'Collaborative' provenance research – About the (im)possibility of smashing colonial frameworks

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Abstract

This article reflects on the aporias and paradoxes of a postcolonial, collaborative research approach to ethnographic collections dating from colonial times. In Germany, 'provenance research' and 'collaboration' have become important and politically opportune modes of approaching the possibilities and impossibilities of overcoming colonial categories. Nevertheless, epistemologies and imbalances of power remain to be addressed. Based on research and collaboration with stakeholders over the course of two projects on the Tanzania collections of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, this article considers the risk that 'collaboration' and 'decolonization' could remain mere empty, fashionable phrases. We argue that today's concern with the colonial context of collections in European museums is largely self-referential, and avoids radical criticism of today's power asymmetries. The deconstruction of colonial class, gender, race, and ethnic categorizations, and of the resulting representations, is hindered – if not made impossible – by the epistemologies implicit in the order of the collections themselves, as well as by identity politics.

Key words: *collaboration, power asymmetries, provenance research, decolonization*

Introduction

I have no relationship with you and cannot remember that you ever gave me a pesa or a quarter of a pesa or a needle or a thread. I look for a reason why I should owe you obedience, and can find none. If you wish for friendship, then I am not unwilling, today and for ever, but I cannot be your subject [...]

Machemba bin Mshame Masaninga to Hermann von Wissmann, undated letter, probably 1890 or 1891[1]

When the politically influential trader Machemba bin Mshame Masaninga (fig. 1) addressed these words to Hermann von Wissmann, Imperial Commissioner for 'German East Africa', the German colonizers had already established themselves in the coastal towns of what is today Tanzania. But they had thus far failed to implement their claim to sovereignty in what they referred to dismissively as 'the hinterlands'. Machemba's regional influence was wide, extending from the south-eastern coastal region into territories that Portugal had claimed as colonies, and he refused to comply with Germany's demand to submit to its Empire. His refusal was followed by a cat and mouse game that lasted for several years. The Germans threatened to push the war into his territories, and tried to capture him; Machemba pretended to agree to their demands, while actually following his own political agenda for trading purposes that conflicted with (exploitative) German economic interests.

From 1896 onwards, Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum – then the 'Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde' – came into the possession of a number of objects that had allegedly belonged to Machemba. One of these is described in the main catalogue as a 'walking stick with integrated tobacco box' (fig. 2). This object, whose significance and function is still not understood, was obtained by the Museum für Völkerkunde in 1896 – a year after Machemba agreed

Fig. 1. Machemba, 1896 (VIII A 21940) Verlag C. Vincenti (publishing house), Dar es Salaam, from the estate of C. Porree. This studio portrait of Machemba may have been taken in Dar es Salaam in 1896, at the time of his visit to the German Governor. 25.7 × 22.4 cm (box), 22.6 × 16.5 cm (picture) Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB) – Preußischer Kulturbesitz

to recognize German sovereignty. However, this was an agreement he made under threat of war, and one that he seems to have revoked later on.

120 years later, in 2016, Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum began a new provenance research project titled 'Tanzania/ Germany: Shared Object Histories?'. The main purpose of the project is to explore how Machemba's walking stick and other objects obtained in the course of German colonial expansion and rule came to be in the museum's possession, with a focus on Eastern Africa and on the Africans involved in the context of appropriation. The closely connected 'Humboldt Lab Tanzania' (2016- 18), based at different locations in Tanzania's most populous city, Dar es Salaam, provided a social, artistic, academic and public space to experiment with collaborative formats in provenance research.[2]

The two projects build on the work of political activists and critical researchers (many of whom are themselves political activists), who have for years been demanding a public and political reckoning with German colonialism, its structures of exploitation and its epistemic violence (Friedrichs and Jana 2018).[3] These demands stress the need to make the continuities of colonial ideologies, imaginings and racisms visible in German society today. One focus of such demands is the decolonization of urban spaces that contain street names and memorials featuring white 'colonial heroes', and especially, of institutions like ethnological museums that hold countless historically and culturally sensitive objects. The term 'culturally sensitive' is used for objects with a special significance, often involving restricted access and specific forms of storing (like grave goods, religious and ceremonial objects, regalia and human remains), whereas 'historically sensitive' refers to the context of acquisition or appropriation 'involving the use of force and/or highly dependent relationships' (German Museum Association 2019: 17-8), as in colonial contexts.

