

Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit

Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte

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Das Buch versammelt die Beiträge zur gleichnamigen Tagung am 7./8. April 2017 – veranstaltet von der AG Museum der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie (DGSKA) und dem Museum Fünf Kontinente, München. Herausgeberinnen und Autor_innen behandeln darin u.a. die Frage nach einer sinnvollen Systematisierung und Institutionalisierung von postkolonialer Provenienzforschung, nach internationaler Vernetzung, insbesondere zu den Herkunftsländern und -gesellschaften, und stellen aktuelle Forschungs- und Ausstellungsprojekte zum Thema vor.

The book collects the contributions to the conference of the same name that took place on 7th/8th April 2017, and was organised by the Working Group on Museums of the German Anthropological Association and the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich. Editors and authors discuss issues such as meaningful systematization and institutionalization of postcolonial provenance research, international networking and collaboration, in particular with regards to source countries and communities, and present current research and exhibition projects on the subject.

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The »Africa Accessioned Network«

Do museum collections build bridges or barriers?

Jeremy Silvester

In present-day Namibia it is difficult to locate many historical artefacts that embody the cultural identity of communities. Our museum displays include many photographs that reflect the cultural heritage of local communities, but few artefacts from the pre-colonial and colonial period. Yet these objects have been collected and, often, archived (rather than displayed) in museums beyond the African continent. In my encounters with the storage warehouses of German museums I feel that I am diving amongst icebergs of artefacts: perhaps 5% of their collections are on display and visible on the surface, whilst the other 95% remain hidden on shadowy storage shelves. [fig. 1]

The internet has now given Namibians some access to this scattered »virtual museum« of Namibian cultural heritage. The over-ambitious aim of the suggestively titled »Africa Accessioned« project was to locate and list the objects held in the diaspora of African ethnographic collections in European museums. Our aim is to create a tool that can be used to make links between collections and communities in order to generate dialogue and provoke collaborative projects. We see the project as a concept that has the potential to be extended, although it is currently a network that operates with very limited financial resources. However, technology means that at this stage the creation of a conversational network of curators and the exchange of information that enables us to create a more detailed map of collections of material culture from Namibia is achievable – and the network has been gradually expanding.

The »Africa Accessioned« project is not a campaign for the repatriation of all African artefacts to the continent, but it will initiate debate about the provenance and significance of artefacts. We believe that the willingness to review collections and to address the past is essential to stimulate inter-cultural dia-



[fig. 1] Examining Namibian objects in the collection of the ethnographic museum in Berlin. One of the challenges that the project faces is that the old conservation techniques historically used in many German museums involved substances that are now considered hazardous. © Larissa Förster.

logue and lead to positive co-operation. We believe that the collections held in European museums are entangled with histories of collecting and circulation. Museums need to engage with this fact, but we believe that museums should see the resulting dialogue as an opportunity, rather than a threat.

It is possible to mark the exact date that the concept of »Africa Accessioned« was born. It was Tuesday, 28th August 2012. On that day I visited the Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich with my colleague, Dr Martha Akawa, the Head of the History Department at the University of Namibia. The museum had an exhibition featuring objects that had been collected by a Swiss botanist, Hans Schinz, during a visit to a Finnish missionary, based at Olukonda in northern Namibia (Beckmann 2012). The encounter with this fragment of the larger African artefactual diaspora was a personal one for Martha as she had grown up very close to Olukonda.

The surprise encounter with fragments from a familiar past far from home confronted us, as historians engaged in museum work, with a realization. We had actually no idea of the extent to which Namibia's material heritage had

crossed borders and oceans. We simply did not know where the tangible remains of Namibia's cultural heritage had travelled to and, eventually, settled. The exhibition also made us reflect on the issue of provenance and our perspective was not one that focused on the legal dimension of the process, but, rather, on the biographies of these objects. They were beautifully displayed, like artworks. But this, in some ways, drained them of meaning.

The challenge that this museum and indeed all ethnographic museums face is that the objects were divorced from two important dimensions of their identity. The meaning of an object is linked with the landscape (the place) that gives it context and the community whose intangible cultural heritage provides a greater depth of understanding. Our simple conclusion was that it was important to create a network of communication that can connect museums with the communities and places that the objects originated from. The conclusion was not original, but such a network did not exist for southern Africa.

