactly these terms – ‘irrational’, ‘absurd’, or simply ‘diletante’ – sometimes with direct reference to Max Weber.

Another dimension of this gap concerns the ambiguity of bureaucratic procedures, as the ‘unwritten rules’ museum staff identified produced frustration, insecurity, or even anxiety. One prerequisite for these unwritten rules to work was the highly hierarchical setting. Decision-making processes, for example, were often made ‘from above’, without considering expertise from within; critique and suggestions were usually kept within one hierarchical strata, preventing it from reaching those addressed beyond the Museum (see chapter two on being affected).

At the same time, the gap left room for flexibility. This room to manoeuvre was limited, however, to those agents who know and have learned how to handle the internal procedures and processes, or to put it in one of the employees’ words, who have become part of the Museum’s ‘culture’.<sup>24</sup> The flexibility of the rules and regulations, then, articulated in the ways in which museum staff referred to how people seek and succeed in gaining and maintaining ‘power’ (manifest, for example, in acquiring additional financial resources, more exhibition space than others, etc.). At the same time, the lack of project planning as well as the lack of definitions of tasks and responsibilities prevented accountabilities being clearly defined. It seemed as if everyone could adapt their role as they wanted, including the responsibilities that the role entailed. This enabled museum staff on all levels to regularly delegate responsibilities ‘elsewhere’, usually to an undefined ‘above’, leaving questions unanswered and problems ignored, working with ‘horse blinkers’.

The phrase ‘we are all victims of the structures’ was indicative of the way of working in the Museum. The working conditions were at once difficult to handle, seemingly arbitrary (‘victims’), but as a consequence, offered the opportunity to not feel responsible or accountable.

What was depicted by employees as ‘structures’ can be understood as one of the reasons why the curatorial culture of the Ethnological Museum was maintained and reproduced. It was difficult to identify the distinction and demarcation of the SPK’s ‘work cultures’ – and in this particular case, the relation of ‘curatorial cultures’ – to its ‘structures’ and to understand how they reproduced each other through their entanglement. Difficult to make visible and to pin down, these entanglements between structure and culture continued to shape the Museum profoundly when it came to the maintenance of representational tropes as they impeded processes of change.

Put simply, if the structures don’t change, culture won’t change, and it is more difficult to do representations differently. Representations in ethnological museums are not only difficult to change because of established and regulated processes of how exhibitions are thought and produced in these museums. The maintenance of these cultures is facilitated, or rather, these cultures remain because of ‘structures’ predominant in the museum staff’s everyday. Beyond difficulties in engaging with the architectural, disciplinary, and conceptual framings of the Humboldt Forum, it is thus the organisational embeddedness, the ‘structures’, that shape museum work in profound ways.

## Conclusion

Just after quitting her post in Saxony and moving to head Cologne’s Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, the museum director Nanette Snoep declared in a public presentation at Berlin’s Technical University (12 November 2018) that

[a] museum doesn’t only conserve its objects, it also conserves itself. It freezes itself. Why is the ethnological museum still dominated by ahistorical discourses as if societies were unchangeable? Why are the museum’s and collection’s histories, the objects’ biographies not represented in the museum? And what role does the diaspora play in the Ethnological Museum?

Looking back at her own museum career, she wondered whether the museum could be seen as a sick patient. Had the state of health worsened or had it stagnated in the last few years? Was there even any hope of healing?

An understanding of the exhibition as single-authored, research-based, research-focused, and collection-centred shaped curatorial processes at the time in the Ethnological Museum; much has changed ever since (see timeline for ongoing collaborative research and exhibition practices). The curatorial cultures contributed to complicating or contradicting exhibition concepts aimed at change. If exhibiting continues to be seen as a practice of dialogue only between curators and collections, curators risk being trapped in the Museum's disciplinary frames. This is not an argument against expertise, but rather a suggestion to expand what counts as expertise and practising the exhibition process as the result of a constellation of expertise. This might help to break open these framings, as was suggested by Béatrice von Bismarck in her definition of 'exhibitions as collectives' of both human and non-human actors, thus defining the process and product of the curatorial as 'constellational' (von Bismarck & Rogoff, 2012, p. 24; von Bismarck, 2011, p. 183; 2012).

Returning to the metaphor of repair, the observations on culture and structure in particular reveal more clearly the restorative moment of repair. By repairing, one risks conserving; one risks bringing back into existence or using that which was deemed damaged or destroyed. Repair is a means to mend what has been damaged. By treating the fissure, it conceals the fractures underneath and in turn confirms the existent. So even if the ambitions to challenge representations had been realised, they would have inevitably and invariably contributed to confirming the contested constellations of access to resources, authority, and, ultimately, power. Repair can thus be a means to delegate, to distract from addressing the structural. It can become a means to paint or brush over without touching the root of the problem.

Situating the ethnological museum as a place of repair nevertheless suggests the museum's central role in contemporary society-making. It includes the belief in the museum as a democratic place for the working through of contested histories to better understand and situate complex presents, allowing these histories to be visible, to be addressed, and to be problematised. Wayne Modest proposed the metaphor of repair to imagine the museum as a place for productive discomfort, conflict, as well as hope (von Oswald, Soh Bejeng Ndikung, & Modest, 2017; see also Modest in von Oswald & Tinius, 2020). Conceived as a reconciliatory practice and approach, repair aims to keep the discomfort alive and to enable negotiations and conflicts to take place – accepting the wounds, without breaking them open again, leaving the injuries and scars visible. In this context, curating – in its etymological origin in 'taking care of' or even 'to cure' – can be defined as a means to engage in and contribute to processes of healing.

Repair as a practice is inherently ambivalent – between historical redress and healing, restoring and legitimising. The subject and object of repair

– what curators repair (the museum, its structures, relations?) and what the products of the process are – is sometimes not clear and might switch. This leaves some questions unresolved. In relation to the curation of ethnological collections, I wonder: can – and if so, how – exhibition making in ethnological museums be more than a response to its earlier wrongdoings, more than a reaction to critique? Is this even desirable? Or is it necessary to imagine other forms of enquiry, possibly working with and through the collections beyond exhibitions? With reference to questions of culture and structure, what kind of critique is possible within organisations such as the Humboldt Forum, which symbolically and conceptually confirm the critique that curatorial positions and strategies attempt to counter? Can the ethnological museum’s powerful trope of the right to exhibit and to represent otherness ever be broken, and if so, how to do so in a context in which some people believe that this right is still valid?