Fig. 2. Wooden staff with integrated tobacco box (III E 4584) May have been owned by Machemba (capital Luagalla, Makonde Plateau). Appropriated by Hans Glauning (1895) and donated to the Museum (1896). Wood 88 × 8 × 4 cm © Martin Franken/SMB. Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB) – Preußischer Kulturbesitz

Over the last two years, the activists' decolonizing demands seem to have become mainstream. The aims of 'engaging with colonialism' ('Aufarbeitung des Kolonialismus'), of a 'stronger cultural exchange' ('stärkerer Kulturaustausch') with Africa, and of the need for provenance research on 'cultural assets from colonial heritage in museums and collections' are even written into Germany's 2018 government coalition agreement.[4] In the same year, the Federal Government Commissioner of Culture and Media invited representatives from museums and academia to the German Chancellery to discuss the colonial nature of collections, especially in ethnological museums, and the findings and perspectives of provenance research.[5] A topic that was once the preserve of political activists is now seen as the responsibility of institutions (museums, the government) and has become – up to a certain point – a welcome subject of discussion in the media landscape and political circles. This sudden increase of interest, however, may also give rise to a vague sense of unease, since provenance research and collaborations with 'societies of origin' are often appropriated and instrumentalized by public political institutions. These collaborations are increasingly viewed as part of the cultural-political agenda, which itself represents an indirect assertion of power by the politically dominant discourse – revoking or reinforcing essentializing ideas and imaginations of continental, national and ethnic identities. This power dynamic has an impact on those who participate in the project.

Taking the two projects as a starting point, we – as the project's head and provenance researcher, respectively – will (self-)critically reflect on paradoxes and (apparent) aporias in the process of trying to implement a postcolonial collaborative research approach. With the words cited at the beginning of this article, Machemba positions himself as a self-confident equal, rather than complying with the colonial image of a subjected, colonized 'native' without agency. He speaks as Wissmann's peer – Wissmann being at the time the representative of the German Empire – and introduces the concept of 'friendship'.[6] He also speaks to Wissmann on a personal level, locating his relationship to the Germans within a context of social interchange based on mutual respect. We have placed this quotation at the beginning of our article, because one goal of our current provenance research project is the (necessarily fragmented) reconstruction of the roles, agendas and agency of individual African actors in the context of the appropriation of objects. Machemba is one such figure who does not fit in the colonial constructions of locally bounded African societies devoid of history. However, we must also recognize that colonial relationships, that is to say their interpretations and the way in which they have been distorted to fit colonial ideology, continue to exert their power today. It goes without saying that collaboration with the makers, users and previous owners of the objects, and with their current descendants, can hardly be equated with Wissmann's demand (backed by threat of military force) that the Africans should subject themselves to (or cooperate with) the German Empire. Yet Machemba's words raise a number of questions that are relevant to our circumstances, too.

One question we have been asking ourselves (in dialogue with our Tanzanian partners) is: How can we avoid an outcome in which collaboration and decolonization turn out to be empty phrases? Is the term provenance research, and the underlying conceptual framework focusing on issues of ownership and circumstances of acquisition, per se self-referential? And if so, does it risk imposing certain perspectives and research agendas on our partners? To what extent is it possible to practically implement a critical perspective on power relationships when provenance research projects are carried out in institutional frameworks that depend on German funds? How are we to deconstruct colonial class, gender, race, and ethnic categorizations and representations in a context in which German public debate on colonialism reinforces dichotomies (colonizers vs. colonized) and essentialized affiliations (continental, ethnic, national) – tendencies that also hold true for the Tanzanian partners involved in the project? And how to deal with the epistemologies implicit in the order of the collections themselves?

