



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2023

Attempts to Decolonize Knowledge Production in Museum Practice

Grigo, Jacqueline ; Laely, Thomas

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rsa.5709>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-252920>

Journal Article

Published Version



The following work is licensed under a Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) License.

Originally published at:

Grigo, Jacqueline; Laely, Thomas (2023). Attempts to Decolonize Knowledge Production in Museum Practice. *Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques*, 53(2):119-151.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rsa.5709>



Recherches sociologiques et anthropologiques

53-2 | 2022

Praxis décoloniales et rapports de pouvoir dans la fabrique des savoirs en contextes postcoloniaux

Attempts to Decolonize Knowledge Production in Museum Practice

Critical Reflections on a Collaboration between Uganda and Switzerland

Jacqueline Grigo and Thomas Laely



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/rsa/5709>

ISSN: 2033-7485

Publisher

Unité d'anthropologie et de sociologie de l'Université catholique de Louvain

Printed version

Date of publication: December 1, 2022

Number of pages: 119-151

ISSN: 1782-1592

Brought to you by Zentralbibliothek Zürich



Electronic reference

Jacqueline Grigo and Thomas Laely, "Attempts to Decolonize Knowledge Production in Museum Practice", *Recherches sociologiques et anthropologiques* [Online], 53-2 | 2022, Online since 23 May 2023, connection on 11 January 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rsa/5709> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rsa.5709>



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Attempts to Decolonize Knowledge Production in Museum Practice Critical Reflections on a Collaboration between Uganda and Switzerland¹

Jacqueline Grigo, Thomas Laely *

In the last decades, the pressure on museums, especially on ethnological museums in the global North, has increased considerably. They are criticized for reproducing neo-colonial power relations and knowledge orders through common representational practices. The recent debate on colonial collections and the necessity of restitution has further fueled the discussion about the role and legitimacy of museums. Ethnological museums need to fundamentally rethink their practices. Since 2015, two museums in Uganda (Kampala and Mbarara) and one in Switzerland (Zurich) have begun an unusual collaboration. They are conducting joint research in both countries, pursuing an approach of “reverse” and “reciprocal anthropology”, and creating exhibitions together in dialogue. This article provides insights into the dynamics of the cooperation process between the three museums. It addresses the challenges of collaborating on an equal footing, striven for in a transcontinental project framed by structural inequalities. Is it possible to integrate all points of view, orders of knowledge and interests? Each of the three museums involved is entangled in specific historical, economic, and political contexts that influence and limit their respective scopes of action, interests, and possibilities for assertion. Furthermore, there is always the danger that historically grown, internalized and unconscious relations of dominance come into play. Special attention is paid to the conditions and processes of knowledge creation.

Key-words: conditions and processes of knowledge production; co-creation in exhibition making; decolonization of museum practice; transcontinental museum collaboration; museums in Africa.

¹ Parts of this article are based on GRIGO J., “Points of View. Kritische Reflexion Einer Transnationalen Museumskooperation,” in GROTH S., RITTER Ch. (ed.), *Zusammenarbeit(en). Praktiken der Koordination, Kooperation und Repräsentation in kollaborativen Prozessen*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2019, pp.79-109.

*Jacqueline Grigo, University of Zürich, Switzerland, Social-Scientific Study of Religions, jacqueline.grigo@uzh.ch; Thomas Laely, Institute of Social Anthropology and Empirical Studies, University of Zurich, Switzerland, thomas.laely@uzh.ch.

I. Introduction

In recent years, ethnographic museums have increasingly come under criticism for putting other societies on display without involving people from those cultures and their knowledge. The act of collecting foreign cultural artifacts and recent discussions about restitution have increased public pressure on museums to take a critical look back at their history and reassess their practices – collecting and conserving, researching and interpreting, meditating and exhibiting.

However, these questionings and debates are by no means new. On the one hand, they were already increasingly raised in the context of the emergence of a so-called “New Museology” from the 1980s and 1990s onwards (cf. Mayrand, 2014); on the other hand, they have been part of new theoretical approaches and discourses in cultural anthropology and museum ethnography from the 1970s on – in this context, we need only recall the writings of Michael Ames, Tony Bennett, James Clifford, George Stocking, or Anthony Shelton. In the last fifty years, there have been manifold critical discussions of the forms of ethnological collecting and exhibiting. A range of scholars and museum practitioners have questioned and critically examined processes of patrimonialization and museumization which have resulted in reductions, even downright mutilations, of cultural heritage in the separation of material culture from its contexts, its history and origins².

Expectations of the museum in the last decades have tended to focus on its “democratization” (Ames, 1992:xvi, 24, 89ff) and inclusiveness, towards opening the institution as a forum for sociocultural exchange and debate, towards plurivocality concerning representation, and towards greater accessibility to and renegotiation of the ownership of its collections. It is anticipated, and according to the current trends in museology rightly so, that museums are transforming from being inward-looking institutions that communicate unilaterally from an authoritarian and custodian position, to becoming outward-looking organizations that insert themselves permeably into society (cf. Laely *et al.*, 2019).

With the developments of recent years, however, the debates on issues of representation and decolonization have taken on a new vibrancy. In this context, international partnerships with museums and communities in the Global South have gained importance. For ethnological museums today it is no longer conceivable to process their collections on their own and present exhibitions authoritatively, with an exclusive voice. By working together and engaging in continuous dialogue, new routes can be developed, and the existence of ethnographic museums finally be legitimized. To overcome

² Renaud Chantraine has provided us with a particularly striking example, illuminating not least because he demonstrates the pitfalls and weaknesses of patrimonialization processes using a European example, an HIV activist heritage collection at the Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée (Mucem) in Marseille (CHANTRAINE R. *et al.*, 2019, pp.209ff).

colonial and neo-colonial practices, reciprocity and collaboration on an equal footing must necessarily be considered as guiding principles of these partnerships. However, this remains a challenge, as existing power relations, different structural preconditions and unconscious biases persist in promoting knowledge hierarchies and unequal participation, complicating decolonization processes. The conjunctures of knowledge production are highly topical in projects between partners from Europe and Africa in the field of museum work. Why? Two reasons deserve special mention. First, the international mobility of researchers, also highlighted in the call for this journal's issue, has also increased in the domain of museums. It has increased in both directions, although it is still characterized by colonial structures and conditions: the mobility is considerably higher – and easier – from North to South than vice versa, and, even more so regarding the strongly neglected South-South movements and contacts.

