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# Curation by the Living Dead: Exploring the Legacy of Norwegian Museums' Colonial Collections

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## ABSTRACT

While the history of Norwegian museum acquisitions and collection formation has long been a topic of research, the extent to which colonial structures are still embedded in various Norwegian collecting institutions is seldom addressed. In this paper, we discuss the legacy of colonial collections in Norway through two case studies; Inge Heiberg's collection of Congo ethnographica in various exhibitions at the University of Oslo's Museum of Cultural History from the early 1900s to the present; and the Norwegian Kon-Tiki Museum's initiative to repatriate human remains and other material excavated by Thor Heyerdahl on Rapa Nui in the 1950s. Presenting two cases that have been promoted as attempts at decolonisation – apparent “best practice” scenarios – we ask how the collections of Heiberg and Heyerdahl are used in current research and representations, and discuss whether the exhibiting and repatriation of the collections represent a continuation of, rather than break from colonial museum practice. We argue that attempts to revise current exhibition practices and research agendas prove consistently difficult. We conclude that in their very different ways, the cases illustrate that museums are effectively trapped in their collections. Heyerdahl and Heiberg still have the privilege of being curators of their collections.

## KEYWORDS

Inge Heiberg; Thor Heyerdahl; Congo ethnographica; Kon-Tiki; Rapa Nui; repatriation; decolonisation

## Introduction

In recent years, European museums have become the focus of belated post-colonial reckoning. The wider public engagement in the questions of decolonisation in Norway follows many of the patterns seen elsewhere, although the country, unlike many other European nation states, was itself under foreign rule for most of its modern history.

The acknowledgement of the Norwegian involvement (at the individual and institutional level) in the European colonisation of Africa and the Pacific has been limited. Anthropologists Kjerland and Rio (2009) have suggested that the disinterest rests on an assumption that colonisation was something perpetrated by other European countries, but not really relevant to Norway. Rather, the Grand Narrative of Norway is one of individual “explorers” and “adventurers”, of national heroes, and about breaking free from the foreign rulers, Denmark and Sweden (Eilertsen 2012). The prevalence of this attitude of

perceived Norwegian blamelessness regarding colonialism permeates daily language, foreign policies, and commerce, with a “rhetoric of colonial innocence” (Bjørkdahl 2021; see also Naum and Nordin 2013). The tendency is the same across Scandinavia: the “conveniently forgotten past” is evident in everyday life, language and products (Kruse 2021).

Alongside the emergence of independence and national narratives, Norwegian museums were filled, not only with domestic collections, but pre-eminently with the private collections of some of the above-mentioned “adventurers” and “explorers”. Raised in Norway in the eighties and nineties, both authors of this article essentially grew up with the tales of national icons, like Thor Heyerdahl, and the commonality of mandatory school visits to the Kon-Tiki Museum.

Lien and Nielssen (2016) have discussed how impulses from the (colonial) “international museum culture” merged with the Norwegian national project from the end of the nineteenth century and were decisive in the origin and organisation of the main museum institutions of Norway. “In a time when we were about to define ourselves as nation, . . . , the museum became a place to explore ourselves in contrast to others” (Lien and Nielssen 2016, 17) [Author’s translation]. The very first acquisition, and indeed the reason for the establishing of the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo, exemplifies this: a request from London was made to the University of Oslo in 1852 on whether they could provide the planned ethnographic museum in *The Crystal Palace* with a representative collection of Sami artefacts. In exchange, they would receive other ethnographic objects from other parts of the world (Lien and Nielssen 2016, 128; Mikkelsen 2004, 46).

The historicity of Norwegian museum acquisitions and collection formation has been researched in several instances over the last few decades (e.g. Lien and Nielssen 2012, 2016; Løkka 2017; Ruud 2018; Wæhle 2004), and interventions have been made to the Sami ethnographic and art collections in leading museum institutions (e.g. *Sámi Dáidda-musea* and *Bååstede*). Sami archaeology, in particular, has a longer history in the study of archaeology and its political role in the modern nation state (Olsen 2016, 215). A salient point of criticism is the encyclopaedic representation of “others” prevalent in the traditional ethnographic museum (e.g. Lien and Nielssen 2016, 124–125). For the ethnographic and archaeological collections assessed in this article, less attention has so far been given to what the representation reveals about the collecting institutions and individuals.

Ethnographic archives and materials, as shown by Karina (2020, 2), “reveal parts of their writers’ and collectors’ way of seeing and attending to the African continent” (Karina 2020). Despite the mobilisation of terms such as “decolonisation” among archaeologists and museum practitioners in Scandinavia, as noted by Harald Fredheim (2020, 4), post-colonial perspectives and critique have had limited impact on exhibitions and practices in most archaeological and ethnographic museums in Norway.

The following should be regarded as a preliminary study, in which the research material and methods have largely consisted of a scrutiny of available archival sources, the digitised artefact collections, previously published research, exhibition guides and news articles, as well as informal background conversations with current and previous permanent and temporary museum staff, to better understand the motivations and agendas behind ongoing exhibition practices. The results of the analyses presented provide a necessary point of departure for further research, including in-depth qualitative interviews and visitors/public opinion surveys.

## Case description – Dr. Inge Heiberg’s Congo collection

### *An exhibition experiment*

In September 2016, the temporary exhibition *Congo Gaze* opened in the Red Zone of the Museum of Cultural History (KHM) in Oslo, Norway. The Red Zone is a space for exhibition experiments, intended to open the museum practice and discourse to the public, inviting them in to partake in and question these practices. As part of the museum’s stated aim to function as an arena for dialogue and inclusion (KHM 2018; KHM staff presentation), the exhibition was a collaborative project between the museum and representatives of the Congolese diaspora in Norway; “[t]hrough activating the museum’s ethnographic collection a meeting place is established where new knowledge and other stories are generated” (KHM staff presentation).