We are not the first to take a critical stance on the dysfunctional aspects of cross-cultural spaces and forms of collaborative knowledge production in museums, or to scrutinize the political opportunism such projects can entail (cf. Boast 2011; Lynch 2017; Scholz 2019). However, we think it is worth revisiting these aspects against the background of provenance research in historically sensitive collections from former German colonies, and in light of our experiences amidst a somewhat heated public debate in Germany. That debate, as we shall

show, has thus far focused mainly on ethnological museums and their collections when faced with the question of how to deal critically with the German 'colonial past' – which is also the past of the 'colonized' societies.

The projects

The project title, 'Tanzania/Germany: Shared object histories?', was deliberately formulated as a question. This is not simply because of the general uncertainty that characterizes postcolonially informed provenance research. Instead, it points to a very specific context: because insufficient financial resources were available in the first phase of the project, Tanzanian researchers and experts were not involved in designing its purpose and programme. Initially, therefore, the project itself – and the question of what 'provenance research' with so-called 'ethnographic objects' actually means – was rather self-referential. It mainly drew on the museum's inventories, colonial archival material and journals, ethnographic monographs, travelogues as well as secondary literature in order to reveal fragments of the context of appropriation (political, economic, social) in Eastern Africa. In so doing, the project sought to de-centre the German/European collectors in favour of identifiable African users, owners and producers of the objects. Since the specific circumstances of acquisition and appropriation are rarely mentioned in the written sources, contextual research in local and regional economic, political and social contexts are indispensable. This is all the more true given that most of the objects from Tanzania cannot be assigned to individuals.

The project also set up a residency programme with additional funds (raised and allocated for the future Humboldt Forum in Berlin) through which three curators from the National Museum of Tanzania were invited to visit the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin for several weeks. These visits facilitated an intensive exchange about the historically sensitive collections held at the museum in Berlin and about the potential perspectives that could result from collaborative forms of provenance research. The sensitivity of the collections not only refers to the often violent context of acquisition/appropriation, but also to the grievous processes of discussing and interpreting German colonialism through the objects. The objects, defined by the European/North American order of disciplines as ethnographic or archaeological artefacts, might have been gifted, purchased, exchanged or traded. However, they could also have been acquired through blackmail, theft, robbery or looting. Indeed, the processes of appropriation were as complex as the colonial situation itself. The objects triggered emotions in the Tanzanian colleagues and the German team alike. These visits were also a catalyst for discussions about potential forms of (re)presentation and ways of thematically embedding selected objects from Tanzania that are housed in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, given that these objects were appropriated in the era of Germany's violent colonial expansion and colonial rule from the late 1880s to the beginning of the First World War.

Alongside the provenance research project in Berlin, a team of German and Tanzanian researchers set up the 'Humboldt Lab Tanzania' at various locations, offering the opportunity to try out new forms of working collaboratively (fig. 3).[7] These sites included the Nafasi Art Space, an art centre with studios and exhibition spaces, and the National Museum and House of Culture in Dar es Salaam.

The Humboldt Lab brought researchers and artists together. Participants discussed fragments that could help with the compilation of object biographies from a 'Tanzanian' point of view, which highlighted anti-colonial resistance. At the same time, participants also stressed the contexts of colonial rule and exploitation, as well as their continuing implications and significance in the present. They deliberated about the meanings we assign to colonialism today, and about how it continues to affect us. The programme included workshops in Berlin and Dar es Salaam, short field trips to places where certain objects came from, and a travelling exhibition that visited the National Museum and House of Culture in Dar es Salaam, the University of Dar es Salaam, and the Maji Maji Memorial Museum in Songea, presenting the first findings of the research project along with artists' responses (fig. 5).