In the current article we will discuss the case study of a collaboration project between museums in Uganda and Switzerland ongoing since 2015, which has attempted to break new ground. We will critically analyze the cooperation process and reveal the conditions as well as the (re-)production of inequality and knowledge hierarchy, sources of connection and disruption, as well as discussing possible ways out of inequality.

The cooperation started and developed quite organically out of daily museum work. When in the mid-2010s we, the two authors of this article, worked at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich (EMZ), which also has a considerable collection of objects from the African continent, it was obvious that we sought contact with similarly oriented institutions, especially museums and cultural centers in sub-Saharan Africa, and explored whether such institutions might be interested in one or another form of cooperation and exchange. In this context, it is significant to note that we started out knowing that the concept and forms of museums in Africa had fundamentally changed and broadened in recent years.

At the outset, one of the Zurich Museum staff got in touch with the Uganda National Museum in Kampala (UNM) to ask for their knowhow and support to clean and pack smelly calabashes to be transported to Switzerland for an exhibition on “drinking skills”. Quite soon both sides became aware that they could profit from each other's knowhow and expertise. They decided to stay in touch and develop a longer lasting partnership in which soon a third partner was included, the Igongo Cultural Center (ICC) near Mbarara in western Uganda, which was set up in 2012 on the basis of a private-public partnership and sees itself as a community center. In mutual visits in alternating directions, it soon became clear that all three sides were interested in exchange and insight into the working and thinking methods of the other museums, as well as the respective other society – with its cultural characteristics. A common topic and research interest was revealed: milk cultures

in both countries. From its inception, it was clear to all three parties that the expectations and goals of the contact was a long-term institutional partnership, based primarily on research.

The collaboration developed into joint research in both countries, to publications, as well as to stationary and mobile exhibitions that were in part jointly curated. The reverse and reciprocal research approach allowed both teams to open up perspectives through an “external gaze” on their own context. On the other hand, it facilitated access to the respective “foreign context”, as socio-cultural background information and structural framework conditions were more easily available.

A second research strand documented and critically analyzed the cooperation practice itself. A (Swiss) documentary filmmaker was commissioned to document all important phases and stages of the process. On the one hand, this approach provided visual material for the planned exhibitions. On the other hand it pursued methodological considerations, in order to gain insight into the processes of cooperation, mutual expectations and behavior. This footage, as well as interviews with key persons of the project and other documents (internal reflection reports, Whatsapp-chats, minutes, etc.) served as a data base to be discussed and analysed collectively. The exhibitions themselves and their reception by the public were later documented by one Ugandan and one Swiss videographer each – the intended reciprocity as a guiding principle was to be realized wherever possible.

In the following we will first briefly outline the background of the current situation and of actual debates. in the context of ethnological museums. In the second part of this paper we will present the evaluation of the above-mentioned international museum cooperation process in detail and sketch out a possible route into the future.

II. Background: The current situation and debates

Up through the late 20th century, discussions around the best way to deal with cultural heritage and the rights associated with it were primarily associated with Nazi looted or stolen art. In the last few years the debate has shifted to cultural heritage originating in formerly colonial territories or contexts. How do we explain this shift in attention? There are several reasons which have to be located in a wider context reaching far beyond the heritage and museum domain. One factor has been the sharp increase in the significance of questions of identity politics in general. In Europe, there is also the question of South-North migration, which has been strongly mediated and politically shaped since autumn 2015. In the latter context, there is a heightened public sensitivity to the striking discrepancy with which objects from the Global South find access to the North, while people who move in the same direction are not easily welcomed.

These social and political developments have not emerged out of the blue, but result from a specific environment. It is characterized by the fact that in recent years a greater awareness of inequalities on a global scale has developed. These have led to a reappraisal of what we can call with Georges Balandier (1951) “the colonial situation”, as well as of coloniality, still existing today – a reappraisal demanded by both, South and North. This new awareness in turn gave rise to a newly coined or captured terminology, including concepts such as post-colonial society, post-colonial museum and “decolonization”, which in part became buzzwords. They definitely deserve a closer look. The concept of decolonization, as it is conventionally used in a broader and metaphorical sense, is fraught with ambiguities, and complications arise as soon as we try to make it concrete in specific contexts. “Decolonization” in its strict sense is the wrong term and the concept needs a deeper analysis. Decolonization, strictly taken, is not only impossible in the full sense of the term, nor can it be our aim to let disappear the after-effects of colonization, but rather to be aware of and acknowledge them. Or it may be taken in a broader sense, such as conceived by the ICOM International Committee for Collecting:

[...] decolonization is not simply a matter of representation or repatriation. It concerns the language we speak, the archives we use, the way we categorize, what we collect, how the building is designed, the way topics and objects are researched and how knowledge is defined and shared³.

With the debate about the appropriate use of collections from a colonial context, museum institutions in Africa are slowly but surely coming to the fore. Lately there is increasing talk on museums in Africa. To name but a few of numerous examples, ICOM UK was organizing a special session on the state of museums in Southern Africa under the title “Winds of Change” end of 2018; from 2018 up to 2020, the German Goethe Institutes in Sub-Saharan Africa were running a series of so-called “Museum Conversations” to bring together «international academics, museum experts and curators to discuss the future of African museums from a post-colonial perspective»⁴ – meetings took place in Kigali, Windhoek and Ouagadougou, Kinshasa, Accra, Lagos and Dar es Salaam, with the closing event in Windhoek in September 2019. The series led to the “MuseumFutures Africa” project, managed by an exclusively African team, which aims to bring together African museologists alone without the usual experts from the North and promoting peer-to-peer learning at local levels⁵. Heralding in his oft-cited

³ <https://comcol.mini.icom.museum/special-projects/decolonizing-as-a-verb/> retrieved 21 December 2022.