The opportunity to take the next step came in 2014 when the slogan for the International Museum Day was »Museum Collections Make Connections«. We felt that this was the opportunity to encourage museums to interrogate their collections and to make connections with communities. At a meeting of ICOM's *International Committee of Museums and Collections of Ethnography* (ICME) a group of Zambian and Namibian colleagues proposed the establishment of a project with the name »Africa Accessioned«. The name of the project was intended to be evocative and reflect the fact that there has been a global history of large scale movements of people and objects through a range of interactions, but in terms of the accession of cultural artefacts into museum collections the flow has been unequal.

The project started with an ICOM Special Projects Grant of 2,244 Euros to ICOM Namibia in 2014 to purchase a laptop and appoint an intern. Four African countries provided the initial focus for the project: Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The objective was to map the ethnographic collections from these countries held in museums in Finland, Germany, Sweden and the UK. The scope was ambitious, but a clear three stage methodology was developed:

Stage One: Overview

- We established a *Working Group* (with two or three curators of ethnographic collections from each of the eight countries). The idea was that the European-based colleagues would help identify the most relevant collections,

whilst the African-based colleagues would help link collections to communities.

- We set up a *Work Station* at the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN) for six months with an intern with a laptop who sent emails and letters to museums.
- The project produced a *List* of relevant museums in each country with an overview of their collections. We also obtained the contacts for curators who had responded to our initial communication with an estimate of the number of relevant artefacts and photographs in their collection. The initial communication established which museums held the most important collections and provided the basis for a coalition of curators in each country who were able and willing to engage with the project.

Stage Two: Documentation

- *Obtaining More Detailed Information.* We started to try to obtain more detailed information and images of the most important collections. At this stage we started to operate on a bi-lateral basis. For example, Namibia focused, initially, on museums in Finland with Namibian collections. The geographical balance of the collections from the four Southern African countries reflected mainly the colonial history of different countries. The Namibian collections in Finland were chosen as a manageable initial point of engagement, before approaching the much larger Namibian-sourced collections held in Germany and the UK. Access to more detailed inventories revealed that the information available for each object was often far thinner than we had hoped, particularly in terms of linking objects with particular geographical places.
- *Namibian Appraisal of Collections.* The project is currently looking at lists of objects and identifying, from a Namibian perspective, the most interesting objects or images in each collection. The current focus is on German museums with collections from Namibia.

Stage Three: Facilitating Dialogue

- *Identification of Potential Partnerships.* The appraisal will suggest the possibilities for links with a particular museum or community. We would be particularly interested in the possibility that some partnerships could assist

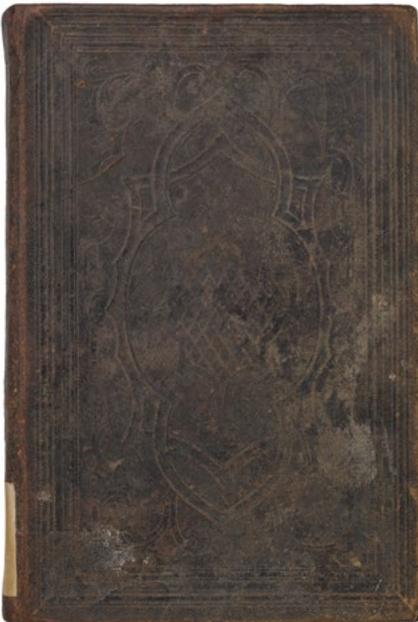
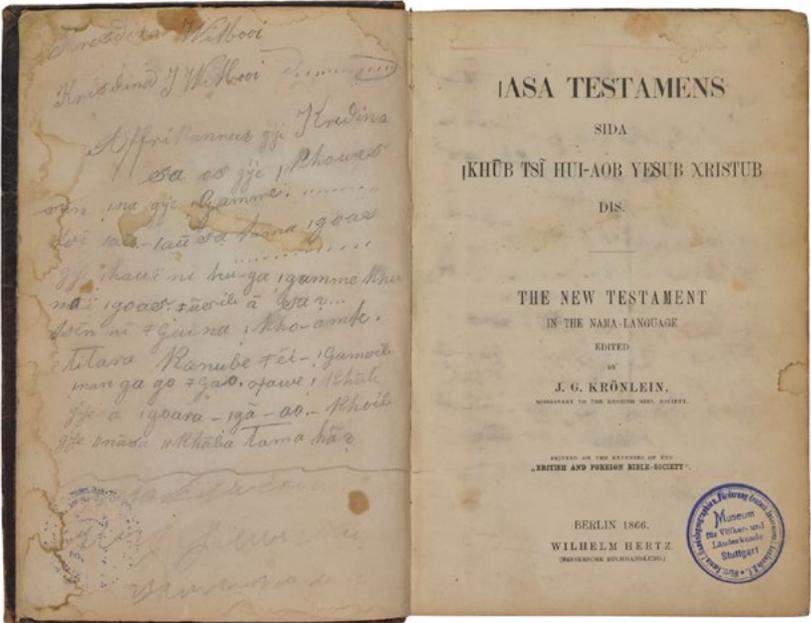
the establishment of new community-based museums. For example, the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart holds a number of objects that were seized by German troops following an attack on the |Khowesin community at Hornkranz in April 1893. The community was led by Hendrik Witbooi, an iconic figure in Namibian history (whose image appears on Namibian bank notes). The descendant community are mainly located in the small town of Gibeon in the Hardap Region today.