## Notes

1. The exhibition took place in the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, April–August 2012. The exhibition was the subject of an ethnography that I was doing for my master’s thesis (von Oswald, 2016).
2. This is a quotation from the transcription of the conversation, initiated by Sinzania Ravini, which took place in Paris between Okwui Enwezor, Françoise Vergès, Mikela Lundahl, and Nicolas Bourriaud, then director of the École des Beaux-Arts, at Nicolas Bourriaud’s apartment in the school, 21 April 2012.
3. Field notes from 3 February 2014.
4. Ordered by date of the interview: Julien Volper, Tervuren (Musée Royale de l’Afrique Centrale), 18 August 2015; Laura van Broekhoven, Leiden (Volkenkunde Museum Leiden), 11 December 2015; Nanette Snoep, Leipzig (Director Ethnographic Collections Saxony), 19 April 2016, Yaëlle Biro, New York City (Metropolitan Museum, New York City), 6 June 2016, Kevin Dumouchelle, New York City (Brooklyn Museum, New York City), 8 June 2016, Clémentine Deliss, Berlin (formerly Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main) 26 June 2017, Gaëlle Beaujean-Baltzer, Paris (Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris), 14 November 2017, Stefan Eisenhofer, Munich (Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich), 18 November 2016, Peter Junge (formerly Ethnologisches Museum Berlin) 19 and 25 January 2021.
5. The writings of bell hooks or Stuart Hall are just two, but crucial, examples of scholars focusing on analysing and grappling with representations of cultural identity, and Blackness in particular (see for example hooks 1990; Hall 1993).
6. Interview with Yaëlle Biro, 6 June 2016, at the Metropolitan Museum, interview with Kevin Douchemelle, 8 June 2016, at the Brooklyn Museum.
7. Talk of the curator’s ‘kingdoms’ is common in ethnological museums. I came across it several times during my stay in Berlin (field note from 27 November 2013), but interviews with Nanette Snoep, then director of the Ethnographic Collections of Saxony (2015), and Steven Engelsmans (2018), who had just retired from his director position at Vienna’s Weltkulturen Museum, confirm the term and practice in European museums more generally speaking.
8. The nine departments consist of the eight historically established regional departments listed on its website, complemented by ‘ethnomusicology’. These departments are South Seas and Australia; Africa; North Africa, Western and Central Asia; South and Southeast Asia; East and North Asia; North American ethnology; South American ethnology; American archaeology; and Ethnomusicology. In an internal organigram, both ‘Ethnomusicology’ and ‘Visual anthropology’ were separate from the eight, historically established specialist departments (*Fachreferate*). Visual anthropology was, however, not listed as one of the museum’s departments on the website, <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/about-the-collection.html>, consulted 5 June 2019.
9. The director, as part of the ‘concept group’, was responsible for reporting the museum’s development to the organisational superstructures of the SMB and the SPK, and communicating the ongoing processes and demands back to museum staff involved in the exhibition-making processes.
10. Interview with Peter Junge, 19 January 2021.
11. In November 2013, for example, in the first draft of the exhibition designs, the Drehbuch (‘script’), the three terms were to be filled with content for each exhibition section. However, in the ‘script’, most of these boxes were empty, including in König’s own exhibition concept. Another example consisted of the König’s vision of the Museum being ‘modular’ and ‘flexible’ in its exhibition set-up (König, 2012c, p. 127). However, the display cases would be fixed. Several meetings with the exhibition designers clearly

- showed how elaborate and immutable the exhibition cases would be. The relocation of 24,000 objects was calculated as a one-way move at the considerable cost of 29 million euros (Fahrin, 2016). This understanding of the objects' relocation also reinforced the separation between the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnological Museum, where the Humboldt Forum would serve as a permanent showcase for a collection that was kept on the city's outskirts, with low to no accessibility.
12. In early 2014, during my fieldwork, a desperate attempt to 'identify common threads' for the Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum, which would transcend individual exhibition projects was initiated by a group of curators, regardless of the fact that most curators had already handed in the final object lists for their respective exhibition concepts. After a few weeks and meetings, the initiative was abandoned. For an overview of the debates and developments of the concept, animated by formats such as the *Museumforum* (2002–2005), directed by Viola König and Navid Kermani, replaced by Horst Bredekamp in 2003; the exhibition *Anders zur Welt kommen* in 2009, which integrated exhibitions by each of the three players at the time; and the diverse public conferences and internal workshop or the international advisory board; see König (2012a; 2012b). In August 2019, the political opposition claimed that no concept has been agreed upon to this day (Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 1).
  13. See, for example, Hermann Parzinger's statement on sharing (Parzinger, 2016a; 2016b).
  14. Interview with Peter Junge, 19 January 2021.
  15. Education was a 'service' centrally organised and provided by the SMB's general directorate (*Generaldirektion*), see <https://www.smb.museum/en/education-and-outreach/profile.html>, consulted 29 May 2019.
  16. Field notes from an exhibition planning meeting, 6 March 2014.
  17. Even when the person responsible for BV was called to participate in several meetings after the draft had been dismissed by the 'the supervisory group' (*Steuerungsgruppe*) in February 2015, this was only 'last minute' (a few weeks before the final handing-in of the exhibition draft), with almost no impact on the outcome and the final exhibition draft.
  18. For an overview of the debates, see, for example, Hohenstein and Moussouri (2017).
  19. Selected writings on the topic include Hein (1999); Hooper-Greenhill (1999); Lindauer (2007); Wilson and O'Neill (2010); Mörsch (2009); Jaschke, Sternfeld, and in collaboration with Institute for Art Education, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (2012); Mörsch, Sachs, and Sieber (2017).
  20. <https://www.humboldtforum.com/en/pages/humboldt-forum>, consulted 28 February 2019.
  21. Field notes from a conversation, 25 April 2018.
  22. The conversation is assembled from different forms of exchanges (email, informal conversations, meetings) from 11 November 2013, 19 August 2014, 9 August 2017, 25 April 2018.
  23. Bettina Probst headed the *Stabsstelle* ('administrative department'), which was created in 2012 and funded by the SPK. Probst was responsible for the long-term planning of the Humboldt Forum concerning its content and design, as well as for cooperation with (future) project partners, with a focus on media, sponsoring, and education (Probst & Wegner, 2013, p. 115).
  24. For ethnographic interrogations on 'bureaucratic ambiguity', see Best (2012) for research conducted within the World Bank and the IMF, see Tuckett 2015).