The Norwegian-Congolese community comprises a small minority both in national and metropolitan (Oslo) terms.<sup>1</sup> As such, the Norwegian-Congolese diaspora does not have a prominent presence in the Norwegian public discourse. Nevertheless, the KHM’s relationship with the community has been ongoing since 2007, based on individual engagement and personal initiatives. This happened after the KHM took part in and hosted a travelling exhibition on the Nordic presence in the Congo Free State (1885–1908) and the impact of the Congo on the Nordic countries in the same era, and the years after (Tygesen and Wæhle 2007). The initial contact between museum staff and a Congolese museum visitor living in Norway resulted in a yearly celebration of the Congolese national day at the museum (KHM 2018; Huseby and Treimo 2018; pers.com. Maroy 2021), as well as ambitions to create an opportunity for people with a Congolese background to visit the museum storerooms to get to know the ethnographic collections originating from the Congo Basin (Huseby 2018, 67).

The opportunity arose under the collaborative project *The Method of Things* (Tingenes Metode (2015–2017)), framed by the overarching question of how museums might combine efforts of “open access” and inclusion with their main institutional activities of curatorial management, research and public outreach (Huseby and Treimo 2018). Before discussing the Congo Gaze project in more detail, as the most recent effort of engaging the vast Congo collection of the museum with the public, an introduction to the collection itself as well as earlier exhibition ventures, is needed.

### *The Congo collection*

The Congo collection of the KHM is the largest ethnographic collection of the museum that originates from one single country. It is comprised of more than 5000 catalogue entries amounting to almost 10% of the museum’s total ethnographic collection. The absolute majority of the artefacts from Congo were acquired during the reign of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State, and a few years onwards. It has been documented that about 2000 Scandinavian men (and a few women), played an active role in the

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<sup>1</sup>Norway’s population amounts to almost 5.4 million inhabitants (Statistics Norway 2021) with immigrants or children of immigrant parents comprising 18.5% of the population (Statistics Norway 2020a). A little more than 140,000 people are of African descent, the majority of whom originate from Somalia, then Eritrea (Statistics Norway 2020b). Only 4521 individuals, about 0.45% of the total immigrant population, are of Congolese descent (per end of 2020), having arrived within the last 20 years. Of these, 1654 live in Oslo and its surrounds (pers. com. Bergman 2021).

colonisation of the Congo between 1880 and 1930 (Jenssen-Tusch 1902–05; Tygesen and Wæhle 2007; Wæhle 2015). About 450 of these were Norwegian captains, sailors and machinists working in the shipping industry on the great rivers and waterways, along with military officials and soldiers, as well as missionaries and a few medics (Tygesen and Wæhle 2007, 6; Sørensen 1977, 3; Wæhle 2015).

Enlisted by and working for the Belgian colonial administration, the Scandinavian “Congo-travellers” (as they are commonly referred to) operated within a Scandinavian diaspora with strong ties to the emerging national states of their home countries (Jenssen-Tusch 1902–05). For a tiny country such as Norway, still officially under the rule of Sweden until 1905, the efforts and international presence of Norwegian citizens in the Congo were much appreciated at home. Between 1885 and 1956, more than 30 private collections of Congo ethnographica were sold to or handed over to the KHM (Gjessing and Johannessen 1957, 136–139).

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the museum had to go to great lengths to secure funds to purchase collections that were offered to them (Gjessing and Johannessen 1957, 136–138; Wæhle 2015). Very soon, however, the amount of available material became so abundant that the museum would rely on gifts and donations for additional acquisitions to complement the existing collections (Gjessing and Johannessen 1957, 137). In a letter from the museum director Yngve Nielsen to his colleague at the University Museum in Bergen, Håkon Shetelig, Nielsen describes how they are “overloaded with things from Congo”, and therefore cannot buy any more: “... there are hundreds of newly arrived artefacts that we barely have the time to register” (letter from Nielsen to Shetelig, 11.01.1912 UEM Kopibok 1853–1916, No 4, 1912) [Author’s translation].

The artefacts in question are most probably, among others, the gift from Dr. Inge Heiberg, donated to the museum in 1911 and eventually catalogued as UEM21000-21053 (see UNIMUS).

### ***Medical Director Dr. Inge Heiberg***

Dr. Inge Heiberg first left for the Congo in 1897 (Espeland 2014; Sørensen 1977). Employed as a medical doctor he travelled all over the country for many years, all the while collecting ethnographic artefacts that he would bring back to the director of the KHM on his occasional visits to Norway. All in all, his donations from 1903, 1905, 1911, 1913 and 1920 sum up to almost 1300 utility articles, weapons, musical instruments, masks, “fetishes”/figurines, mats, pots, chairs and more, making it the biggest collection ever received by the museum from one single donor (Iveland 2004, 69; Wæhle 2002, 196). Director Nielsen made sure to thank Heiberg repeatedly, often on behalf of “the Fatherland” (letter from Nielsen to Heiberg 23.08.1913, UEM Kopibok 1853–1916: No 46, 1913), and he was most likely directly involved when Heiberg allegedly was awarded the Order of St. Olav (an honorary title granted by the Norwegian King) in 1908 for his generous gift to the University of Oslo (Espeland 2014; Wæhle 2002, 196).

Espen Wæhle (2004, 2015, 359) has suggested that the many efforts of the Scandinavian Congo-travellers to collect artefacts from the Congolese peoples was a way for them, in this foreign and often chaotic situation, to systematise and try to understand their own experience of the region. From the very basic information recorded in the acquisition catalogue of the ethnographic museum in Oslo, it is clear, that beyond Heiberg’s notes on

place and people of origin, there is very little information associated with each artefact. Being a medical doctor himself, it seems Heiberg had no academic ambitions regarding his ethnographica. We know from the letters in the KHM archive that he engaged in conversations with the Museum Director on his occasional visits to Norway, but if he shared deeper knowledge or understanding of the material culture he presented to the museum, this has not survived in the records.