As the provenance research project and the work of the Humboldt Lab were getting under way in 2016, we began to see a significant rise in mainstream media coverage and broad public interest about the history of objects from former colonies. People were increasingly

Fig.3. Research trip 2016. Calabash, workshop of Abdallah Said Mkundi, Mohoro, next to a photo of a calebash of a healer that was appropriated during the Maji Maji war and donated to the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin by the colonial Government in 'German East Africa' in 1907. © Lili Reyels, Humboldt Lab Tanzania, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB) – Preußischer Kulturbesitz

starting to question how such objects had come into the possession of German and other European museums. In German public discourse, these objects are often referred to as 'Raubkunst', or 'stolen art', a term that references the countless artworks expropriated and stolen by the Nazis during the Third Reich. Such objects have become catalysts for a broader public interest that recognises a need to engage with the structures of German colonialism and with Germany's exploitation of its colonial territories. Such a public debate would require German society as a whole to recognise issues that have long been denied or deliberately ignored as an important part of official German history (cf. Eckert 2018), which must itself be regarded as part of a larger entangled history. Further, it would require a more difficult step that is seldom mentioned in these discussions, that is, recognising the continuities between present day society and German colonialism with all its self-legitimising ideologies, imaginations and racisms. Our aforementioned projects seek to consider how these continuities affect our working process, allowing them to shape the formulation of our research questions.

Provenance research, collaboration, participation, exchange and transparency are all words – one might almost say, buzzwords – that are now regularly cited in public discourse. Journalists and representatives of political institutions, for instance, appear to regard such terms as offering solutions for dealing with colonialism, (epistemic) violence and the resulting power asymmetries still in effect today. Some may even see in these terms a potential for bringing about a process of 'decolonization'. However, it should be noted that those who make such claims hardly ever define what they mean by 'decolonization', and rarely acknowledge the complexity and potential radicalism of such a process, nor the length of time it would necessarily entail. This is nothing new. Museums have long been construed in mainstream academic discourse as 'contact zones' or dialogic spaces for meetings, exchanges, transactions, cultural negotiations and mutual influencing against a backdrop of specific 'histories of dominance, hierarchy resistance, and mobilization' (Clifford 1997: 213; cf. also Pratt 1991; Boast 2011). We

Fig. 4. View into the touring exhibition Living Inside the Story, Humboldt Lab Tanzania at the National Museum and House of Culture in Dar es Salaam, January 2017. Amani Abeid, Colonial Scars (installation), acrylic on canvas, clay pots, oil paint, water, 150 × 150 cm (painting), 25 × 10 cm (pots), 2016) © Pavel Desort

Fig. 5. Detail of Amani Abeid's artwork: painted clay pot, filled with water, with portrait of sub chief Songea Mbano, hanged for resistance against German colonial rule © Pavel Desort

might say that a construction of 'the museum as contact zone' has become commonplace for museums with ethnographic collections – at least in theory. In post-imperial settler colonies such as the USA, Canada, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, museums, like the societies they are part of, have had to face up to these challenges as part of their own history. German museums have a lot of catching up to do in this respect. A self-critical perspective should be a fundamental part of the transformation processes. To quote Robin Boast, 'I raise a serious concern that the neocolonial nature of the contact zones could destroy the very nature of empowerment that it is meant to engender' (Boast 2011: 57).

Collaborations with what in German are often termed 'Herkunftsgesellschaften', or 'societies of origin' – itself a phrase with problematic essentialist implications – often attempt to include these societies as equal partners in a politicized and emotional debate. Yet, these collaborations can easily become empty gestures if we do not integrate an awareness of power dynamics and asymmetric power relations into postcolonial museum theory and practice (Boast 2011). If adopted, such an awareness would inevitably lead to a radical questioning and transformation of established museum structures – including administrative procedures, internal institutional hierarchies, systems of classification and organisation, forms of representation and knowledge production, and the epistemologies and ontologies that inform all of these. It is difficult for institutions to bring about such a transformation from within. This means that, in practice, even the most well intentioned collaborations often end up having a merely ornamental function that replicates and legitimizes neocolonial perspectives.

It is thus imperative to deconstruct the colonial ideology of comprehensive, sovereign rule and control over a colonized people – comprising both practices of colonial rule in a specific territory as well as symbolic forms of appropriation. To do so, we must uncover the dysfunctional aspects of the knowledge/power nexus. Our project's focus on the (historical) agency of East African makers, users and previous owners of the objects is one way of doing this. Furthermore, the collecting mania of Berlin's ethnologists in the colonial period ended up swamping the museum with objects that curators no longer had the time to properly catalogue or inventorize (Zimmerman 2001; Penny 2002). Their meanings and functions therefore often remained unknown; all we have are labels assigning objects to supposed 'ethnic' or geographical categories. The lack of knowledge here itself represents a form of epistemic violence – although one can also read it as a form of resistance. Like their makers, users and previous owners, these objects have never been fully amenable to objectification for the purposes of colonial or subsequent (European) knowledge production.