# Conclusion



Figure 9.1 The stairs guiding to the exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art in the Humboldt Forum, announcing their future opening, 21 April 2021, photograph: Margareta von Oswald.

This book is – ultimately – about change. About change and the continuities within in. At the time of publishing this book, in 2022, almost a decade has passed since I spent time in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. At times it feels as if the field of ethnological museums, related discourses and practices have transformed entirely ever since. When I started my research in 2013, the German political landscape was marked by political *faux pas* and the breaking of diplomatic protocol when it came to the interaction with representatives and descendants of the formerly colonised, both in Germany's former colonies and in Germany. Public outcries and opposition to the Humboldt Forum dominated public debate. Demands to access, research and restitute collections were on the table, but remained publicly unaddressed by those in charge of the collections (No Humboldt 21!, 2013). The Forum's representatives routinely confirmed the collection's legal and legitimate status within the Ethnological Museum (Parzinger, 2011, p. 21).

Today, colonialism is politically and publicly acknowledged as an integral part of Germany's history. The remembrance and recognition of German colonialism was first announced, then anchored in the 2018 coalition contract (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018, pp. 154, 166, 169) as on a par with the remembrance of the SED dictatorship and the NS reign of terror (Koalitionsvertrag, 2018, p. 167). As I illustrate in the timeline that closes this book: museum collections, and the Humboldt Forum as the 'most important German cultural project of the twenty-first century' (Parzinger, 2011), served as central prisms to negotiate Germany's stance towards its colonial history. Public funds now prominently support research on colonialism and digital access to the collections (German Lost Art Foundation, 2019a; BPA, 2019). A 'contact point' has been set up to inform about colonial collections, facilitating potential requests for the restitution of museum objects (Kulturstiftung der Länder, 2020). As part of transnational policies of reconciliation, German museums engage in multiple projects of collaboration and processes of restitution. Felwine Sarr, co-author of the controversial 'restitution report', described Germany as one of the 'most progressive [nations] in Europe' when it comes to dealing with its colonial histories, and in particular where commitment to and implementation of restitution are concerned (Sarr & Savoy, 2018; Felwine Sarr in Bloch, 2019). The Humboldt Forum, for its part, is profiled to become a 'centre for postcolonial debate' (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2019; see also Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 9). These developments were framed by parallel debates and developments in other European contexts, indeed globally. In Berlin, they built on alliances and claims facilitated by the convergences between different organisations, initiatives and actors across the fields of politics, contemporary art, academia, activism, and museums (von Oswald & Tinius, 2020). These discourses, political decision-making processes, and

their organisational implementation point to the multifarious ways in which different histories understood as ‘difficult heritage’ (Macdonald, 2009) in Germany and the associated remembrance practices and memory politics start to relate, and risk competing.<sup>1</sup>

I first entered the Humboldt Forum in April 2021. It was a few months before the permanent exhibitions of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art would open, scheduled for September of the same year (see figure 9.1). The stairs indicated: ‘Soon: From Berlin to Africa in 3 minutes’; ‘At the top of the stairs is the South Pacific’; ‘Just 50 more steps to Asia’; ‘America? Take the escalator behind you’. In their essence, these statements captured the historical mission of ethnological museums. They perpetuated the self-entitlement of a Western organisation to represent, manage, and organise entire continents and regionally distinct cultures, and to make visitors access and experience these cultures, rebuilding boundaries between ‘Berlin’ and ‘the rest of the World’. This book questioned how much, and how, ethnological museums – grounded in colonial thought and conquest – can transform (themselves). What can and should their role be?

This research’s point of departure was to situate the ethnological museum itself as a colonial legacy. Whereas the museum has been recognised as a modern organisation and as an organisation that has contributed to the making of nations,<sup>2</sup> positioning ethnological museums as a colonial legacy might still cause irritation. To reduce the collections to being ‘colonial’ ignores, for instance, the fact that many of the objects, and more importantly the cultures and peoples who are at their origin, pre-date colonialism and have existed independently from colonial power structures. The historian Glenn Penny has stated that the ‘the role [of colonial interests] was neither the dominant nor the most important factor in the development’ of ethnological museums (Penny, 2002, p. 13). However, my focus on the Ethnological Museum as colonial legacy shifts attention to the Museum’s historical relations with and role within the colonial project, as well as its position towards the afterlives, echoes, and implications of these relations in the present. This positioning is thus an acknowledgement of the structuring factors that the colonial past continues to have on the present. Defining the Museum as colonial legacy then focuses on where and how its structuring effects manifest – as, indeed, they do in obvious and less obvious ways. Centrally and finally, viewing the Museum as colonial legacy has been an ethical choice. This understanding of the Museum has enabled me to explicitly point to the continuation of and dealing with racist and discriminatory aspects of contemporary life and work in a society shaped by its genealogy in colonialism.

The book focuses on the ways in which a pivotal Western organisation, grounded in and constituted through colonial governance, works through its

colonial pasts and presents. The Ethnological Museum in Berlin presented itself to think about Germany's relation to its colonial past in particular because its colonial legacies are undeniable. The colonial relations are materialised in the Museum's composition; the collections and their documentation are evidence of colonial exchange in its different and often violent forms. Only because of colonialism's material dimension, along with the strong representational tropes of the Humboldt Forum, could the discussion around German colonialism arise in such intensity and manifold forms during the period that the book covers – in a national context that has long been dominated by bypassing and ignoring the public remembrance and recognition of Germany's colonial past.

Investigating the ethnological museums' crisis, I approached the questions of change and transformation through an ethnography. I looked at how museum staff, in their everyday, worked with and through colonial collections. I was interested in understanding and probing how material and immaterial colonial legacies manifest, and what museum staff do when engaging with these legacies. What can ethnography do in such a context?

### **The colonial, the mundane**

My research focused on seemingly commonplace things and ordinary moments: repetitious filling out of databases, cleaning of showcases, putting things into cupboards, ordering chaos, tidying up, looking through documents, books. Dust, grids, labels, orders, names, computers, databases, boxes, files, chemicals, masks, gloves.