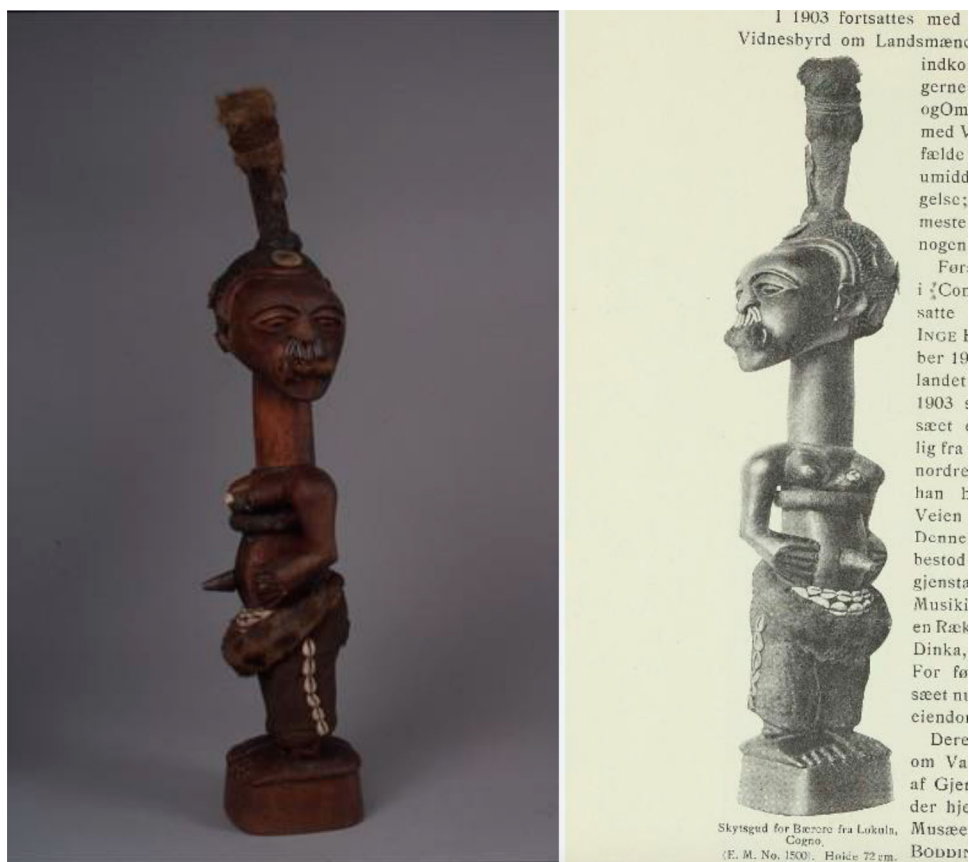
### ***Exhibitions on repeat***

Within the scientific paradigm around the turn of the last century, stylistically defined groupings of material culture were understood to be representative of specific groups of people, neatly placed in time and space. Heiberg's eventually vast ethnographic collection contributed in this regard in representing the "exotic" variations of Congolese tribes and peoples to the Norwegian audience. Heiberg's collection was already on display in 1904, in the first permanent Africa exhibition of the newly built museum, in which more than half of the 38 exhibition displays originated from the Congo (Nielsen 1904, 7–11, 13; Wæhle 2004, 28–30). At this point, Heiberg had only just started to collect for the museum, but from what Nielsen writes in the accompanying exhibition guide, all the items that comprised Heiberg's first gift in 1903 were exhibited in display 21 and 22; "One can see chairs, weapons, fetishes etc" (Nielsen 1904, 13). In fact, there were only two chairs and one "fetish" among the 44 accessioned objects (UNIMUS, UEM11103-11146). What we might gather from Nielsen's comment, however, is that these were among the most valued objects – an appreciation of certain kinds of artefacts that seems to have prevailed into the next century, and that might have been expressed explicitly to Heiberg, who must have been the museums' main de facto collector at the time. Heiberg's next gift, accessioned in 1905 (UNIMUS, UEM14301-14575, 14832-15035), notably includes 24 so-called fetishes, one of which was photographed and included in the review of the origin, history, and development of the ethnographic museum from 1907 (Figure 1) (Nielsen 1907, 104; UNIMUS, UEM15001).

Ever since the first exhibition of the new ethnographic museum in 1904, objects deriving from Heiberg's Congo collection have been on display in at least seven permanent and temporary exhibitions,<sup>2</sup> some of which were on for years. Through archival records, personal communication, online documentation, and a few existing exhibitions catalogues, it has been possible to piece together a general idea of what kinds of artefacts have been at the forefront of these exhibitions. The tendencies noted in this paper must still be substantiated by systematic analyses of the above-mentioned material. But from the visual representation that is reminiscent of the various exhibitions, it seems evident that a strong focus on "fetishes" and ancestor figurines, masks and chairs has persisted

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<sup>2</sup>This overview is not necessarily exhaustive, but as complete as possible according to our enquiries and research so far. It is for example not clear whether the Heiberg collection was featured in the "Africa" exhibition of 1946 and again between 1963 and 1967 (listed in Mugaas 2004, 137), although we presume this to be the case. In the period between 1919 and 1924, the ethnographic exhibitions were closed to the public, and during World War II (1940–1945) they were packed away (Mugaas 2004, 137). The institutional interest in the documentation of exhibition preparations has not been consistent (pers. com. Wæhle 2019) and what is recorded in the archive is sometimes of a more random character (pers. com. Halvorsen 2021), although there might be other relevant information kept in the private archives of former museum staff members (as referred to in Lien and Nielsens 2016; pers. com. Wæhle 2019).



**Figure 1.** Left: “Fetish”, Africa, Congo (UNIMUS, UEM15001, Photograph: Ingvild Sonstad, CC BY-SA 4.0.) Right: The same “fetish” illustrated in Nielsen 1907, 104. The catalogue description reads: “Fetish against sickness. In the horn of the head the ‘dawa’ is inserted (the medicine). Its owner sold it to me, because the sickness had passed, and he had taken out the medicine. (Hbg.)” [Author’s translation].

for more than 100 years of display, as well as through differing curatorial regimes and museological paradigms.

On the background on a somewhat limited record of the museum’s engagement with the Congo material, we use the “fetish against sickness” (Figure 1) as the example to follow. It appears again in 1959, displayed in a travelling exhibition together with newly arrived artefacts from Thor Heyerdahl’s excavations on the Easter Islands (Rapa Nui) (Klausen 1959). We have found no lists of exhibited objects from the permanent exhibition that was built in 1984 other than a small information leaflet with a few hand-drawn illustrations (Mugaas, Pedersen, and Wæhle 1984), but we know that the figurine was exhibited again from 1999 (UEM 2000) until the Africa-exhibition was taken down in 2013.