⁴ <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/wis/ser/mup/mug.html>, <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/ges/eu2/pog/21447655.html> accessed 18 October 2021.

⁵ <https://www.goethe.de/en/uun/auf/mup/wam.html>, retrieved 19 October 2021. See also <https://museum-futures.com/>. In 2021, the Uganda Museum was part of this initiative.

“Ouagadougou Discourse” in November 2017, French State President Emmanuel Macron called for «scientific and museological partnerships with museums and research institutions in Africa» – a speech that was and still is «sparking a fire [...] he will have a great deal of trouble extinguishing», as one commentator wrote⁶.

These debates also have stimulated new drive and debate to the cultural and museum landscape on the African continent. The relaunch of AFRI-COM, the International Council of African Museums, was announced in May 2019 on the eve of the “International Museum Day” organized by the International Council of Museums (ICOM). This only, pan-African non-governmental museum organization, founded in 1999 in Lusaka, had become dormant and dysfunctional after its first successful years of capacity building and networking among African museums. However, hope in its supposed revival soon proved to be immature. Yet the need for a superordinate, supranational museum umbrella organization remains quite essential, especially in the wake of debates on collections originating within colonial contexts in museums in Europe and North America, in order to strengthen the position and capacities of museums in Africa and not to have to approach each case bilaterally. This would require a new impetus and a multilateral basis for stronger networking among African museums and beyond. There are, however, quite a few promising and encouraging signs of a new beginning within the sub-Saharan museum landscape. These include recently founded or planned museums in Senegal, Benin and Nigeria⁷, partly as a direct result of the recent debates on restitution, as well as a number of cases in central and southern Africa. Most of these are local initiatives rather than externally driven. An exception here is the museum and cultural center Bëti-bi planned for western Senegal, which is scheduled to open in 2025 and is funded by the NGO Le Korsaa, an offshoot of the US Albers Foundation. Bëti-bi is not only designed to showcase African art but also to serve as temporary storage space for African artifacts restituted from Western institutions, stepping in for regional locales that lack the resources to preserve them⁸. Not least, the center plans to partner with institutions across the continent to exhibit historic and modern African artworks on loan⁹. In southern Africa, in former British and Portuguese colonial territories, numerous, mostly independent, non-governmental community and living mu-

⁶ Yves-Bernard Debie, Belgian collector and lawyer, primarily representing the art trade (DEBIE Y-B., 2018, p.149).

⁷ These include, for example, the Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) planned for Benin City. www.artnews.com/gallery/art-news/photos/david-adjaye-emowaa-benin-city-designs-1234576585, accessed 12 December 2020; or several museum projects in Bénin (https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/02/21/le-benin-ambitionne-de-creer-quatre-nouveaux-musees-pour-developper-le-tourisme-culturel_6114634_3212.html), accessed 19 Nov 2022.

⁸ <https://aflk.org/projects/bet-bi-art-and-education-center/>, retrieved on 7 June 2022.

⁹ ARTnews 16 May 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/t/albers-foundation/> retrieved on 20 November 2022.

seums of various forms have emerged in the last decades since political independence, some also under the name of Heritage Centre or Liberation Museum (cf. Thondhlana *et al.*, 2022).

It is clear that in the process cooperation and networking are a central part of a new concept of museum that is ready and able to accept and take up postcolonial challenges in both Europe and Africa. In recent years, there have been numerous approaches, including multilateral ones, to create new foundations for this endeavor. For example, the International Inventories Programme (IIP), with its “Invisible Inventories. Kenyan Perspectives on Restitution” project, which brought together several Kenyan and German partners; furthermore, the “Benin Dialogue Group”, a multi-lateral European-Nigerian collaborative working group which focuses specifically on the so-called “Benin bronzes” from which the “Digital Benin” online platform¹⁰ with an extensive database was launched in November 2022; or the [Re:]Entanglements website and exhibition series, which brings together several Sierra Leonean, Nigerian, Beninese and British institutions, and the “Museum Affordances” project based at the Research Center for Material Culture in Leiden, linking Dutch, British and West African institutions, to name just a few of the most mediatized examples¹¹. In July 2019, a conference in Cologne under the title “Museum Collections in Motion: Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters” brought together museum practitioners and scholars to discuss why

museums have failed in making visible their critique of stereotypical representations of the “other”, in working out an encompassing provenance research and in transforming their institutions, archives and infrastructures in ways that could effectively bring about new forms of restitution, collaboration, access, decision making and curation¹².

In short, numerous initiatives for decolonizing academic research and museum collections are ongoing, not only ethnological and anthropological ones, but also in art, natural history and regional museums.

In 2018, President Macron commissioned the Senegalese economist and writer Felwine Sarr and the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy to draw up recommendations for the return of the African cultural heritage stored in French museums and collections. Immediately after its publication, their catalogue of recommendations led to a controversial debate extending far beyond French borders and passionately pursued to this day, as was the case, for example, in Germany in the run-up to the phased opening of the

¹⁰ <https://digitalbenin.org/> , retrieved 1 December 2022.

¹¹ See <https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org/archives/tag/Digital+Benin.+Reconnecting+Royal+Art+Treasures> , <https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org/about-iip/> , Invisible Inventories - Kulturstiftung des Bundes (kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de), <http://re-entanglements.net/>, <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/research/projects/museum-affordances> , <https://markk-hamburg.de/benin-dialogues/>, https://markk-hamburg.de/files/media/2020/04/Digital-Benin_Press-Kit-2.pdf , all retrieved on 20 October 2021.

¹² <https://gssc.uni-koeln.de/veranstaltungen/konferenzen/19-7-museum-collections-in-motion>.