The museum's collection contains two items of particular significance to the community. One is the bible that was allegedly used by Hendrik Witbooi with an inscription in Khoekhoegowab (Linden-Museum Stuttgart, Inv. Ai 103, s. Forkl 2007: 111; Hartmann 2016b). [fig. 2 and 3] The second is a horse whip that was, also, allegedly used by Witbooi. We would argue that discussions about the possible return of these items to the community could serve as a means of creating a channel for cultural exchange between Stuttgart and Gibeon and might also be used to support the development of a community museum in Gibeon. Collaboration would replace a relationship based on a history of conflict with a new relationship based on communication and cultural exchange.

- *Establish Mechanism to Facilitate Dialogue.* When we started the project, our idea was to establish a web site or database for creating greater accessibility for Namibians to the virtual collections in Germany and elsewhere. However, there are two concerns that need to be addressed before it is decided whether a dedicated website will be the most effective tool. The first is that internet access is still limited in many Namibian communities, and the second is that the volume of material might mean that the site is unwieldy and does not facilitate dialogue. Perhaps alternative mediums such as Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups linked to particular partnership projects would be more effective in creating actual, international, cultural dialogue.

The argument for powerful potential of the »Africa Accessioned« project becomes clearer if one considers the impact of a pilot project funded by the Embassy of Finland. A small team from Namibia was supported to visit the six museums in Finland which held the most significant collections from Namibia. After the visit, the report of the Namibian team made 25 recommendations for potential partnerships (Silvester, Tjizezenga and Kaanante 2015).

Magdalena Kaanante, one member of the team, was the curator of the Nakambale Museum at Olukonda. The Museum building is the house in which the famous Finnish missionary, Marti Rautanen, lived. Whilst in Finland, Magdalena Kaanante was able to inspect the Rautanen Collection held at the Kansallis-



[fig. 2 and 3] The New Testament in the Nama language from the possessions of Hendrik, Christina and Salomo Witbooi (= Asa Testamens sida!Khüb Tsh'ui-aob Yesub Kristus dis). Johann Georg Krönlein (author), W. Hertz (publisher), Berlin 1866. Linden-Museum Stuttgart (Inv. Ai 103). © Linden-Museum Stuttgart.



[fig. 4] Charmaine Tjizezenga (MAN) examining items from the Rautanen collection at the National Museum of Finland. © Museums Association of Namibia.

museo/National Museum of Finland in Helsinki. [fig. 3] The collection consists of 127 artefacts collected by the missionary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The artefacts can be linked to extensive notes made by the missionary based on interviews he conducted whilst collecting the objects. The former Finnish Missionary Museum had published a short catalogue (in Finnish) containing sketches of the objects and information derived from Rautanen's notes.