### **Changing museological paradigms**

In 1904 and the following decades, “Africa” was presented to the Norwegian public in big glass displays (Figure 2), systematised according to the region of origin and group of





**Figure 2.** The Africa exhibition in Hall 1 of the newly built Historical Museum in Oslo, 1904 (Museum of Cultural History in Oslo, reproduced in Wæhle 2004, 29).

people. Influenced by the contemporary German understanding of culture, as a way of life, unique and characteristic of a defined group of people (“volk”) (Lien and Nielssen 2016, 132), Director Nielsen had also travelled extensively to find inspiration for the ideal set up of an ethnographic exhibition. He was meticulous about the need for geographical order and numerical categorisation in the museum halls (Ruud 2018, 77–82). If the 1904-exhibition was meant to represent Africa, with its different regions and peoples, the 1959 travelling exhibition was curated as an art exhibition. The material culture of Africa (predominantly fetishes and masks), the Americas (ceramics and clothing) and Oceania (weapons and masks) was displayed as “exotic” art, contextualised by the modern art movement in Europe inspired by the “primitive” art of aborigines (Klausen 1959). Arne Martin Klausen, one of the instigators of the travelling exhibition, was at this point also in charge of the ethnographic exhibitions at the KHM. According to Krisitin Iveland (2004, 78) Klausen was particularly interested in the aesthetic qualities of ethnographic objects and often juxtaposed these with modern applied arts to draw attention to the artistic achievements apparent in the traditional crafts. It is very likely that this was the approach of the permanent Africa exhibition that was built in 1963.

In 1984 and 1999 the permanent exhibitions became more anthropologically informed, aiming to *explain* Africa, by introducing the diversity of African cultures. Social structure, rather than material culture had been of main anthropological interest since the 1950s and 1960s, following an Anglo-American development in the discipline (Iveland 2004, 77, 80). In an internal document written in 1976, on the necessary changes to be made in the permanent exhibitions, Fredrik Barth (director of the museum from 1974) noted that the artefact collections were of very limited research value, although they might be good for illustrative and pedagogical purposes (cited in Lien and Nielssen 2016, 137). The artefacts were themselves no longer the main point of the exhibition – as comparative tableaux right next to similar objects from a different group of people (Lien and Nielssen 2016, 138).



As illustrations of social cultures, the exhibitions and catalogue texts were consequently organised in overarching themes such as “Subsistence strategies and way of life”, or “Belief systems and ritual life” (Talle 1999, 13–30, 39–49). In 1984, for the first time, as far as we are aware, the colonial circumstances in which the collections came to the museum is addressed (Mugaas, Pedersen, and Wæhle 1984), and it is further discussed in depth in the introduction of the 1999 catalogue (Talle 1999).

In 2007, the travelling exhibition *Kongospor – Norden i Kongo-Kongo i Norden* (“Congo tracks/traces – The North in Congo-Congo in the North”) curated in cooperation with the Scandinavian national ethnographic museums, was on display at the KHM. An accompanying exhibition (*Powerful Objects or Aesthetic Expressions*) based on KHM’s own Congo collection was made and displayed at the same time. Whereas *Congo tracks/traces* explicitly discussed the colonisation of the Congo with a focus on Scandinavia’s role in and experience of the colonial venture, *Powerful Objects* (based on the list of exhibited artefacts) had a strong focus on fetishes and figurines (apparently juxtaposed as either powerful objects or aesthetic expressions). The permanent Africa-exhibition built in 1999 was still also on display until 2013. Our “fetish against sickness” did, however, not rest for long. It was taken out from the storeroom again already in 2016 – This time in a fully revised effort to engage a modern diaspora community with the century-old collection.

### ***Congo gaze – people, encounters, and artefacts***

As noted above, the *Congo Gaze* project of 2016 was an effort initiated partly as a follow-up to the relationship established with the Norwegian-Congolese community during and after the *Congo tracks/traces* exhibition of 2007. *Congo Gaze* set out to investigate if and how the KHM collections are of any relevance to members of the Congolese diaspora living in Oslo today (Huseby and Treimo 2018, 32). A Congolese guest curator was engaged as facilitator, on a temporary contract (initiated by the guest curator herself through external public funding), and the curator was the main contact between the museum and the Norwegian-Congolese community (Huseby and Treimo 2018, 32; pers. com. Maroy 2021). She worked in the museum storeroom in close collaboration with the collection manager and the head of collections to familiarise herself with the collections and identify relevant themes for the planned exhibition in September 2016 (Huseby and Treimo 2018, 32). The project, as described by Huseby and Treimo (2018) aimed to identify objects in the collection that were perceived to be of special significance from a “Congolese” perspective; and to engage the collection meaningfully in processes of identity building among children and youth of Congolese descent (Huseby and Treimo 2018, 32). The guest curator was involved in the organisation of three store-room visits and two follow-up seminars, where participants from the Norwegian–Congolese community were invited to participate (Huseby and Treimo 2018, 32–34; Karlgård 2016). The members of the diaspora community taking part in these seminars, discussing the meaning and relevance of selected objects, were mobilised from the guest curator’s network (Huseby 2018, 69; pers. com. Maroy 2021).

Fredheim (2020, 3) observes that there is a tendency in the heritage sector to view public involvement as essentially good, while at the same time positioning citizens as both “resource and cast participant as beneficiaries”. The problems entailing from this approach and the inherent assumptions may also be arguably recognisable in the *Congo Gaze* project.