Humboldt Forum in Berlin from 2021 - September 2022¹³. The two authors recommend that artefacts should generally be returned to their countries of origin if museums cannot prove their origin or the consent to the transfer to Europe – but only if the return is demanded by the respective African countries of origin. These recommendations are significant when we consider that a substantial part of the African collections in the ethnological museums of Europe have been violently appropriated in the course of colonialism or by the overreaching of African societies of origin. And they are of even higher importance if we take account of the fact that today a good part of the African cultural heritage is located outside the continent. When it comes to figures, the estimate of 90 to 95% is often advanced, and by and large uncritically adopted in referring to a UNESCO study published in 2009 and cited by Sarr and Savoy in their report (2018:3, n.5). While it remains totally unclear what that calculation is based on and how the total number of objects is measured. Yet, or rather, all the more so, as we see by these debatable points, the discussion on restitution and corresponding recommendations may well serve as a starting point and encouragement for a new dialogue between Africa and Europe.

Embedded in a growing societal debate about European colonial history and its significance for the present, ethnological museums face great challenges. They have to deal today with a related set of broader issues: firstly the historical contextualization of the object holdings and the research of provenance required; secondly, and no less important, is the creation of public digital access to collections, wherever they are. Furthermore, questions concerning the return of artefacts do not, as a rule, find easy and unambiguous answers – in the vast majority of cases, several stakeholders are involved in this matter: there may be communities of originators, if such can be identified at all, or individual kinship groups, not infrequently rivaling each other, cultural institutions on various hierarchical levels, while it is majoritarily regional or nation-state authorities, or the nation-state itself, with its institutions, that seek control over these objects. It is thus becoming clear that not least the simultaneous establishment of a dialogue with possible partners from the societies or communities involved or implicated¹⁴ with these objects is crucial. The moral-ethical perspectives which go along with these issues as well as the (socio)political negotiation processes and renegotiations of cultural identity involved, are all also connected with the question of the future role of ethnological museums.

¹³ <https://www.humboldtforum.org/de/presse/mitteilungen/humboldt-forum-vollstaendig-eroeffnet/> , accessed 30 November 2022.

¹⁴ On the concept of “communities of implication”, see LEHRER E., 2020.

III. Generating and acknowledging knowledge. Which model for the future?

When museums in Europe and Africa engage in mutual relations which are supposed to be long-term and based on partnership, they have to remain focused and aware of the conditions of knowledge production. «Given the chequered history and epistemic violence that were integral to the development of museums in colonial Africa, any new forms of engagement between the two continents need to be wary of reproducing skewed power relations» (Mataga, 2018:61). In his research the southern African museum scholar Jesmael Mataga drew attention to how important it is in academic and practical collaborations to admit and integrate different ways of knowing, including the ones created by local communities. In order to analyse the current conditions of knowledge creation, we need to critically assess western knowledge, to understand it as an ethnoscience and – to take up Chakrabarty's terminology – to “provincialize” western science by closely examining its assumptions¹⁵. The prevalent perception still assumes a “center”, equated with the Global North, and a “periphery” identified with the Global South. In western industrial societies, the supremacy and universality of western scientific knowledge as opposed to, for example, local knowledge, is commonly assumed. According to this positivist position, science is able to decide the validity of other forms of knowledge – and this decades after the limitations and relativity of Western knowledge systems and epistemology have been pointed out, especially in ethnology, for example by Fabian, who gets to the bottom of the «denial of coevalness» in his *Time and the Other* (1983:31). In museum studies too and the practices based on them (collecting, preserving, exhibiting, researching and mediating), the more or less conscious assumption of a superiority of scientific knowledge prevails. More sensitivity to potential “epistemic injustice”¹⁶ is needed here.

If one follows the sociologists Berger and Luckmann (1980) and the philosopher Feyerabend (1981), it is difficult to prove the superiority of a form of knowledge such as science, for example. For scientific evidence also relies on a certain logic and rationality, and that depends on the respective frame of reference forming the basis for world interpretation¹⁷. It is true that the knowledge or cognitive culture of science (as opposed to most local knowledge traditions) reflects on the way knowledge is produced and has its own epistemology, with a methodology on rules of knowledge acquisition. Thus, it justifies its claim to universal validity (Neubert/Macamo, 2004:248). However, within and between disciplines there are also in science disputes over interpretation monopolies (Hitzler, 1994). Scientific

¹⁵ Cf. ALVARES C.I., 2001.

¹⁶ Cf. FRICKER M., 2007.

¹⁷ See NEUBERT D., MACAMO E., 2004, p.248; FABIAN J. speaks of the «inescapably positional relativity» of the experience of time as of every knowledge system (1983, p.29).

knowledge represents one of several possible frames of reference and is thus the result of interactions and historically specific, culture-bound, not value-neutral and not automatically universally valid (Neubert/Macamo, 2004:248). According to Latour (1984) and Knorr-Cetina (1999), local and scientific knowledge are equally embedded and constructed socially. The validity of a form of knowledge is determined in processes of social legitimacy. The validity of knowledge and the question of who gains the authority to interpret is decided in a social process (Neubert/Macamo, 2004:253). That often depends on existing power relations and on access to resources, and that occurs not least in the museum world. If the concept of a museum and many of the (technical) terms linked to it are of western origin, we have to ask whether that matters regarding their explanatory power, and the extent to which it moulds the conceivabilities of the forms and assignations of the institution as such. Gareth Austin put it in clear and concise terms: «Does it actually matter, in terms of their explanatory power, if the concepts used in [African history] are mostly of exotic, and usually Western, origin?» (2007:8).

The processing of the colonial heritage is not only concerned with the problematic collections themselves and the restitution demands associated with them (which up to now is still exceptional). The institutions entrusted with the custody of the cultural heritage are also accused of continuing the colonial construction of otherness:

Thus the museums have continued their symbolic colonialism with the eurocentric production of otherness, even though the political one was already history. To this extent, ethnological museums are to be understood as institutionalized carriers of colonial tradition. For the idea of collecting “other cultures” and presenting them according to geographical or systematic criteria makes no sense beyond the logic resulting from the colonial configuration (Kravagna, 2015:97)¹⁸.

As Sarr and Savoy write in their report, published in late 2018: «From its very origins, and within a logic of national affirmation, the museum allows for European powers to stage their aptitude for the absorption and classification of the world» (2018:37). In their view, restitution, through the transfer of propriety that it allows for, can break up this monopoly of control over the interpretation and the mobility of objects by Western museums (*Ibid.*, 2018:38).