Collections as materializations of colonial epistemologies and ontologies

The broad public attention to and political interest in collaborations with African colleagues often go hand in hand with a highly stereotyped and overly 'ethnic' ('tribal') image of Africa that is scarcely informed by knowledge of the continent's complex history. This brings us to a further major point of our (self-)critical discussion, namely, the fact that the ontologies and the epistemologies originating in colonialism are still perpetuated through the ordering of collections in museums. Machemba bin Mshame's biography and the objects attributed to him and his followers offer once again a good example of countering stereotypes – one among many others that we encountered in the course of our research (for more detail, cf. Ivanov and Weber-Sinn 2018a, 2018b). Machemba's origins can be traced to the Makanjila Yao in the vicinity of Lake Nyasa, but since early childhood he had lived in Kilwa Kisiwani, a centuries-old Swahili trading town on the southern coast of today's mainland Tanzania. Machemba was well integrated into Muslim coastal society (whose members are generally called the 'Swahili'), and he controlled the caravan routes from Makanjila (today's eastern Malawi, bordering Mozambique) to the coast. His biography reflects the extreme pace of economic, political and cultural change in the course of a period when the global capitalistic market was quickly penetrating into Africa's interior. This resulted in the emergence of new political and social structures as well as in the development of far-reaching forms of exchange. Simultaneously, Machemba's biography is characteristic of the patterns of open, changeable and not mutually exclusive identity formations that were common in East Africa, and that are especially characteristic of Swahili coastal society (see, among others, Parkin 1989; Glassman 1991; Willis 1993; Glassman 1995; Fair 2001; Ivanov 2017).

Since at least the 1980s, studies in African history and anthropology have established that, in fact, the divvying-up of Africa's population into bounded, unchanging 'ethnic' groups was a construct of colonialism, implemented on the ground in interaction with local actors following their own agendas and interests (Ranger 1983, 1993). Back in the (European) metropolis, ethnological museums played their own part in constructing and implementing colonialism's ideological framework. In classifying objects in the collections according to alleged 'ethnic' origin, these museums constructed colonized people in natural, homogenous, unchanging, ahistorical terms. These very ethnic groups would then become the objects of colonial dominance and economic exploitation (cf. for example Kasfir 1984; Ivanov 2005: 42-4 and 2007).

But what would be the relevance and consequence today of merely noting that Machemba was 'a Yao', and that therefore, the objects in the museum that belonged to him and his followers should simply be classified and inventorized as 'Yao objects'? Social research has shown that identity is always situational, positional and variable.[8] In East Africa before colonial conquest, one could not discern homogenous 'ethnic' groups with a homogenous culture that completely differentiated them from their neighbours. Swahili culture was about to spread far into the interior as a result of ever-expanding trade relations. New political entities (such as the communities that arose near powerful traders like Machemba) had already emerged as a result of (trans-)regional political and economic dynamics. An ongoing process of cultural transformation and hybridization was now given additional impetus (Iliffe 1979; Glassman 1995; Pizzo 2007). Machemba was a significant historical actor in the shared history of the region, which included a diverse range of interactions between the 'colonizers' and the 'colonized' and, of course, among the colonized people themselves. This shared history is clearly shown in our reconstructions of object biographies and trajectories – that is, the routes taken by these objects in the course of their existence.[9] But this micro-history of interactions and its relational dynamics are obliterated, or at best obscured, when one employs an 'ethnic' classification. The 'denial of coevalness' (Fabian 1983), which was the formative element not only of anthropology but of the colonial construction of Africa in general, is only further legitimized through the continued use of such museum classification systems.