The Museums Association of Namibia has now developed a project, in collaboration with the Nakambale Museum, that will print a new catalogue based on the collection. The sketches in the original catalogue will be replaced with photographs of the objects that will be provided by the Kansallismuseo/National Museum of Finland. The photographs will be used in a workshop with community historians from Olukonda to obtain local reflections on the objects and their significance. The texts and oral information will then be combined to

create texts for the new catalogue. The latter will also contain new photographs of some of the most important heritage sites in the Ondonga Kingdom. It will, therefore, seek to reconnect objects with the cultural landscape and intangible cultural heritage that provide them with context. The information will also be made visually available in the form of a small, mobile exhibition with text in English and OshiNdonga (and the possibility of a Finnish version).

My ideal would be that a similar report could be made providing an overview of the most important Namibian collections in Germany, highlighting the unique aspects of each collection and identifying potential German-Namibian partnerships. The challenge is that the scale and number of relevant collections in Germany is far higher, so we will need to develop a different strategy to cover the ground effectively.

The project described above draws strength from the argument that object biographies have three dimensions – as an object needs to be linked to the place and the stories and knowledge that complete it. I think it illustrates the way in which provenance research can move us from storage to storyline. A further example from the Finnish-Namibian connection would be *Omililo dhomamanya Giilongo yAawambo*, the power stones of the Ovambo kingdoms. The stones were sacred objects and it was believed that if they were removed from the kingdom or damaged serious misfortune would strike the kingdom. One of the most useful outcomes of the Finnish trip was that digital images of all the Namibian objects in the collection of the former Finnish Mission Museum (now held by the Kansallismuseo/National Museum in Helsinki) were obtained. The digital images from Helsinki made us aware that the collection contained part of the power stone from Ondonga, one of the Ovambo kingdoms.

A conversation has now started with the Ondonga Traditional Authority regarding the fragment, in which it turned out that the power stone was strongly associated with a particular place – the grave of *Omukwaniilwa* (= king) Nembungu Iya Mutundu at Oshamba. It was an important site for rain-making rituals, with the rituals to preserve the grave being maintained from generation to generation by the family of *mēkulu*¹ Saara Shangula, wife of the late Johannes Shavuka, the last guardian of the grave site. The stone fragment must, therefore, also be linked to the intangible cultural heritage that is associated with it.

An example of visual repatriation concerns a set of mainly ethnographic photographs that were donated to MAN by the Finnish Mission Museum before it closed. The photographs arrived with their original captions written by

1 *Mēkulu* is a term of respect for an elderly woman or female relative.



[fig. 5] The MAN team examining objects from the Liljeblad collection at the University of Oulu in Finland. © Museums Association of Namibia.

the missionaries over a hundred years ago. One image, for example, had a caption saying »Native Attire«. However, showing the photographs to the local community in Olukonda enabled us to script captions with much greater depth that read far more meaning into the clothing. The process and the provision of captions in Oshiwambo enabled images from a distant Finnish archive to be given a new life in Namibia. Our goal now is to find a way to take a copy of the Namibian exhibition back to Europe with Finnish captions and to seek a more substantial sharing of the historical photographs of northern Namibia that are now held by Finland's National Board of Antiquities.

A number of projects have already been completed, or are in progress, with museums in Finland. However, the project would now like to expand its partnership projects to Germany, which has a large number of museums with important Namibian collections. The objects in these collections were also often donated by individuals from Germany who played a significant role in Namibian history. The intersections between German and Namibian history are reflected in the biographies of these collectors and the objects they collected.

The Working Group on Museums of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie*/German Anthropological Association has facilitated an informal email group for German curators with Namibian collections with an interest in participating. On the Namibian side we are also expanding our group to include a range of experts on Namibia's cultural heritage. The Namibian group will review the more detailed catalogue information that we receive from German museums and help us to make relevant connections. The members of the Namibian side will also join the email group so that we have equal representation in this bilateral network and discussions can take place.

We have noticed that many museums do not yet have photographs of all the objects in their collection. Photographs are very helpful, although the best option is still for someone to actually view the objects. I am pleased to say, that so far, we have received detailed information about Namibian collections from seven German museums (Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin; Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin; Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne; Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt; Ethnografische Studiensammlung, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz; Reiss-Engelhorn Museum, Mannheim; Linden-Museum, Stuttgart; Museum auf der Hardt, Wuppertal) and there are a number of others which have also indicated their willingness to share information.