Museums today are not only under pressure to critically examine the history of their collections, but also the issue of representation. Within ethnology, the interpretation, fixation and construction of “culture”, and the associated essentialist attributions and processes of othering, have been critically discussed, within the framework of the “crisis of representation”, since the 1970s with regard to the rewriting of so-called “foreign cultures”.

¹⁸ Translation by the authors, JG.

Within cultural studies, too, (visual) representation is seen as closely linked to power and domination relations. In this perspective, representation does not mean a neutral depiction of something that already existed before reproduction. Rather, it means an active selecting, structuring and shaping. How something is presented produces meaning and reality. It becomes problematic in particular when those who are represented cannot codetermine who or what is represented and how. Here symbolic power is wielded through practices of representation. John Tagg speaks of the «social division between the power and privilege of production and possessing and the burden of being meaning» (Tagg, 1993:6).

Walter Mignolo (2011) had argued that institutions like museums and universities have traditionally functioned to consolidate Western modernity and European imperial expansion. Mignolo sees museums and universities as the «holders of coloniality of knowledge and the makers of modern/colonial subjectivities» (2011:72). As European modernity spread to Africa and elsewhere, «ethnographic museums served to store the stolen memories of the colonized while Art History and Fine Arts museums served to build on the memories and achievements of Europe and Western Civilization» (Mignolo, 2011:72, cited in Mataga, 2018:60f).

The ethnological museums of the western world are currently faced with the challenge of overcoming their hegemonic heritage. Since the 1990s, «on the path of transformation to a type of museum still unknown today»¹⁹ (Kraavagna, 2015:100), they have been endeavoring to redefine their orientation and role and to develop new, “post-colonial” forms of museum work. Building up international cooperation with communities and museums in the countries from which the collections originate, and thus creating a space for multiple perspectives and multiple knowledge, is seen as one way of meeting the demands of the so-called New Museology. Against this background, numerous international cooperation projects have emerged in recent years. On closer examination, however, most of them do not live up to the expectations of postcolonial critique, since their design is still asymmetrical and unidirectional:

Cooperation was (or is) mainly unidirectional, displaying European exhibitions in African museums or aiming to coach African institutions in fields such as conservation, restoration, or curating, generally following a development approach. [...] cooperation all too often remains a one-sided consultancy-level knowledge exchange with afro-politan museologists (Laely/Meyer/Schwere, 2018:4)²⁰.

¹⁹ Translation by the authors, JG.

²⁰ In this context, the numerous (advanced) training schemes offered by Western museums (-organizations) should also be mentioned – from the Getty East Africa Program (<https://www.getty.edu/foundation/initiatives/past/africa/index.html>) to the West African Museums Programme (WAMP, <https://wamponline.org/someng.htm>), or programs run by the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation

Only a few collaborations demonstrate the joint practical implementation of projects, taking into consideration the expectations, goals and needs of all the stakeholders, sharing project management responsibilities, guaranteeing collective decision-making processes and equal access to shared resources that was attempted in the project presented in this article. From the point of view of the project staff of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (EMZ) the two authors of this article were part of, such an approach is a necessary step towards coming to terms with the past and an attempt to contribute constructively to decolonizing ethnological museums and ultimately to securing and legitimizing their continued existence. The model of originating communities visiting for a week or two to exchange with museum staff talking about the collections, artefacts and cultural traditions, as increasingly practiced by museums in the West in recent years, is not sufficient. The power dynamics between participants in such contacts and encounters should always be carefully considered. «Are we really decolonising or are we rather neo-colonising? [...] It is important to think through the power balances of these relationships», as the director of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum phrased it²¹.

Moreover, we should not forget that the collaborative activities have to be assessed in a context in which globalization, global flows, things, ideas and persons, bring about not only greater connections, but simultaneously also the contrary: disconnection and fragmentation, experiences of being left behind, of friction and incongruence. The integration of local actors into global networks is not only contingent upon new forms of communication or social relations, but has also led to new opacities and lacks of transparency. And this goes not only for museums and colleagues in Africa, but also for ourselves, for museums in Europe.

IV. The case study. Critical analysis of a collaborative initiative

Let us now turn to the above-mentioned example of a collaboration between Africa and Europe and examine the statements made so far in a concrete case.

What we see in the pictures below is an exhibition on wheels – they show the “Mobile Milk Museum”, which toured throughout Uganda for four months, visiting more than fifty villages and towns, and attracting over 30,000 visitors. The twelve meter-long truck houses an exhibition on traditional and contemporary aspects of Ugandan and Swiss Milk Culture. Much like Switzerland, Uganda has a strong tradition of dairy production. It turned out that the juxtaposition of the two examples – their own and the foreign – contributed significantly to the attractiveness of the exhibition.

and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), or the offerings of courses and residencies by large western museums like the British Museum.

²¹ Laura Van Broekhoven in an interview, *The Guardian*, 4 December 2018.

Visitors to the mobile milk museum can learn about both countries' cultural heritage in dairy. In addition numerous contemporary methods – both domestic and industrial – for processing and storing milk are presented. The exhibition also draws attention to related topics such as the consequences of climate change, local methods for producing cattle feed, organic agriculture and, additionally, social change and gender roles²².



Fig. 1-3: The Mobile Milk Museum on tour in northeastern Uganda, March 2019, photos: © Thomas Laely.

Before that exhibition, two in-house dairy exhibitions were shown by the partnering museums in Uganda (“Drink Deeply! Milk Exhibition” at the Uganda Museum in Kampala, and “The Power of Milk” at the Igongo Cultural Center in Mbarara in Western Uganda). In April 2018 the exhibition “Points of View. Visions of a Museum Partnership” opened in the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, and was dedicated to a critical reflection on the cooperation. All four exhibitions are the results of a trilateral research and museum partnership. The exhibition concepts, the research on dairy farming in Switzerland and Uganda as well as parts of the implementation of the expositions were developed jointly by an interdisciplinary and international team. The exhibitions mentioned are embedded in a higher-level project aimed at long-term cooperation between the three museums and ongoing since 2020 under the topic of use and recognition of herbal remedies and a corresponding knowledge transfer in both countries (2020-2026).