What is conceived as ordinary, habitual, common is no less significant and turned more and more political throughout the years. And my ethnography points not only to how the Ethnological Museum is grounded in its colonial past, but more importantly, how this very past weaves through and informs its present. Indeed, museum staff confront its remnants in their everyday, developing ideas and strategies to engage with those legacies. Even if they identify and confront the Museum's colonial genealogy head-on, processes of engaging with colonial legacies is far from linear and clearly defined. Museum work in ethnological museums is characterised by a constant risk of reinscribing and reproducing the exact mechanisms and asymmetries one wishes to dismantle. Those working in the Ethnological Museum have been both active participants in addressing, laying open and engaging with the museum's colonial legacies while, at the same time, reproducing, maintaining, and affirming them, even if involuntarily.

In this book, I show how current knowledge production and museum practices are based on and continue to be shaped by parameters that date to the Ethnological Museum's foundation in the nineteenth century. Working through means engaging with the diverse strata of coloniality in the Museum; strata of long-standing patterns of power, established structures and practices derived from colonial governance and knowledge production which still act on the organisation's present. The challenges and contradictions inherent in the reckoning with colonial legacies through the Museum's everyday – touching upon the very words, material orderings, and interactions and work processes in the Museum – show the irreversible grounding of our contemporary worlds in the colonial past.

### **The museum as peopled organisation**

People who work through the Ethnological Museum's colonial histories and legacies make the collections accessible: they inventory objects, create museum storages, research and document the collection's histories, expand the database and its content. Museum staff, including myself, curated exhibitions with the aim to be (self-)critical and collaborative. We worked through layers of colonial traces and their current reverberations.

Doing an ethnography necessarily relies on working with individuals. It is common in museum histories to foreground the role of the museum's founders, its collectors, and curators. However, those who work behind the scenes, such as the storage manager, the database manager, and the conservator, generally go unnoticed and undocumented. I regard the Ethnological Museum as a 'peopled organisation' (Morse, Rex, & Richardson, 2018, p. 116). Seeing the Museum as peopled counters understandings of the museum as homogeneous, faceless, and anonymous. It emphasises how museum staff contribute to, resist, and produce the museum.

In the book, by depicting their personal, passionate engagement with the collections, I highlighted the crucial role that individuals and their subjectivities play in the museum's constant processes of becoming, countering their usual role as 'footnotes of history' (Miller, 2010, p. 50). The focus on people and their practices was also necessary to inspect the Museum's recent history. Organisational knowledge has only partly been documented, and is rather incorporated by the people working in the Museum, some of whom have been working in the organisation for several decades. It is only by working with museum staff that I was able to comprehend, trace, and document these histories – histories that crucially shape the organisation, but are also subject to rapid change in the context of organisational restructuring. Ways

of knowing and being in the Museum are passed on and constructed through personal interaction in the organisation and are thus only graspable via an oral history and an ethnography of its practices and long-term engagement with employees.

Writing about individuals and their efforts also shows that there is only so much one can do. In the Ethnological Museum, there was no shortage of innovation and visions of change, devotion or even self-sacrifice to the Museum's well-being and success. However, grand political gestures and symbolic architectural framings, organisational hierarchies and decision making, the structure of funding, curatorial cultures and work routines limited and impaired individual agency in the attempts to change, and even more so, to structurally transform the Ethnological Museum.

### **Working through colonial collections**

Models for structural change in ethnological museums exist, and are practiced. In Germany, Clémentine Deliss, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch and Nanette Jacomijn Snoep, to name just three museum directors, engaged in the attempt to systematically transform the organisations they have been heading. These attempts have included measures to radically open museum structures, such as encouraging work in the museums' storages and archives. The three directors have fostered access to the documentation of collections and their archives, developed different methodological approaches to curatorial work and research, and have invited numerous people to work with in order to change the meanings of the museum's collections. Finally, they have encouraged to rethink the ethnological museum's role, both in German society as well as in the places that the collections relate these museums to. Nevertheless, as the book shows, change in ethnological museums is only possible to a certain extent. The colonial past impacts the present, and its remnants and afterlives force us to reckon, and live with it.

Thinking about change, this book finishes with an invitation to further engage in the interminable, difficult, and contradictory work that the reckoning with colonial collections requests. In Germany, the claims for the recognition of colonial pasts and imperial histories have been closely linked to developments and debates on Germany's self-understanding as a 'migration society' (*Einwanderungsgesellschaft*) witnessing the rise of right-wing presence in its political landscape along right-wing extremism and racist terrorism. Working through colonial collections is thus always as much about difficult pasts as it is about difficult presents. As places of 'critical discomfort' (Modest, 2020), ethnological museums mirror in their

interdependence with colonial governance the tensions, frictions, and interrogations that characterise our living together today; entanglements which structure our contemporary societies and that remain overlooked by many, and unrecognised by most. Confronting the resistance to and repression of difficult memories and histories, this book invites us to acknowledge, remember, and work through the colonial past, with the hope to live otherwise, and more justly, in the present.<sup>3</sup>



## Notes

1. With the public recognition of German colonial history, its relationship to and the general position of Holocaust and National Socialist remembrance has become more central. Relationships between provenance research related to both regimes has started to solidify since an initial conference in Munich in 2017 (Förster et al., 2018), and has been institutionalised with the creation of the colonial-era-focused branch of the German Lost Art Foundation. However, the need to politically position the Holocaust as ‘without precedent and incomparable’ in Germany remains prominent (Kultusminister Konferenz, 2019, p. 3).
2. For the modern museum, see, for example, Hooper-Greenhill (1992) and Bennett (1995), and for the relationship between modernism and colonialism, see, for example, Quijano (2007) and Mignolo (2011).
3. This is a nod to Jacques Derrida’s invitation to ‘learn to live with ghosts’ (1994, pp. xvii–xviii).

# Timeline

This timeline functions as a rough indicator of the political, social, and cultural developments concerning the Humboldt Forum, the Ethnological Museum, and the negotiation of German colonialism in Germany from its foundation stone ceremony in 2013 until the physical opening of the Museum of Asian Art and Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum in the autumn of 2021. The timeline is inspired and informed by the work of No Humboldt 21!, who provided very useful timelines both on their website (see ‘Comments: Politics; Comments: Press’) and in the publication *No Humboldt 21! Dekoloniale Einwände gegen das Humboldt-Forum* (2017). The anthropologist’s Larissa Förster’s efforts to chronicle the debates on the transformation of ethnological museums in Europe, and in the German-speaking context in particular, are also a major source of information here. Förster regularly sent around a ‘digest’, an informal mailing list, which included lists of the most prominent articles in Germany and Europe with regards to colonial collections. This digest made its way into the ‘Media Review on Museums’ on the website of the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage; the digest traces debates from 2017 till 2020 and is still accessible.