A second question connected to the colonial order of power concerns today's political boundaries in Africa. Our projects' focus on Tanzania resulted from the fact that our work required us to operate on a day-to-day basis in a context in which today's modern state is the relevant political entity. However, the colonial origin of national boundaries in Africa must always be kept in mind. In the context of our example, one needs to question how meaningful it would be to focus exclusively on the fact that Machemba lived and interacted with Germans in today's mainland Tanzania, given that his area of influence and action extended across territories that are now part of Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi. Moreover, when Machemba correctly anticipated the threat posed to him by the Germans, he withdrew to territories that were then under Portuguese colonial rule (today's Mozambique) to escape capture. If we would restrict the historical perspective to mainland Tanzania, then we would continue to write history from a German colonial perspective.

An obstinate adherence to the use of national 'containers' in historiographical practice is especially misleading in terms of Africa before colonization, but is also unhelpful when it comes to understanding the colonial and postcolonial era. Again, the reconstruction of object biographies and trajectories, as done in our research, contributes to dismantling the national 'container' in provenance research in accordance with major trends in academia towards the elaboration of a relational global history (Bayly 2004; Freitag and Oppen 2010).

Machemba's biography and the collections attributed to him and his followers are only one example of how European colonial epistemologies are perpetuated through the ordering of collections in museums. Moreover, they show why it is still problematic for these museums to continue to classify objects according to colonial borders, which are replicated in postcolonial nation-building in Africa. Nevertheless, national institutions in African states are often (rightly) the preferred partners for politically approved collaborations. Moreover, even the essentially emancipatory restitution discourse frequently focuses more on alleged ethnic 'roots' than on the supra-ethnic and translocal 'routes' of objects (Clifford 1997). Given those factors, we may be at risk of replicating colonial power structures in a double sense. Firstly, such an approach reflects, in the final analyses, colonial borders; and secondly, it also echoes

the colonial ethnicizing view of Africans as 'primitive' members of unchanging, 'natural' ethnic groups. We see this tendency notably in (German) public discourse in the use of the highly problematic phrase, 'society of origin' ('Herkunftsgesellschaft'). This term homogenizes a whole society as the quasi natural single 'author' of a cultural item, and obscures regional and transregional entanglements as well as social, gender and generational differences – among others – within one society.

Thus, one wonders whether public and political discourses really recognize Africans as equal participants in a shared global history, given that doing so would also necessarily mean recognizing that this global history is fundamentally relational, not something that is 'made' by Europeans. Are museum classification systems, which literally embody a colonial separation of the world into 'the West and the Rest' (Hall 1992), really to be interrogated in the context of such discourses today? And will this separation itself be questioned, along with the epistemological and structural violence it entails? The exaggerated fixation on nation and identity mentioned above risks losing what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, 1996) describes as a necessary tension between a 'strategic essentialism' (which in an imbalanced power system can offer a way for subaltern groups to gain legitimacy and voice) and the deconstruction of hegemonic classifications. If this tension is lost through a narrow concentration on 'ethnic' groups and nation states, it may no longer be possible to question the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000) and its continuity in the postcolonial condition.

In Africa, the implementation of ethnic classification systems went hand-in-hand with the economic exploitation and taxation of African peoples, and their subjection to structures of wage labour. This was linked to gender-specific classifications, which excluded women from exercising economic and political power (a power to which objects belonging to female chiefs in the Berlin collection still testify). If we lose sight of the tension between strategic essentialism and deconstruction, we risk involuntarily conforming to the (re)essentializing tendencies that are currently sweeping global politics, and may even find ourselves unwillingly complicit in right-wing identity politics. As stated above, 'identity' is always context-specific, subject to change and constructed – but this reality is easily lost in a public and, sometimes, academic discourse unfamiliar with Africa's history. And a similar oblivion also risks concealing the dynamic history and (political) agency of African actors, including those – and there were many – who moved between the world of the 'colonizers' and the world of the 'colonized'. Forgetting or ignoring these realities leaves discourse trapped in the racist dichotomy between 'white' powerful agents and 'black' powerless victims.