Setting the agenda together proved to be essential. In our case, from the very start it was clearly set out that the three partner museums would be involved with equal say and rights, not only in the stages of implementation, but from the outset and first and foremost at the conceptual phase. For the implementation of the determined activity lines and action plan, a series of reciprocal meetings were scheduled, always alternating the geographical location and combined with a research stay with the incoming partners.

A first-time general meeting of all operative representatives of the three museums was organized in September 2015 in Zurich, referred to as a “laboratory” as the general objectives were to get to know each other along with the various modes of working and functioning, as well as clarifying goals and expectancies on all sides. Other points on the agenda were know-

²² <https://www.news.uzh.ch/en/articles/2019/Milch-Museum-Uganda.html> , retrieved 16 April 2019.

how exchange on museological best practice, agreeing on fundraising procedures and activities, defining the internal organization as well as the tools of collaboration and communication, and eventually drafting an action plan and agenda for the next steps and contacts. In December 2016 the Zurich museum organized an international conference under the title “Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe: Opportunities, Challenges and Modalities”²³. The conference aimed to scrutinize and debate current and planned examples of partnership and best practices in cooperation. The majority of the speakers came from the African continent. The results were published in an anthology under the same title (Laely *et al.*, 2018), and in an exhibition mounted at the EMZ in 2018-2019 about the challenges of intercontinental museum partnerships under the title “Points of View”.



Fig. 4: “The Power of Milk” Exhibition at Igongo Cultural Center, photo: © Ali Nkwasiwe

Fig. 5: “Drink Deeply! Milk Exhibition”, photo: © Ali Nkwasiwe.

Special emphasis was placed on cooperation on equal terms and in mutual learning processes. Hierarchies of knowledge production should be avoided in cooperation as far as possible. The project participants strove for a partnership-based approach in which the different points of view and needs were equally taken into account and important decisions made jointly. From the outset, all participants should be involved in a continuous exchange of ideas on the choice of topics, conception, research, planning and implementation of the exhibitions as well as on the communication and mediation services associated with them. That was the claim. The three museums involved – a national, a university and a private community museum – presented quite different institutional settings and missions, making the collaboration not only demanding but also insightful. Controversies as well as searching for complementary perspectives and common ground contributed to mutual learning.

²³ The conference was organized and funded together with the Swiss Society for African Studies (SSAS), the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) as well as the Swiss Anthropological Association (SAA) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM).



Fig. 6: Working on the texts for the exhibition Points of view. Visions of a Museum Partnership at the EMZ Photo: © Marc Meyer.

All three museums benefited from the tripartite partnership. The partner institutions appreciated exchanging knowledge and museological skills, and being part of an international network – including financial support from Switzerland they would not get without each other – which holds true for both the Ugandan and the Swiss museums. The question of available financial resources and the fundraising necessary on all sides remained an important issue, since none of the three museums had a special budget for such collaborations. A senior curator at the Uganda National Museum emphasized another point: «The joint research has also strengthened the relationship between the museums and the local communities. It is very important to us to be able to give back to our communities»²⁴. With their partnership, the three museums also intended to try out new forms of information exchange outside the walls of the traditional museum, for instance by setting up the “Mobile Museum” truck. Each museum gained practical experience in working together with partners from the communities featured in its exhibitions.

What were the partners’ motivation and incentives, and what are the preconditions for a long-term partnership? The declared common goal of the collaboration was, according to the Memorandum of Understanding agreed at the beginning of the partnership, «to engage in cooperative museological exhibiting as well as educational and research activities, for the mutual benefit of the three institutions»²⁵. This «mutual benefit» came to be expressed in the three museums’ different expectations: The Ugandan Museums wished to benefit from the Swiss museum team’s expertise in curatorial, scenographic and technical terms. They hoped for an increase in reputation through the joint implementation of an innovative, modern exhibition. But most importantly, they looked forward to an intensification of their relationship with local communities and to increasing the social relevance of their museums through the planned joint research activities. Not least, the

²⁴ <https://www.news.uzh.ch/en/articles/2019/Milch-Museum-Uganda.html>, retrieved 16.04.2019.

²⁵ Internal document, cf. LAELY Th., 2020:29.

museums hoped that the cooperation would provide them with broader international networking and better access to financial resources. Those two reasons were also a key incentive for the Zurich Ethnography Museum. Moreover, this practical experience allowed it to live up to its principles, of leaving space for multiple voices and perspectives, and not just a unilateral representation.

A contradiction can already be found here in the basic expectations and objectives of the cooperation project. As mentioned above, the EMZ explicitly distanced itself from a “development approach”. In order not to cement a paternalistic attitude and existing hierarchies of knowledge, a unilateral transfer of knowledge and competence should be avoided. Critically speaking, it might be said that the Ugandan partners’ needs of capacity building were ignored to some extent for reasons of principle and also partly because the Swiss museum could not meet them.

What should be seen foremost here is that we are not simply in an area of museum work – socially and politically detached. Just as ethnological collections and cultural heritage are not a neutral good, current efforts cannot be seen in isolation from the increasingly urgent and acute questions about the legitimacy of ethnological museums and collections. Besides bringing new international contacts and recognition, the partnership with the Ugandan museums enabled the Zurich Ethnographic Museum to position itself better and contribute to current debates on the legitimacy of ethnological collections in general and on the issue of restitution of cultural property in particular, demonstrating additional possible means of collaboration and gaining practical experience in working together with partners from the societies featured in its exhibitions²⁶.



Fig. 7: Collaborative research in Uganda, Photo: © Carolina Cerbaro

Fig. 8: Collaborative research in Switzerland: visiting an organic dairy farm, Photo: © Thomas Laely

²⁶ Cf. <https://www.news.uzh.ch/en/articles/2019/Milch-Museum-Uganda.html>, retrieved 16.04.2019.