This timeline is my personal selection and not exhaustive. It brings together positions from activist, political, and cultural agents, focusing on developments in Berlin. It only covers national or international events if I considered them to be of major importance for the field in Germany, such as central nominations, restitutions, or the release of ‘guidelines’. The timeline does not include those requests by activists and politicians concerned with human remains.

## 2013

- 3 June 2013: No Humboldt 21! publish their moratorium, the resolution ‘Stop the planned construction of the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace!’ (No Humboldt 21!, 2013).
- 12 June 2013: The foundation stone of the *Schloss* is laid (Haubrich, 2013; Schaper, 2013).
- 28 June 2013: Brief enquiry of the member of the Berlin House of Representatives Clara Herrmann (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), requesting information about the definition of the ‘legality’ and ‘legitimacy’ of collections acquired in colonial contexts, as well as the state of the arts concerning provenance research of the Ethnological Museum (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2013a).
- 16 November 2013: Preview and inauguration of the exhibition *Anti-Humboldt-Box*, organised by Artefakte//anti-humboldt (Brigitta Kuster, Regina Sarreiter, Dierk Schmidt) and AFROTAK TV cyber-Nomads (Michael Küppers-Adebisi), in cooperation with Andreas Siekmann and Ute Klissenbauer. The exhibition travelled ever since, and has been shown in locations such as in the August Bebel Institut (2013), the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (2013), Galerie Scriptings (2013–2014), the Villa Romana Florence (2015), the Goethe-Institut Johannesburg (2016), and in Berlin’s Kronprinzenpalais during the Steirischer Herbst (2017).
- 18 November 2013: A special issue of the internet journal *darkmatter*, edited by Artefakte//anti-humboldt is released. *Afterlives* brings together discussions and scholarly analysis regarding the politics of representation, restitution, and historiography, all in relation to the Humboldt Forum (Artefakte//anti-humboldt, 2013).
- 2 December 2013: Session of the Committee for Cultural Affairs on ‘Current State of the Conception and Development of the „Humboldt-Forum“ (upon request of the party group Bündnis 90/Die Grünen)’ (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2013b).
- 4 December 2013: Activists from the associations Tanzania Network, Berlin Postkolonial, and UWATAB address the SPK: ‘Request on the

State of the Collection of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and particularly of the Ethnological Museum Berlin and the Museum of Pre- and Early History' (Prosinger, Mboro, & Kisalya, 2013).

**13–16 December 2013:** Press releases of the Central Council of the African Community in Germany, No Humboldt 21!, and the Initiative Black People in Germany, opposing the idea to create a Nelson Mandela Square in front of the Humboldt Forum (No Humboldt 21! & ISD, 2013; Zentralrat der Afrikanischen Gemeinde in Deutschland, 2013)

**17 December 2013:** Inauguration of the conservative politician Monika Grütters (CDU) as Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in a grand coalition of CDU and SPD under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel (Bundesregierung, 2013).

**2014**

- **16 January 2014:** The SPK's director of the presidential department, Dorothea Kathmann, responds briefly and without detail in an email to the request of the activists (cf. 4 December 2013), neglecting precise questions concerning the collections' origins and denying the existence of human remains in the SPK's collections (Kathmann, 2014).
- **29 January 2014:** Monika Grütters (CDU) holds her inaugural speech as Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in the German parliament. In it, she highlights in ten points why she is a 'passionate defendant' of the Humboldt Forum (Grütters, 2014a).
- **12 February 2014:** Activists from the associations Tanzania Network and Berlin Postkolonial contest the vague answers in Kathmann's answer (cf. 16 January 2014) and insist on the existence of a collection of human remains in SMB in an open letter (Prosinger & Mboro, 2014).
- **5 March 2014:** Answer from the president of the SPK Hermann Parzinger regarding the open letter from the Tanzania Network (cf. 12 February 2014). In the letter, Parzinger gives an account of the state of research on the collections, acknowledges the existence of human remains in Berlin's Museum of Prehistory and Early History, and invites representatives of the associations to a conversation as well as to visit of the storage spaces at the Ethnological Museum (Parzinger, 2014).
- **11 March 2014:** Answer from the Berlin Senate to the brief enquiry of Member of the House of Deputies Clara Herrmann (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) on 12 February 2014: 'The Senate continues to plead for the examination of the provenance of objects which ended up in museums or other institutions during the colonial period via respective research projects'. (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2014).
- **3 November 2014:** Answer from Monika Grütters, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, to the brief enquiry of the party group Bündnis 90/Die Grünen on 9 October 2014 regarding the topic of the 'Cultural Usage of the Humboldt-Forum': 'To the knowledge of the Federal Government, the museums will take into account the current debates around the history of their own collections, colonial contexts, and provenance research' (Grütters, 2014b).

- **15 November 2014:** Opening of the exhibition, curated by Simon Njami, *Wir sind alle Berliner: 1884–2014*. A commemoration of the Berlin Congo Conference at Savvy Contemporary, including an expansive discursive programme.
- **8 December 2014:** After a long planning process, the SPK's president Hermann Parzinger and the curator Peter Junge cancel the event *Fenster zur Welt oder koloniale Trophäenschau? Das Humboldt-Forum in der Diskussion* ('Window to the world or colonial trophy exhibition? Discussing the Humboldt Forum') at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt one week before it was supposed to take place. The panel was to include themselves, representing the Humboldt Forum, and the academics and activists Grada Kilomba, Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III, and Joashua Kwesi Aikins. No Humboldt 21! interpret the move as a 'refusal to dialogue'. They publish the SPK's press department's cancellation: the SPK had accused the organisers of 'phrases of accusation, defamation, and unbearable populism' in their announcement of the event (No Humboldt 21!, 2014a).
- **17 December 2014:** No Humboldt 21! issues the press release 'Germany has to restitute human remains and loot from Cameroon, Togo, Tansania, and Rwanda'. It includes a list, with specific numbers, of human remains and what is referred to as 'war booty' in the collection (*Kriegsbeute*), which the activists had researched by accessing the museum's online database SMB digital via keywords, as well as via archival research. The request concerns the Ethnological Museum's collections in particular (No Humboldt 21!, 2014b).

## 2015

January 2015: The anthropologist Nanette Snoep leaves Paris' musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac to direct the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony, with its museums in Leipzig, Dresden, and Herrenhut.