The colonial construction of knowledge has further ramifications, as there is still a strong need to recover African epistemologies and ontologies. For example, academic discourse has failed to pursue alternative ontologies for Africa in the way that it has done for other regions of the world, particularly with the concept of Amerindian perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, 1998), or with the concept of the 'distributed person' for Oceania (Strathern 1988; Gell 1998; see also Henare et al. 2007). Furthermore, one has to keep in mind that museums' collections operate as assemblages of social relations. Objects and human beings work in relation to one another to produce 'knowledge' or 'reality', which thus are changeable results of both human and material agency (Gosden and Larson 2007). To deepen our understanding of ethnographic objects and their collection contexts, we need further research on the particular economic patterns and concepts of property and exchange in relation to the objects, and generally on the transaction patterns in the regions where the objects came from. Such research is only in its infancy. In sum, to properly grasp and historicize the relationship between people and their social and material environment, we need more detailed research on the micro-history of objects as well as more collaboration. Without such research, colonial categories and interpretive patterns will continue to inform collaborative partnerships via the classification systems used in museums, and will even inform plans for new interactive databases which, in the long run, should be developed to make ethnographic objects accessible in Africa and elsewhere. We must be conscious of the risk that today's public interest in African objects from colonial contexts could still involve a highly compliant euronormativity, untouched by any deconstructivist reflectivity.

It should be noted that, in many cases, the problematic issues that we have described in connection with collections in German museums also apply to collections in African

museums. Those museums were mainly founded from the 1920s onwards, at a period when the majority of African countries were still ruled by colonial powers (although Germany no longer held colonial territories by this time). For this reason, it was extremely important to our partners from the National Museum of Tanzania and the University of Dar es Salaam to extend a critical decolonial approach to the collecting practices, provenances and socio-political contexts of collections held in the National Museum and the House of Culture in Dar es Salaam. Likewise, we hope to compare future findings with research on the Ethnologisches Museum's collection of objects from the region known today as Tanzania.[10]

Conclusion

Collaborative work on ethnographic collections from colonial times is a long lasting process; however, at this point, we can draw some preliminary conclusions. We believe that it is necessary to be even more rigorous in challenging colonial categories through research, and to scrutinize practice with even more radical consistency, if we want to find out what a true decolonization of ethnographical collections would actually entail. We believe that 'decolonization' in this context cannot ever be achieved through desperate attempts to push through 'collaborative exhibitions' for museums in the countries of former colonial powers. Rather, such collaborations – in their design and implementation – can only be created in the context of a relationship with our partners, built on long-term reciprocity, and in a manner that respects and integrates their agendas (cf. Schorch and McCarthy 2019). These are the absolute prerequisites for a relationship that is non-colonial in both theory and practice. We must also beware of political opportunism, which in practice means a superficial appropriation of the discourses of political activism and critical research.[11] Such an appropriation can quickly lead to the replication and further embedding of stereotypes, dichotomies, imaginations and racisms that are fundamentally derived from colonialism. The subversive moment that should be inherent to any radical critique of colonialism and its effects must not be lost or exhausted in empty phrases. And such a critique should not be circumscribed to cultural institutions. This would only have the effect of containing and taming its radical implications, at a time when, due to Europe's repressive 'refugee policy', thousands of refugees (from African countries, among others) continue to die in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

Seen against the backdrop of these policies and their lethal consequences, the museum and its objects appear to be a secondary arena of contestation. Outside the museum walls, (neo-)colonial structures are monstrous. Thus, is it possible, as formulated in our title, to smash colonial sediments and frameworks from inside the museums' context? We want to stress that it remains crucial to foster an ongoing questioning of one's own institutions, of one's own positioning within rigid museum structures. Likewise, we must maintain open and transparent communication with partners collaborating on joint work, about the (limited) possibilities of decolonization and the consequences for all members of the team. Nevertheless, we must disclose the persistence of colonial structures, since dealing with them already means opposing them. We must accept that resisting also means failing again and again. Doing so can release energies in its own right, helping to move the process along. Our discomfort with categorizations such as Tanzanian/German, African/European, colonized/colonizing etc. – which continue to plague us – compel us to seek help from Franz Fanon, who writes:

> *There is no black mission; there is no white burden.*
> *[…]*
> *The black man is not. No more than the white man.*
> *Both have to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born.*

(Fanon, 2008: 203, 206)

Notes

1 Bundesarchiv R 1001/473.

2 The Zanzibar archipelago, which constitutes a semi-autonomous part of today's Tanzania, was not subject to German colonial rule; instead, it became a British protectorate in 1890. For this reason, the collections from Zanzibar were not included in our research projects.