V. Unequal power relations due to structural differences

Transnational cooperation takes place neither in a neutral social, economic or political space, nor within homogeneous systems of knowledge and meaning. In the collaboration of the three partner museums unequal global power relations became apparent and were in fact obvious from the outset. Each of them is operating within specific economic and political contexts. Their access to financial means, provided with specific conditions, is very different. Contrasting infrastructural circumstances are also a challenge for the collaboration. Furthermore, each museum has its own institutional mission statement, mandate and goals. All of this influences each museum's processes and affects the ways the partners work together. The divergent conditions determine each partners' opportunities to promote their own interests, decisions and interpretations within the cooperative project.

In engaging in closer partnerships, we have to bear in mind that museums in Africa as well as in Europe have different strategies on collecting, interpreting and communicating material and immaterial culture in the 21st century. It cannot be assumed that shared narratives exist. Nevertheless, contemporary phenomena such as urbanity, globalized flows of objects and ideas, and modern technology translate into museum work, exhibitions and perceptions on all sides. Moreover, we have to consider that there may exist diverse understandings of cultural history and representation, as well as of best practice in African and European museum work, including in the relationships between academic anthropology and museums in contemporary Africa. The domains not least affected by a colonial legacy are (existent and non-existent) international cooperation, research and museum practice; to name just a few: artefact loans, claims for restitution, foci of research and collecting strategies, ways of curating and preserving, of exhibiting and approaching outreach. All this influences cooperation between museums within Africa too.

As a result of indigenous and historically grown conditions the parties involved in the cooperation described interact against the background of different prerequisites. These include economic factors (for example, unequal exhibition and wage cost budgets, access to third-party financial funds), the existence of – and accessibility – to the necessary infrastructure, macro-political framework conditions, the integration of museums into state structures and, for that reason, particular interests that need to be considered. The cooperation takes place in the field of tension between these various framework conditions influencing the processes of knowledge production as well as general decision-making and the agency of the respective museums.

As an example, the UNM has a very limited budget that hardly exceeds their payroll (with wages barely covering the employees' cost of living). At the beginning of the project, the partner institutions had agreed on financing

it jointly. Each institution contributed to fundraising activities. After all, it had only been possible to raise the necessary funds for the Ugandan exhibitions in Switzerland; the contributions from the Ugandan side consisted mainly of goods in kind, labor, local (exhibition) materials and services, all of which should not be underestimated, especially in Ugandan conditions. Notwithstanding a long period of uncertainty, the project could finally be realized. At the same time, however, this one-sided funding limited the autonomy and decision-making power of the Ugandan partners. The Swiss team were thenceforth responsible for ensuring that the conditions attached to funding were met. Furthermore, the predefined eligibility criteria for international projects of the main funder (Lottery Fund of the Canton of Zurich) were based on Swiss development policy objectives and thus had a decisive influence on the concrete content of the exhibitions. They partly determined the question of what knowledge is considered as relevant, elaborated through joint research and finally exhibited in the African museums. The (unequal) access of museums to economic capital not only results in a varied range of possible activities, but also in an unequal distribution of responsibilities and possibilities of influence within the project team: a better access to resources leads to a higher control over structures, processes of decision-making and planning as well as of knowledge production, e.g. for the contents of exhibitions.

As a consequence of the differing political and economic preconditions, the availability and reliability of necessary infrastructure also varied. Unlimited access to internet was not a matter of course in the Ugandan museums. In the UNM only authorized staff had access to the internet at all. And it was limited to certain times of the day²⁷. In addition, electricity and internet are regularly interrupted in Uganda due to technical issues, but also for political reasons. During the period of presidential elections in Uganda, for example, the budget for the UNM was frozen and internet access was deactivated for several days nationwide. Moreover, the availability and public accessibility to libraries differ in both countries. Those unequal conditions in the two countries created an unequal access to digital sources of knowledge as well as to their dissemination. They impeded the transmission of information and thus affected reciprocal planning and decision-making processes and made equal collaboration more difficult.

The respective structural preconditions, which were partly the result and remnant of colonial power structures, influenced the parties' scope for action, but also how they shaped their relationships with one another and de-

²⁷ The costs and technical conditions of internet (availability, speed of data transmission) vary highly. For example, the cost of broadband internet in Switzerland is on average less than 1% of the annual income, while in Uganda it is 40-50%. In addition, the speed of data transmission in Switzerland is disproportionately faster (on average 21,680 Mbps in Switzerland, and 2,350 Mbps in Uganda, for example, downloading a video of 53 min (1.2 GB) takes about 7 minutes, while the same process takes over an hour in Uganda).

fined, negotiated and asserted their interests. These unequal structures tended to weaken the position of the Ugandan partners and impair cooperation “on an equal footing”. An attempt was made to actively counteract all of that in implementing various measures: In the Memorandum of Understanding, for example, the claim to participatory cooperation was laid down in writing. Elaborately drawn up contracts regulated in detail the use of funds and decision-making processes with regard to joint financial resources. In addition, great importance was attached to transparent information flows as well as to high reflectivity on processes of knowledge production.

VI. Cultural differences?

In addition to such strategic, technical and structural factors influencing cooperation, and creating unequal preconditions, transnational cooperation and interaction processes also inevitably raised the question of the influence of “cultural” differences related to socialization. Do they create connections or disruption in transnational collaborations? Do they affect processes of knowledge production or decolonization? This question is problematic in at least two respects – but nevertheless significant for reflection on international collaborative work. First, it is not always possible in investigating such differences to clearly define whether they are in fact so-called cultural differences or whether structural factors lay behind them. Or is it not much more probable to assume that they interact with one another – as will be suggested by a practical theoretical perspective outlined below? Secondly, the focus on “cultural differences” harbors the danger of essentializing attributions and thus of reifying fixed boundaries of meaning and culture. In order to avoid a cultural comparison in the sense of a juxtaposition of separate units or entities, we would therefore like to base our observations on a conceptual comprehension that understands culture not as a “common way of life”, as ideas or as text, but as knowledge-based social practices. These practices are subject to incorporated, action-guiding systems of meaning and “cultural”, locally rooted codes which are in turn anchored in superpersonal orders of (local) knowledge. The latter comprise various elements: a methodological knowledge²⁸, a motivational-emotional knowledge²⁹ and a knowledge in the sense of an interpretative understanding, i.e. a habit-based, «routinized attribution of meanings to objects, persons, abstract entities, the “own self”, etc.»³⁰ (Reckwitz, 2003:292). The incorporated cultural knowledge orders thus provide the actors with patterns of thought, perception, evaluation and action and convey to them, in the form of a

²⁸ By this Reckwitz understands «scriptural procedures, how to produce a series of actions “competently”» (2003, p.292).