5 January 2015: Answer from Monika Grütters, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, to the written request by Member of Parliament Özcan Mutlu (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) about colonial loot and human remains in the museum storage of the SPK and the SMB:

The government and the Prussian Heritage Foundation (SPK) hold that no unlawfully acquired objects in the collections of the State Museums Berlin should be preserved, independent from the time periods they stem from. This applies to Nazi-looted art as well as displaced art and cultural artefacts due to war; to collections purloined by the GDR regime; but also to objects stemming from colonial contexts of injustice or to objects from illicit archaeological diggings. (Deutscher Bundestag, 2015)

26 March 2015: The SPK releases the 'Statement regarding the approach of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) to handling human remains in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) collections' (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2015a).

March 2015: The Rhodes Must Fall protests at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, begin, requesting the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes. They become a central reference for further protests that address racism within higher education, in particular in universities in South Africa, the UK, and the USA.

08 April 2015: Monika Grütters's first important intervention in the Humboldt Forum's organisational structure is to nominate the founding directorship (*Gründungsintendanz*) in April 2015, which becomes the Humboldt Forum's public face. The directorship consists of Hermann Parzinger, representing the SPK; the art historian Horst Bredekamp, representing Humboldt University; and Neil MacGregor, formerly the director of the British Museum. Neil MacGregor's

intervention in the exhibition plans are pronounced and logistically supported and financially realised by the company Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH (2016–2018), a firm created explicitly for the purpose.

**18 May 2015:** For the first time, Hermann Parzinger publicly profiles the Humboldt Forum as dealing with Germany's colonial history. In an article titled 'Berlin's rebuilt Prussian palace to address long-ignored colonial atrocities' in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Parzinger announces that the Humboldt Forum's permanent exhibition would deal with the Maji Maji war (Scaturro, 2015), a position that he would continue to espouse until the Humboldt Forum's opening (see, for example, Parzinger, 2017).

**May 2015:** Clémentine Deliss is dismissed without notice as director of the Museum der Weltkulturen Frankfurt.

**9 June 2015:** The SPK releases the document 'The Non-European Collections of the State Museums Berlin – Statements of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation on their Handling and Provenance Research' (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2015b), of which no English translation exists until today.

**12 June 2015:** In a press release, No Humboldt 21! criticises the 'Statements of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation on their Handling and Provenance Research'. They interpret the statements as an avoidance of returns, or, as they put it, 'a dubious manoeuvre to preserve unlawful property' (No Humboldt 21!, 2015b).

**9 September 2015:** Paul Spies is nominated to head the exhibition about Berlin in the Humboldt Forum. Spies also becomes the director of the Stiftung Stadtmuseum (City Museum Foundation) (Brockschmidt, 2015).

**18 October 2015:** The Humboldt Lab Dahlem closes its last exhibitions. Initiated by the German Federal Cultural Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes) in cooperation with the SPK, the project aimed to find ways of engaging with the collections of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art with view to their exhibitions' move to the Humboldt Forum. It featured more than thirty projects throughout its seven 'rehearsal stages' (*Probepöhlen*) and workshops (Humboldt Lab Dahlem, 2015).



## 2016

**February 2016:** The project Tanzania–Germany: Shared Object Histories (2016–2021) begins. The aim is to do collaborative provenance research on the Ethnological Museum’s Tanzanian collections, which consisted of approximately ten thousand objects. Funded by the Prussian Cultural Heritage Board of Trustees (*Kuratorium*), an association of leading German businesses, the project focuses on objects that were acquired ‘through violent appropriation and colonial wars’ (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2016a).

The project The Humboldt Lab Tanzania (2016–2018) also starts. It intends to work through issues related to colonial war booty, together with artists, scholars, and communities in Tanzania (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2016a; see also Ivanov, Weber-Sinn, & Reyels, 2018). The project leads to the signature of a memorandum of understanding between the University of Dar es Salaam and the SPK, which intends to guarantee the long-term cooperation between German and Tanzanian national institutions.

**18 July 2016:** The German Federal Republic recognises that ‘the war of annihilation [against the Nama and Herero people in the colonial German South West Africa] [...] from 1904 to 1908 was a war crime and genocide’ (Bundesregierung, 2016). The recognition would only be partial, because ‘retrospective legal claims’ would not apply. As the government stated, ‘notions of “reparation” and “reconciliation” (*Wiedergutmachung*) would not apply in this context’.

**14 October 2016:** Exhibition opening: *German Colonialism: Fragments Past and Present*, in the German Historical Museum in Berlin, 14 October 2016–14 May 2017.

**2017**

- **1 January 2017:** The Ethnological Museum in Dahlem closes its doors to the public.
- **27 March 2017:** The plan to move the collections to the external museum storage Friedrichshagen are officially suspended. Instead, the idea of a ‘research campus’ (*Forschungscampus*) suggests that collections will mostly stay in Dahlem. A cooperation with the Freie Universität, the museum’s neighbour, is set up (Ossowski, 2017).
- **7–8 April 2017:** For the first time, the conference Provenance Research In Ethnological Collections of the Colonial Period brings together scholars working on provenance research across the fields of the National Socialist and colonial periods, putting the topic on a wider academic agenda.
- **20 July 2017:** Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian based at Berlin’s Technical University, leaves the Humboldt Forum’s advisory board. With her demand that there should be an unveiling of ‘how much blood drips from each artwork’, she refers to the provenance of collections acquired in colonial contexts (Häntzschel, 2017a).
- **2 September 2017:** The Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, confirms that Germany has ‘cared little about colonialism for a long time’. She promises funding for research on colonialism, defining it to be a ‘national task’ (Monika Grütters in Schaper, 2017).
- **25 October 2017:** Reopening of Vienna’s Weltmuseum Wien.
- **28 November 2017:** In Ouagadougou, the French president Emmanuel Macron announces his wish to return museum objects from French public collections to France’s former colonies in Africa (Macron, 2017). With the French president’s subsequent and immediate promise to return twenty-six objects to the Republic of Benin, the political and legal argument in favour of restitution and reparation in Germany gains more legitimacy.

16 December 2017: In December 2017, the founding directorship of the Humboldt Forum is replaced with a new organisational and administrative structure. This new structure consists of a leadership system of ‘four pillars’, plus the directorate (*Generalintendanz*): administration, collections (including Museum of Site), Humboldt Academy (education), and programming (responsibility of the Humboldt Forum’s *Intendant*, or director, in cooperation with the state of Berlin) (Zawatka-Gerlach, 2017). Monika Grütters creates and appoints two further leadership positions: the director of collections (*Sammlungsdirektor*), merging the directorship of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, and the general director (*Generalintendant*).