Summing up the experience for this particular context, the curator of diversity at the KHM and leader of the *Congo Gaze* project emphasised that the goal of making an exhibition did perhaps put an unwanted pressure on all parties involved, making cooperation difficult at times (Huseby 2018, 69–70; pers. com. Karlgård 2019). The Congolese guest curator has similarly expressed that common goals and interests should have been discussed more explicitly beforehand. In particular, the perceived abrupt termination of the collaboration, in addition to not having the opportunity to provide guided tours of the exhibition or to implement visitor surveys, as she had wanted to, meant that the Curator's experience had not been entirely satisfactory (pers. com. Maroy 2021). In a recent (2019) comparable attempt to decolonise a museum space in Britain, freelance museum worker and curator Rachael Minott notes that "The process was tense for many reasons. One criticism was the way in which the process mimicked colonial structures, most notably in how the museum used an authoritative voice to create interpretation that the institution felt it could defend" (Minott 2019, 565).

In the *Congo Gaze* project, participants of Congolese descent saw an opportunity to create narratives on the Congo from their own perspectives (Huseby 2018, 68). The use of a source community was initiated by the guest curator herself (pers. com. Maroy 2021), and for the museum staff, this was a new way of engaging the collections (Huseby 2018, 69). The guest curator selected artefacts to exhibit according to four themes: home, music, spirituality and textiles. Her expressed goal was to form the exhibition in a way that would be relevant to Congolese youth – for them to get to know the Congo – and as an arena for people to talk about their experiences and their stories (pers. com. Maroy 2021).

In the wake of the *Congo Gaze*, the project leader has commented that there was an expectation for the exhibition to be somewhat "different and unexpected", seeing as it was displayed in the experimental zone of the museum. Eventually, the most unexpected part "was perhaps that the expression of the exhibition was amazingly classic and similar to other exhibitions of artefacts behind glass, photographs and texts" (Huseby 2018, 74) [Author's translation].

In the context of this paper, tracing the history of the display of the "fetish against sickness", what should be noted, we argue, is not only the *expression* of the exhibition but also *the actual artefacts* exhibited. Why is it that from a choice of more than 5000 artefacts, it is seemingly always the same objects that are picked out to be representative? "Fetish against sickness" has in the course of more than 100 years represented "Africa", "exotic art" and "African culture", as well as "the contemporary Congolese Diasporas' perspectives on Congo". Throughout the efforts to develop and change exhibition practices, which have been informed by contemporary discourse, we still seem to be witnessing a continued reproduction of certain valued objects. Curiously, throughout its history of the extensive display, the vast collection has received little attention in regard to research. Thus, the scant information provided by Heiberg himself (the example from the catalogue text under Figure 1 being one of very few explanatory notes) is still the basis of knowledge about the artefacts. One might wonder whether this was the reason why the fetish was chosen as a prime exhibition object in the first place – even noted as "nice, valuable" in the list of exhibited objects from the 1999-exhibition (UEM 2000). As such, the "unexpected" similarities between a traditionally academically informed, as opposed to a publicly engaged exhibition, we would argue is not unexpected at all. To free a "new" exhibition

from the existing connotations, categories and value judgments associated with the collection it is made from proves, instead, to be consistently difficult. Without seeking to minimise the efforts and achievements of the diaspora community in the *Congo gaze* project, we would argue that the inherent colonial curatorial process, in which the collection came to be, continues to constrain the new voices of the project group as much as it has structured the institutional approach throughout the last century.

### Case description – Kon-Tiki

The privately owned Kon-Tiki Museum was launched in 1950, following Thor Heyerdahl's trans-Pacific expeditions in the 1940s. The museum is designed to support the narrative of Heyerdahl's quest to show that Easter Island (Rapa Nui) was first inhabited from the east, via South America, and not from the Asian mainland west of the island. His theories did not win scientific acceptance (e.g. Friedlaender et al. 2008; Linton 1954, 123<sup>3</sup>). Heyerdahl himself considered the rejection of his ideas and criticism of his research a display of academic arrogance (Heyerdahl and Lillieström 2001), and the notion of Heyerdahl as a fearless adventurer operating outside of the scientific establishment is deeply ingrained in the Norwegian public (Bentzen 2012). When established scholars have labelled Heyerdahl's research as pseudo-science, such academic rejection has been treated as point in case (Stalsberg 2006). What is notable, however, is that scholarly defence of Heyerdahl is not entirely uncommon in the Norwegian context. The academic supporters tend to acknowledge Heyerdahl's general engagement and courage. An example is a recent celebratory publication by zoologist Tor Bakke (2017, 89). The deflection of criticism of Heyerdahl, especially against the categorising of his research as racist, has also come from academics employed by or otherwise representing the museum (e.g. Hoëm, Ravn, and Solsvik 2019; Solsvik and Stokke 2019).

Regardless of the criticism, Heyerdahl is considered a national icon in Norway, and the Kon-Tiki Museum is among the country's most visited museums. The grand narrative prevails in the didactic profile of the museum. The Kon-Tiki Museum branding of Thor Heyerdahl as an icon has remained constant and resistant to criticism. It was therefore surprising when in an interview in 2019, the museum director declared that the Kon-Tiki Museum had initiated restitution of artefacts to the Rapa Nui as an initiative to "decolonise the museum" (Haagensen 2019). In the following, we explore how Heyerdahl's legacy is portrayed and used in the museum, in current research, and in the repatriation initiative.

### Exhibiting objects and the story of extraction

Since the opening in 1950, the Kon-Tiki Museum has exhibited Heyerdahl's expedition vessels and collections of ethnographic and archaeological material. To this day, the focal centre piece of the exhibition's main hall is the raft that Heyerdahl and his crew

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<sup>3</sup>The reception of Heyerdahl's publication was generally dismissive, along the lines of this anthropologist's review of Heyerdahl's 1952 volume:

The author's unquenchable enthusiasm for his theories is evident on every page. Again and again the "possibility" cited in one paragraph becomes a "probability" in the next and an established fact half a page later. Another book half the size of this would be required to deal with his evidence adequately, but a few general objections may be cited (...). (Linton 1954, 123)

used in their 1947 expedition, surrounded by archaeological and ethnographic artefacts and photo-documentation collected and formed in the years following the expeditions. Seeking further archaeological evidence, from 1955 to 1956, Heyerdahl and the Kon-Tiki Museum initiated extensive archaeological excavations on Rapa Nui to uncover archaeological remains in support of his hypothesis. A substantial part of the archaeological material currently on display in the museum was sourced during these excavations. Part of the museum is formed as an underground cave system, in which objects are displayed. In a telegram to the head of the museum in Oslo, Knut Haugland, Heyerdahl wrote:

Strictly confidential. Native friends revealed centuries old secret private family caves full of endless amounts of stone sculptures. Sensational scientific and cultural-historic value. More than a thousand sculptures about a foot in size loaded aboard Bjelland. Endless variation. All types unknown to science. Enough to fill entire new Kon-Tiki Museum completely. Storage space arrival Oslo. Necessary Exhibition space desirable since world sensation. Announcement in next few weeks. Greetings Thor. (Figure 3)

This history is referred to in the current Kon-Tiki Museum and the telegram appears next to a display of the objects that were collected. While the placing of objects behind bars in haphazardly crowded shelves may strike some as highly symbolic, there is no indication of a conscious attempt to present the objects as hostages. The display as well as the labels attached to it appears celebratory of the efforts to ship the material to Norway and contains no critical remarks. The museum exhibition does not address issues of problematic provenance pertaining to the material it displays. Rather, the objects appear as a contextualising backdrop to the main story, which is the story of Thor Heyerdahl.

### *The repatriation agreement*

During spring 2019, the Kon-Tiki Museum announced that it had initiated an agreement to repatriate thousands of artefacts removed from Rapa Nui by Heyerdahl, members of his family, and his crew in the 1950s. At an event in Santiago, Chile, in the spring of 2019, the



**Figure 3.** “Cave stones from Easter Island”. Display in the Kon-Tiki Museum, Oslo, 2019. (Photo by author).

agreement was signed by Heyerdahl's son, Thor Heyerdahl jr. as representative of the Kon-Tiki Museum, and officials of Chile's culture ministry.<sup>4</sup> The ceremony was part of a state visit by Norway's King Harald V and Queen Sonja, on the occasion of celebrating the 100 years anniversary of diplomatic connections between Chile and Norway. The repatriation is conditioned by certain requirements. The museum's director was quoted in several news articles saying that the process "will take time" as the agreement prerequisites that the objects should be delivered to a "well equipped museum" (e.g. Cascone 2019). The details of the agreement have not been publicly disclosed, but it appears that the repatriation will not be completed until satisfactory conditions for the preservation of the collection can be guaranteed, and that it is the Kon-Tiki Museum management who initiated and formulated these requirements.

Such requirements are not uncommon in connection with repatriation agreements, and not unproblematic. Despite the stated aim of decolonisation, the processes, conversely, mimic colonial hierarchies, reinforcing the museum's authority to determine what is best for the collections. Arguably, these are practices of supremacy sustained through a position of assumed neutrality. As observed by Minott (2019) in the case of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the "decolonial" engagement has become a rehearsal of colonial practice. The Norwegian-Chilean arrangement took place amidst an ongoing conflict between Rapanui activists demanding economic control of their indigenous land and reparations from Chile (IACHR 2017; IWGIA 2019). In essence, Rapanui leaders and community members were invited to perform at a mock-restitution of their cultural heritage at the event of the Norwegian state visit to Chile. No museum objects or human remains were handed over, and arguably the event primarily benefited the two sovereign states – not Rapa Nui. The Kon-Tiki Museum apparently "decolonised" without having to do any actual restitution.

### ***Human remains in the Kon-Tiki collection and Heyerdahl's research agenda***

Unlike the Congolese collection at the KHM, which has received very little scientific attention, the Rapa Nui material has been subject to more extensive research. In 2007, 2013, and 2017, researchers connected to the Kon-Tiki Museum and the University of Oslo conducted bone sampling from skulls collected by Heyerdahl, for the purpose of DNA analysis and to pursue Thor Heyerdahl's research into the racial ancestry of Rapanui. The Norwegian Research Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences, Law and the Humanities (NESH) explicitly advised against the sampling on the grounds of unclear provenance and ownership of the skulls (Fugelsnes 2019; NESH 2013, 2017, 2018). In their response to the issues raised by NESH, the principal investigator of the research project, biologist Erik Thorsby, maintained that although they had not pursued investigations of provenance, they "assumed that the collection had been conducted in agreement with the local population" (NESH case 2017/53). [Author's translation]

In October 2019, the editor of the Norwegian research ethics journal questioned the case of the most recent (2012 and 2017) unconsented act of extracting bone samples

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<sup>4</sup>The agreement is not publicly available. In an email to the authors dated 9th August 2021, the Kon-Tiki Museum states that the parties to the repatriation have agreed to keep the details of the agreement exempt from public disclosure until the process is further developed.

from Rapanui skulls (Fugelsnes 2019). Notably, however, the implications of continuing Heyerdahl's research agenda are not addressed. A reason could be that Thorsby is vague when he describes the scientific aims and implications of the bone sampling. In an interview with the journal, he claims that the research has to some extent restored Thor Heyerdahl's theory:

We thought it would be nice to be the first to confirm earlier findings, and that we, in Norway, could prove that Thor Heyerdahl was not completely wrong: native Americans were not the first to inhabit the Easter Islands, but they were early. (Quote in Fugelsnes 2019, 17). [Author's translation]

While Thorsby's use of the label Native Americans in this context seems to indicate reference to an indigenous population in South America, he must be aware that this was not Heyerdahl's theory. Heyerdahl's idea was that a lost white, culture bearing race came to the Americas and then travelled on to the uninhabited Easter Island, and to Fatuhiva where they taught the local people the arts of civilisation (Heyerdahl 1952). Heyerdahl's theory seems to rest firmly on ideas of scientific racism, hyper-diffusionism, and pseudo-archaeology (Hovdhaugen et al. 2002; Holton 2004; Andersson 2010; Magelssen 2016; Engevoid 2019; Melander 2020).

Because of Thorsby's vagueness in the interview as well as in research publications, the impression left behind is that Heyerdahl's hypothesis is still up for debate, although according to Thorsby's own research, there is no substance to any of these claims (e.g. Moreno-Mayar et al. 2014, 2522). It therefore seems odd that Thorsby would want to invoke Heyerdahl's research agenda in this context. The impression of an outdated research mandate is even further underlined when Thorsby, as late as spring 2019 (see Fugelsnes 2019, 16), invokes a 1956 research permit given by the colonising power – the Chilean authorities – to argue his right to perform destructive sampling from the contested Rapanui skulls.