3 Postcolonial groups have been founded in major cities in Germany since the start of the new millennium, like Berlin Postkolonial in 2007. In the course of the campaign '125 Jahre Berliner-Afrika Konferenz', initiated and coordinated by Berlin Postkolonial, a group of five historians established the project 'Kolonialismus im Kasten?' in order to deal critically with and challenge the (re-) presentation of German colonialism in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin in 2009, see: Manuela Bauche, Susann Lewerenz, Marie Muschalek and Kristin Weber, 'Versteckt und verharmlost – Kolonialgeschichte im Deutschen Historischen Museum Berlin'. https://www.academia.edu/25804481/with_Manuela_Bauche_Susann_Lewerenz_Marie_Muschalek_and_Kristin_Weber_Versteckt_und_verharmlost._Kolonialgeschichte_im_Deutschen_Historischen_Museum_Berlin_www.berlin-postkolonial.de_2012, accessed 25 February 2019. The result is an audio guide tour (2013) as an independent intervention in the permanent exhibition (https://www.kolonialismusimkasten.de/, accessed 7 October 2019). Artistic projects and interventions also addressed the issue of (not) remembering the impacts of German colonialism, like S a v v y Contemporary with the project 'Fragments: A Series of Artistic Interventions into the Colonial Neighbours Archive', which started in 2016 (https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/projects/2016/fragments-colonial-neighbours/, accessed 31 January 2020), or the travelling exhibition *Anti-Humboldt-Box* realized by *Artefakte//anti-humboldt* und *AFROTAK TV cyberNomads (*http://www.no-humboldt21.de/anti-humboldt-box/*, accessed 31 January 2020) – just to name a few examples.*

4 In March 2018, the German coalition agreement was signed by the governing parties CDU, CSU and SPD 'Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa – eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland – Ein neue Zusammenhang für unser Land' (https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2018/kw11-koalitionsvertrag-546976, accessed 27 September 2019). One year later, the Minister of Cultural Affairs of the Länder (states), representatives of the federal government, and local authority associations agreed on a 'Key Issue Paper on the Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts', https://www.kmk.org/aktuelles/artikelansicht/eckpunkte-zum-umgang-mit-sammlungsgut-aus-kolonialen-kontexten.html, accessed 27 September 2019.

5 The meeting took place at the Bundeskanzleramt (Federal Chancellery) in Berlin, May 2018. Members of the project team for 'Tanzania/Germany: Shared object histories?' were also invited.

6 As Machemba's words are only available in a German translation of the Swahili dating from 1890 or 1891, we cannot check the accuracy of the translation. 'Urafiki' means 'friendship' in Kiswahili.

7 The project (2016-18) was initiated by the Ethnologisches Museum and realized with the following cooperation partners: Bookstop Sanaa: Visual Art Library & Creative Learning Space in Dar es Salaam; University of Dar es Salaam, Department of History, Department of Fine and Performing Arts, Department of Archaeology; National Museum and House of Culture, Dar es Salaam; Antiquities Department, Dar es Salaam/Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, Goethe-Institut Tanzania (cf. Reyels et al. 2018).

8 For a recent assessment, with regard to Africa, cf. Richard and MacDonald 2015.

9 Cf. also Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2018a; for a comprehensive discussion Zimmerman 2012.

[10]   This three-year partnership project delivered by the Department of History of the University of Dar es Salaam, the National Museum and House of Culture, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Seminar for Africa Studies at the Humboldt University Berlin, is funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. We would like to thank the Foundation for its support.

[11]   For a deeper discussion of this 'strategic reflexivity', see Bose 2017a.

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