18 December 2017: Addressing the German chancellor Angela Merkel, Berlin Postkolonial publishes an open letter on the subject of the restitution of cultural objects and human remains from Africa. Numerous organisations, institutions, and private persons sign the open letter (Kopp & Mboro, 2017).

## 2018

- 16 February 2018: Hermann Parzinger calls for international guidelines akin to the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art to help museums handle provenance research and repatriation of illegally acquired colonial heritage in public collections (Hickley, 2018).
- 12 March 2018: The German government's coalition contract (*Koalitionsvertrag*) is settled. The coalition contract suggests to reinforce cooperation with Africa, 'especially by working through colonialism as well as the construction of museums and cultural organisations in Africa' (*Koalitionsvertrag*, 2018, p. 154); to put the remembrance of the SED dictatorship in the GDR (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*; Socialist Unity Party of Germany), the National Socialist reign of terror, and the German colonial history on the same level (*Koalitionsvertrag*, 2018, p. 166); and to prioritise provenance research concerning colonial museum collections in Germany (*Koalitionsvertrag*, 2018, p. 169). It also includes the aim 'to adapt [the SPK] to the requirements of a modern cultural industry with international appeal', including an evaluation by the Science Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*) and a subsequent 'general reform' of the SPK (*Koalitionsvertrag*, 2018, p. 169).
- 6 March 2018: The French president Emmanuel Macron commissions the art historian Bénédicte Savoy and the economist Felwine Sarr to research the framework of possible restitutions of collections to Africa (Terp, 2018).
- 19 and 20 March 2018: The SPK's foundation board (*Stiftungsrat*) appoints the music ethnologist Lars-Christian Koch to become director of collections (*Sammlungsleiter*) at the Humboldt Forum, heading both the Ethnological Museum's and the Museum for Asian Art. Formerly curator and interim director at the Ethnological Museum, Koch thinks 'colonialism will be the topic of the years to come' (Jöbstl & Mathey, 2018). Hartmut Dorgerloh, former director of the Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation (*Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg*), is announced as the general director (*Generalintendant*) of the Humboldt Forum (Kilb, 2018). With the taking of office of Hartmut Dorgerloh, the founding directorship

(*Gründungsintendanz*: Neil MacGregor, Hermann Parzinger, Horst Bredekamp) dissolves.

• **23 April 2018:** Gorch Pieken is appointed to lead the curatorial team responsible for making an exhibition with the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2018).

• **26 and 28 April 2018:** In two key interviews, Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, positions the Humboldt Forum. She describes it as the 'nation's business card' (*Visitenkarte der Nation*) in a conversation with Hermann Parzinger (quoted in Mangold & Timm, 2018) and states that it is 'above all thanks to the Humboldt Forum that colonialism has been put on the political agenda', attesting that it has 'operated like a catalyst, even before its opening' (quoted in Ringelstein, 2018).

• **May 2018:** Publication of the first version of the 'Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts' by the Deutscher Museumsbund (German Museum Association, 2018). In the document, representatives of the legal department of the SPK and the Dresden State Art Collections confirm that '[t]he current legal [system] [...] does not provide suitable instruments for deciding ownership issues surrounding acquisitions from colonial contexts' and that it was 'very questionable' that the 'political will' both on the national and international level existed to conceive such legal instruments (Thielecke & Geißdorf, 2018, p. 71).

• **9 September 2018:** Under the new directorship of Barbara Plankensteiner, Hamburg's Museum für Völkerkunde changes its name to MARKK (Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt) (Fengler, 2018).

• **12 October 2018:** Representatives of the Länder and the federal government agree that the Länder, together with the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media and municipal umbrella organisations (*kommunalen Spitzenverbänden*) will set up a working group on dealing with collections from colonial contexts. This will include cooperation with the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the German Museums Association (Bundesregierung, 2018).

**21 November 2018:** Publication of the restitution report entitled ‘The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics’. Its authors, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, propose to change the French *code du patrimoine* to circumvent the collection’s protection by the principle of inalienability (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 67). They also request the reversal of the burden of proof, which means that the museums would be charged to evidence that the collections were acquired with ‘consent’ (*consentement*), and the claimant parties will not be obliged to prove its illegal acquisition (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, pp. 39–40). These suggestions opposed and contrasted the official positions voiced by most Western museums up to this point and caused controversy in both academia and public debate (Elysee, 2018). For first reactions on the report in politics and the media, see von Oswald (2018).

**8 December 2018:** The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium’s Tervuren opens its doors as the ‘AfricaMuseum’ after several years of substantial renovation and redesign (Marshall, 2018).

**15 December 2018:** The Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, and the Minister of State at the Federal Foreign Office, Michelle Müntefering, state that ‘Germany and Europe need to face their colonial history. The restitution of cultural artefacts is just the beginning’, asking ‘How can museums and collections justify having objects from colonial contexts in their collections, whose transfer to Germany contradicts our value system of today?’ (Grütters & Müntefering, 2018)

## 2019

- 1 January 2019: Nanette Snoep is appointed director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum für Völkerkunde in Cologne and leaves Leipzig, Dresden, and Herrnhut, where she directed the State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony since 2015.
- 13 January 2019: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs commits to the foundation of an 'Agency for International Museum Cooperation', with 8 million euros for 2019 alone, with a focus on the nourishing of 'capacity building and improvement' within museums, the 'exchange of curators and objects', as well as to 'read between the lines, an acceleration of restitution processes', all with a regional focus on Africa (Zekri, 2019).
- 01 February 2019: Léontine Meijer-van Mensch starts her position as the new director of the State Ethnographic Collections in Saxony, following Nanette Jacomijn Snoep. She is now director of the respective museums in Leipzig, Dresden, and Herrnhut.
- 04 February 2019: The German Lost Art Foundation establishes a branch that focuses on colonial-era provenance research – in an organisation originally founded 'in order to aid the search for cultural assets and especially those of Jewish provenance which were illegally obtained through Nazi persecution' (German Lost Art Foundation, 2019a; BPA, 2019).
- 28 February 2019: The Land of Baden-Württemberg and the Linden-Museum Stuttgart restitute the whip and the Bible of Namibia's national hero Hendrik Witbooi to Namibia (Linden-Museum Stuttgart, 2019).
- 06 March 2019: The Humboldt Forum is profiled to become a 'centre for postcolonial debate' (Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2019; see also Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 9).
- 07 March 2019: The confederation of Dutch ethnological museums publishes the 'Principles and Process for Addressing Claims for the Return of Cultural Objects' (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, 2019).