The dialogue with each of these museums will be different and it is important to develop a two-way flow. Curators often have questions about particular items in their collection, whilst the Namibian Committee is also identifying the objects that are of greatest interest to them and which might form the basis for partnership projects in the future. We need to establish the best way to spread information within German museums and within Namibian museums and communities. One proposal for Namibia is to work through the fourteen regional culture offices, although others are arguing that the best platform for information-sharing and enquiries are the traditional authorities (the local leadership structures of the different ethnic communities).

In terms of our initial overview of the collections it might be useful to give three brief examples of the possible collaborative projects that have already been identified from the Namibian side.

One item that is interesting and that is found in most of the collections in the German museums visited to date is the traditional headdress worn by Ova-Herero women – *ekori*. It is significant that there are actually, at present, no community-based museums in Namibia reflecting the culture and history of Herero communities. It should also be noted that the old *ekori* headdresses, which are found in storage in many German museums, are extremely difficult

to find in Namibia. An exhibition that used these items as a springboard for a wider discussion of Herero cultural identity would be of great interest to both a German and a Namibian audience.

Another iconic item that requires further research in Namibia is the cattle skull Herero tomb marker from the collection in Wuppertal that also featured prominently in the exhibition *Namibia-Germany: a shared/divided history (Namibia – Deutschland. Eine geteilte Geschichte*, Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne 2004; Förster et al. 2004). [fig. 6] Information is not available about the grave that was marked, but the name of the farm on which the grave was located and the earliest recorded owners of this piece of land have been provided (Förster 2004a, b). The possibility, therefore, exists to obtain more information from the Namibian side with the hope that we might be able to uncover not only the original location of the grave, but also the name of the person whose grave it was. We would like to be able to re-caption it. The general – »Herero tomb marker« – should be replaced with the name of the individual leader whose grave it marked.

The third example was inspired by the postcard display shown in the exhibition *Deutscher Kolonialismus. Fragmente seiner Geschichte und Gegenwart (German Colonialism: Fragments, Past and Present*, Deutsches Historisches Museum/German Historical Museum, Berlin, 2016/17). The postcards show a scattering of German military outposts and landscapes and carry messages from German troops and settlers to their friends and family in Germany (Hartmann 2016a).

In present-day Namibia many of the buildings have now disappeared or exist only as ruined foundations, whilst landscapes have also transformed over time. The possibility exists to create parallel contemporary photographs that will feature many of the same places today to suggest continuity and change. The postcards can also be used as a metaphor for the exchange of information and movement of objects, images and ideas to Germany that, through their circulation and display, contributed to the creation of popular concepts of Africa. Postcards could be utilised to create new lines of communication between the youth in communities participating in the project (or perhaps we have to create online postcards as young people are not used to waiting three weeks for a reply to a message!).

In conclusion, it is important to emphasise the principle that ethnographic museums must change. Their role is no longer to be the custodians of representations of the Other. Today I believe it is crucial to find creative ways for museums to develop effective mechanisms to enable conversations with each other. Simply put – conversations between people. The shift is a principle that



[fig. 6] Cattle skull Herero tomb marker from the collection in Wuppertal.
© Archiv- und Museumsstiftung der VEM. Photo: Reinhard Elbracht, 2014

is becoming increasingly accepted within the mainstream museum sector. Thomas Campbell, who recently resigned as the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York stated: »I have been trying to develop an agenda that moves away from a Western museum as primarily an accumulator of objects and knowledge to one that positions itself as a matrix of international peers«. ² The argument that museums can provide opportunities for »intercultural dialogue« is not new, however the focus in European museums seems to have been largely on interaction with local »multicultural« communities, rather than more expansive, global connections (Bodo; Gibbs; Sani 2009).

The idea that museums can become hubs in an international network of cultural exchange is an attractive one. We have the potential to position museums as mediums for global dialogue. Conversations can enable *source communities* to provide greater historical depth regarding the intangible cultural heritage and places that provide a more complete biography of an object in a collection. Of course, dialogue about collections will also sometimes lead to questions about the (un-)ethical context within which they were obtained and their sacred significance. Such questions are an unavoidable legacy of colonial history.

European museums need to engage with this legacy, but they should see dialogue as an opportunity, rather than a threat. Collections can generate connections and greater mutual understanding. Provenance research is not just an exercise in the accumulation of knowledge. It can be a central feature of the »museum as process«. By embracing this process we can ensure that our museums can help to build bridges, rather than barriers, between communities across the globe.

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