### ***Unacknowledged supremacist***

Magelssen (2016) has argued that the performance of Thor Heyerdahl alludes to a conscious attempt at posing as the white bearded god, Kon-Tiki. In a Norwegian 1965 biography, the conflation of Thor Heyerdahl and Kon-Tiki is clear. The title of the biography by Arnold Jacoby is *Señor Kon-Tiki: The Biography of Thor Heyerdahl* [author's translation]. Even in some of the later biographies written about Heyerdahl (e.g. Kvam 2008, 2013) the scientific racism of his theories are left unaddressed or alluded to without critical comment (e.g. Evensberget 1994, 59, 92). In the 1965 biography, Jacoby makes the following declaration:

The people who had inhabited these caves had been extremely primitive. How could such a low-standing people have been masters of the enormous statues and walls on the island? These were achievements of noteworthy engineering and organisation! The legends came in handy. Once, the light skinned, bearded long-ears had lived in peaceful co-existence with the short-ears that were cannibals when the Long-ears had arrived on the island. (Jacoby 1965, 307) [author's translation]

The idea that indigenous populations are unlikely producers of advanced architectural and sculptural remains was not uncommon at the time, and it is still common to white supremacist positions. It is only in very recent biographies, one by Axel Andersson



(2010) and another by Per Ivar Engevoold (2019), that racism in Heyerdahl's work is addressed. The biographers' descriptions of racism and sexism were firmly rejected by Heyerdahl's relatives and another biographer in various Norwegian news media (e.g. Hem 2010; Rydne 2013). In a similar fashion, the museum's representatives have repeatedly rejected the importance of acknowledging the scientific racism inherent in Heyerdahl's research (Hoëm, Ravn, and Solsvik 2019; see also Gran 2019). Solsvik and Stokke have suggested that younger researchers' attacks on Heyerdahl are motivated by the opportunity to assert themselves at the expense of the renowned scientist and explorer (2019, 10). The uncovering of supremacist fantasies perpetuating Heyerdahl's research do not seem to have impacted either the popularity of Heyerdahl in Norway, or the dissemination of Heyerdahl's legacy in the Kon-Tiki Museum. Rather, the museum representatives seem to negotiate two positions: Firstly, claiming that Heyerdahl's attitudes and beliefs on race reflected the times. Secondly, refusing to reflect on what that means today. Both positions severely limit the room for investigating the traces of racialised knowledge production in current and historical practices.

### ***Exchange or looting: Heyerdahl's collecting practices***

In connection to the 2019 repatriation case, Heyerdahl's acquisition practice was described as "trade", "exchange" and "bartering" (Bakke and Solsvik 2019), and the collection of artefacts, and the research by Heyerdahl as a project of common interest to the Rapanui community as much as it was to the researchers and explorers (Nrk Ekko 2019). Quoting Heyerdahl's own descriptions, Jacinta Arthur (2015) has suggested that the situation was more complex: "One by one, our native friends reported that they could not move at night without someone trying to spy on them" (Heyerdahl 1974, 131 in Arthur 2015, 197). "As the news spread that the expedition was systematically disclosing and looting caves, the community reacted" (Arthur 2015, 197). Arthur contends that Heyerdahl's activities were a source of conflict in the community.

The labelling of Heyerdahl's collection practices as "looting", by one of the authors of this paper (Rasmussen) in an interview in the newspaper *Morgenbladet* (Lunde 2019, 25) in the wake of the repatriation news, was repudiated by the curators of the Kon-Tiki Museum:

For hundreds of years the Rapanui had a unique exchange system. Heyerdahl did not rob the objects. ... The natives and Thor Heyerdahl wanted this exchange: Heyerdahl traded with fishhooks and textiles, the natives with any kind of object that they understood that Thor Heyerdahl was keen on. The Rapanui had an impressive ability to read strangers, and they often managed to exploit the exchange system to their own advantage. (Bakke and Solsvik 2019, 28) [author's translation]

It must be assumed that the authors/curators base their characteristics of the natives on Heyerdahl's old records. This might explain the curators' employment of apparent tropes about natives as savvy tricksters in their effort to reject the characterisation of the removal of artefacts as clandestine loot. It is stated that Heyerdahl's practice was not controversial at the time, but it is notable that the curators are essentially keeping up the same discourse that Heyerdahl did himself in *his* time. Heyerdahl's stories are filled with accounts that in a current legal and research context testifies to looting and scientific racism. E.g. this description of the removal of human remains from Fatuhiva:

Inside the old terrace walls the temple ground was covered by grinning skulls. Sure, a specialist would be able to find out much from the big collection of skulls, but the native spy made sure that not a single skull or tooth was removed. In the end, Thor strolled into the jungle. The spy followed, for at Fatuhiva a man is a man, but a woman is just for food and sex. Other than that, she does not count. While Thor strolled away with the native in tow, Liv [Heyerdahl's wife] filled quite a few skulls in a bag that strangely did not arouse the native's suspicion when he returned. (Jacoby 1965, 71) [author's translation]

### ***Cultural diplomacy promoting trade***

In Norway, repatriation is seldom a result of court cases, but will more typically be solved through out of court-settlement. Thus, repatriation cases become a diplomatic tool through which other political, economic, and diplomatic agendas can be tied. The Rapa Nui repatriation agreement is an example of this. The Norwegian and Chilean common interest in the seafood industry and trade was the topic for the diplomatic meetings alongside the repatriation ceremony, where representatives of the Norwegian Royal family (acquaintances of Heyerdahl) and leaders of the Rapa Nui community attended. However, the repatriation remained purely symbolic as none of the agreed upon artefacts have so far been handed over.<sup>5</sup>

The planned return of human remains, documentation, archaeological objects and ethnographic material was coloured by a rhetoric of harmonising the portrayal of Rapa Nui communities past and present to that of the agendas and visions of Heyerdahl. In 1965, Heyerdahl's biographer reports that in the 1956 expedition "Everyone had heard about the voyage and addressed him as Señor Kon-Tiki. It was wonderful that Señor Kon-Tiki had come to investigate the island's history. Everyone wanted to help" (Jacoby 1965, 304) [Author's translation]. Similarly, in 2019, the Rapanui are grateful for the return of objects, but equally grateful for the research done by Heyerdahl, according to Norwegian newspapers (e.g. Kolberg, Vignæs, and Skrede 2019; Larsen 2019).