- **13 March 2019:** Definition of framework principles (*Eckpunkte*) on how to deal with collections from colonial contexts by both political representatives of the national government and the cultural ministers of the Länder in March 2019 (Kultusminister Konferenz, 2019).
- **26 March 2019:** The European Parliament publishes a rather unnoticed statement in favour of restitution, in the context of the ‘redress for past injustices and crimes against humanity – bearing in mind their lasting impacts in the present – against people of African descent’ (European Parliament, 2019).
- **3 April 2019:** Official hearing of ‘experts’ in the German national parliament who agree that ‘the return of objects from colonial contexts in German museums to the societies of origin can only succeed in a joint process with all parties involved’ (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019a; see also Fraktion Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, 2019; Fraktion FDP, 2019).
- **6 May 2019:** On the occasion of the 2019 Annual Conference of the Directors of Ethnographic Museums in German-Speaking Countries, the group publishes the Heidelberg Statement, claiming that ‘decolonising requires dialogue, expertise and support’ (Heidelberger Stellungnahme, 2019).
- **17 May 2019:** The German Historical Museum restitutes the Stone Cross of the Cape Cross to Namibia (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2019).
- **4 July 2019:** After the idea of a ‘research campus’ (*Forschungscampus*) emerged in 2017, advances to support the research campus are made: in July 2019, the results of a ‘potential assessment’ (*Potenzialanalyse*) are published by an architectural firm and partly made public. The SMB announces the anthropologist Alexis von Poser as the research campus’s director at the same time (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2019a). The Museum for Asian Art and the Ethnological Museum are subsequently co-directed by Christian Koch and Alexis von Poser as deputy director.
- **22 August 2019:** A brief enquiry by the Green Party in the German parliament about the conditions of museum storages in Germany is responded to in the press (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019b). In the article,



‘Contaminated, Corroded, Flooded’ (*Verseucht, zerfressen, überflutet*), the journalist Jörg Häntzschel describes the conditions of museum storage in German ethnological museums, particularly in Berlin, as ‘administrative emergencies’. Referring to the museum storage’s current operation as ‘passive de-collecting’, he criticises what he understands as a lack of transparency concerning the state of conservation of the collections, which are ‘to say the least, not ideal’ but rather, ‘catastrophic’ (Häntzschel, 2019a); the politician Monika Grütters responds to this critique (Häntzschel, 2019b).

- **18 September 2019:** Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures (2019–2021): this official partnership is launched between the Ethnological Museum Berlin and the Museums Association of Namibia (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2019; see also Stienen & Bahr, 2019; Stienen, 2020).

- **23 September 2019:** *Öffnet die Inventare!* becomes a public appeal demanding physical and digital access to German museum collections in a context in which parts of the collections have not been inventoried and public online access to the collections is highly restricted (*Öffnet die Inventare!*, 2019).

- **November 2019:** Four provenance researchers are employed at Berlin’s Central Archive on a permanent basis to research the provenance of the collections in the Ethnological Museum and Museum of Asian Art.

- **12 November 2019:** The focus on ‘collections from colonial contexts’ (*Sammlungsgut aus kolonialen Kontexten*) is institutionalised with the foundation of unit K 56 (*Referat K56*) as part of the protection of cultural property of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters. Unit K56 is part of the subsection on basic questions of cultural politics, protection of cultural property, and monuments (*Grundsatzfragen der Kulturpolitik, Denkmal- und Kulturgutschutz*).

- **12 November 2019:** The US-American George Soros’s Open Society announces to ‘strengthen efforts to restore cultural objects looted from the African continent’ with 15 million USD over four years, ‘support[ing] networks and organisations working to return Africa’s heritage to its rightful home’ (Open Society, 2019).

## 2020

- **31 January 2020:** In Berlin, a funding scheme of 3 million euros from the city and the German Federal Cultural Foundation (*Kulturstiftung des Bundes*) will address colonial heritage broadly speaking – working together, and thus further institutionalising, the programme of activists in Berlin’s case and funded with a total sum of 3 million euros. It includes a cooperation between Berlin’s City Museum, the City of Berlin, and several NGOs, including Berlin Postkolonial, Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD), and Each One Teach One (Barthels, 2020).
- **12 February 2020:** Implementation of the funding scheme by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the ‘creative industry’ in Africa with 15 million euros, including the funding of ‘museum work and especially the working through [*Aufarbeitung*] of the colonial past’ (BMZ, 2020).
- **March 2020:** The working group (*Arbeitsgruppe*) Colonial Provenances, founded in 2018 as a result of the 2017 provenance conference in Munich (cf. April 2017), lists over forty projects of what they frame as ‘postcolonial provenance research’ on their website <https://www.post-colonial-provenance-research.com/ag-projekte/>
- **28 May 2020:** A golden cross is placed on the Humboldt Forum’s cupola, causing a virulent debate. The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum is formed on the occasion.
- **June and July 2020:** In Berlin and across Germany, protesters support the Black Lives Matter movement in several, large demonstrations.
- **12 June 2020:** Different activists, including Mwazulu Diyabanza, try to dislodge a funeral pole in the musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac in Paris. Going through several trials, the activists continue to attempt to take objects from other European museums throughout 2020 and 2021 (Willsher, 2021).
- **1 July 2020:** Emmanuel Kasarhérou is appointed the director for the musée du quai Branly–Jacques Chirac.

- **13 July 2020:** The German Wissenschaftsrat recommends a fundamental reorganisation of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Wissenschaftsrat, 2020).
- **3 August 2020:** Germany launches the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts, which is supposed to ‘help societies of origin and other parties obtain information about colonial-era art collections’ (Kulturstiftung der Länder, 2020). It follows up on the cornerstones agreed upon by *Bund* and *Länder* (cf. 13 March 2019, Kultusminister Konferenz).
- **Summer 2020:** Foundation of BARAZANI.berlin – Forum for Anti-Colonialism and Resistance, a site for virtual exhibitions and programming, is dedicated to opposition to the Humboldt Forum. It emerged from the working group on Museums and Collections of the alliance Decolonize Berlin.
- **16 December 2020:** Digital opening of the Humboldt Forum.
- **22 September 2021:** Opening of the Museum of Asian Art and Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum.

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