In an op ed in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, the directors of the museum and its board state that repatriation of human remains is "an important part of what a modern museum with relevant collections should care about", but maintain that artefacts should only be repatriated when the receiver is well equipped to take care of valuable collections, and they conclude that the Kon-Tiki museum in Oslo is the foremost cultural ambassador for Rapa Nui now and, they hope, in the future (Hoëm and Biehl 2019) [Author's translation].

Since the 1950s the framing of Thor Heyerdahl as a Norwegian hero and adventurer has endured. While the museum in principle acknowledges the right of Rapanui to execute the ownership of their ancestors as founders of their culture, they struggle to decentre Heyerdahl from it.

### **Heyerdahl and Heiberg: history-makers and living dead curators**

Heyerdahl and Heiberg represent very different contexts of collecting. While Heyerdahl had academic and scientific ambitions, Heiberg acted as an amateur collector in the

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<sup>5</sup>In an email to the authors on the 7 August 2021, the museum states that the repatriation is postponed because of travel restrictions due to Covid 19.

service of nation-building in Norway. Still, there are similarities that span these two collectors from different centuries. The national agenda is evident in the cases of both collectors. While Heiberg's collection practices appear to have been guided by vague and general interests and acquisition ambitions towards a national museum collection, Heyerdahl's collecting, and acquisition practices are clearly in cohort with his own research agenda. Both are formative to the museological representation of Africa and of The Pacific in Norway. The cases discussed in this paper represent two different trajectories; as part of the colonial administration in the Congo under King Leopold II, Dr. Inge Heiberg collected ethnographic objects partly commissioned by the Museum of Cultural history. In addition to his official participation in the colonisation of the Congo, through his formal engagement and position as Medical Director, Heiberg's contribution to the museum, and thereby impact on the museological discipline, falls into the category of a lay ethnographer, as described by Karina (2020); an example of how "... the 'African,' as a museological genre – and the ethnographic tropes upon which it relies – has been defined by, or has capaciously coincided with, lay imperial attentions for at least a century" (Karina 2020, 14). Heyerdahl, on the other hand, represents a later collecting and museum practice, that is still, arguably rehearsing colonial practices.

In the wake of the 2019 repatriation announcement, the framing of Thor Heyerdahl as a national icon, "one of history's most famous explorers",<sup>6</sup> was affirmed through media coverage of the agreement. In a Norwegian context, the racist theories of Thor Heyerdahl remain largely unacknowledged.

In contrast to the expressed wish of the Kon-Tiki Museum director to "decolonise the museum" (Haagensen 2019), there is little that indicates a break with practice in the repatriation case, the current exhibition, or the rhetoric surrounding the 2019 media coverage of the case. Rather, one might see this as a continuation of the colonial practice, and self-promotion under the guise of repatriation.

With an apparent sense of superiority, Norwegian and other European travellers maintained the image of the others as superstitious and mysterious. Arguably in this context, the label "fetish" itself seems to indicate a fetishist projection onto "the other". A particular focus on magic, fetishes, rituals, superstition, and ancestors, was prevalent in both Heyerdahl's and Heiberg's collecting. We argue that both museums perpetuate a continuation of these images.

Removed from their place of origin and de-contextualised to fit into the image of "the other", conjured by museums and collectors, the colonial collections in Norwegian museums testify to current and historical circumstances and agendas, as well as to specific collecting practices of individuals such as Heiberg and Heyerdahl. Despite efforts and intentions to reframe or even repatriate collections, the severed connections to the origins of the materials, and to the individual makers, users, and owners, leaves the meaning and individual experiences behind them obscured, while the agency of the collectors and curators takes centre stage. Minott (2019, 563) has observed that:

This imbalance allows the majority of museum ethnographic collections to be attributed to huge groups of people, across a period that often spans centuries. To BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] visitors this can feel lazy and careless, particularly when Euro-American

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<sup>6</sup>See <https://www.kon-tiki.no/> (accessed 18 April 2021).

culture is documented to present individual history makers grounded in specific dates and times that run from the deep past to living memory.

In the cases treated here, this phenomenon is reflected in the use of the collections as representations of anonymous “others”, while conversely allowing the collectors’ individual agency and role as “history maker”. In the case of the Kon-Tiki Museum, of course, this is specifically salient in the celebration of Heyerdahl’s achievements as the museum’s *raison d’être*. In both Heyerdahl’s and Heiberg’s case, their definitional privilege to curate remains. Current exhibitions and research remain conditioned by the frameworks and agendas laid down at the time of collecting. In accordance with Heyerdahl’s research ambitions and self-promotion, the museum exhibition is to this day a continuation of the representation of Thor Heyerdahl as the embodiment of Kon-Tiki, the bearded white god, as adventurer and national hero. In terms of research, his programme is ongoing. Though the content has shifted, the Heyerdahl brand and legacy are on the receiving end of government endorsement and monetary support. In Heiberg’s case, it is notable that the *absence* of research interest has been prevalent to this day. His aim was the representation of Africa, and this primordial agenda remains, despite attempts to disrupt it. While the exhibiting of Heiberg’s Congo ethnographica is unable to shed the collector’s representation of “Africa”, the Kon-Tiki Museum is perpetually conveying the fantasies of white supremacy inherent to Heyerdahl. In their very different ways, these two cases illustrate that museums are trapped in their collections. Heyerdahl and Heiberg still have the privilege as curators of the exhibitions. Attempts by museums to overcome colonial legacies by involving communities or stakeholders (often on a part-time conditional basis), to which the museum assumes some relevance, takes the guise of engagement-driven inclusion, but may, conversely, serve to re-enact historical, colonial, hierarchical and contingent power relations.

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