²⁹ «An implicit sense of “what one really wants”, “what it is about” and what would be “unthinkable”» (RECKWITZ A., 2003, p.292).

³⁰ Translation by the authors, JG.

“practical sense” anchored in their habitus, a feeling for what appears to be right, appropriate, beautiful or logical in concrete situations and social contexts. With Andreas Reckwitz, knowledge in this sense may be understood as a «conglomerate of contingent patterns of meaning that enable and regulate everyday attributions of meaning and understanding in a culturally specific way, and thus as necessary conditions of action as well as of the social» (Reckwitz, 2004:42). The practical knowledge does not correspond to a «consolidated knowledge of facts or solutions, but to a doing knowledge», which is used creatively and exploratively in practice as «knowing how» or «implicit knowledge» (Hörning/Reuter, 2004:11)³¹, according to the current situational requirements.

From this point of view, cultural differences are not perceived as differences between fixed units or as distinct breaks between tight systems of ideas or collectives, but as «partly routinized, partly conflictual active interpretative appropriations of different “overlapping” elements of meaning and activity which may be of quite different spatial and temporal origin»³² (Reckwitz, 2005:100ff). The implicit collective orders of knowledge and elements of meaning are constituted in different contexts of transmission and socialization and correspond to different backgrounds of experience and objective structures. They are locally rooted but increasingly intermingled with global reference systems.

It is therefore to be expected in transnational collaboration that the incorporated knowledge orders and the routines of interpretation, judgments and actions based on them differ. So what may be taken for granted in one socialization context, what is regarded as right, appropriate or beautiful, may be perceived quite differently in another. This circumstance requires increased attention and a willingness to reflect and to question the assumedly self-evident as well as the ability to recognize and endure the contingency of one’s own views and constructions of reality. Concrete differences between the partners of the Ugandan museums and those of the EMZ were evident, among other things, in working procedures, interaction manners and prioritization. However, the observed “cultural” differences cannot be reduced to diverging, locally located dispositions of meaning and activity. They are also embedded in the orders of knowledge of different disciplines and professional cultures.

Different approaches between the partners of the Ugandan museums and those of the EMZ were found for example in interaction rituals (the ways of greetings or farewells, or how official meetings were opened and closed, participants introduced and appreciated, or testimonies of respect shown). One of the curators of UNM observed it as follows: «The way we (Ugan-

³¹ Translation by the authors, JG.

³² Translation by the authors, JG.

dans) conduct functions are mostly very formal. [...] The people are addressed bureaucratically or according to their positions of authority. The Swiss tend to have simplicity in approach to addressing functions». Over time, a mutual adaptation of those practices was observed. Also the handling of time and appointments, the importance of punctuality was noticed to be different. Adherence to set times was indeed a regularly recurring issue, from both sides. The minor frictions associated with those matters were resolved through discussions within the team. Moreover, there were differences observed in the relationship between pragmatism and perfectionism, in inner-institutional power distantiating, i.e., the tendency towards more hierarchical (Ugandan team) or more egalitarian relationship (Swiss team) formations within the respective museum teams.

In developing the narrative of the milk exhibitions in Uganda, the question arose as to the value and status of milk to be conveyed. Should it be presented unreservedly as a healthy and valuable food (“The Beauty of Milk”)? Or should we not also focus on the downsides of global milk production and consumption? The differing assessments of milk were based on different prioritizations of knowledge elements which, in this case of course, was anchored in different structural contexts. The slogan “Milk is good for you” has a different meaning (and truth) in Uganda, where the malnutrition rate of children is 41 percent, than in Switzerland where (mass) animal husbandry and overproduction dominate the discourses on animal ethics, health and global ecological problems. In the exhibitions, the various views were finally juxtaposed and contextualized, thus leading to a more multi-faceted narrative. «The individual members of the collaboration had different skills, experiences and knowledge which complemented each other [...]» as an ICC curator phrased it. It becomes clear from the observation and analysis of collaborative interaction that in the course of the cooperation many of the mentioned differing social practices (“cultural” differences) mentioned were – consciously or unconsciously – adapted to each other or “hybridized”. This was evident not only in an alignment of manners and time management, but also in the development of a common communication culture, as well as in planning processes, modes of operation and the definition (agreement on) and synthesis of relevant factual knowledge. “Cultural differences” were thus dealt with in the concrete practice of cooperation through processes of negotiation and clarification or in a rather unconscious mutual adaptation and syncretization – and transformed into new forms of social practice.

Conflicts that could be traced back to so-called “cultural differences” were far less significant than originally expected. Moreover, those differences also had positive effects. The team members are convinced that this was also due to the relationship of trust and general goodwill that developed between the project members over time. As the ICC curator puts it:

All these differences affected the cooperation largely in a positive manner because they encouraged individuals to wish to know more about the culture of the partners. In the field visits and research attention to detail was a must and therefore clear information was obtained. To me the cultural differences were never felt because of the cohesion among the group members. The objective goals were clear to every member, so the cultural difference brought out the different expertise, knowledge and skills helped to achieve the goals. Up to now I have not noted clear conflict because of cultural differences (2019, internal reflection paper).

In our opinion, among the most important gains of this cooperation project are the appreciative personal relationships, great intrinsic motivation and a shared enthusiasm for “the common goal”, while leaving open the possibility of each institute pursuing its own goals. The decisive factor for this resource was probably also the special starting position of the project, which placed collaboration itself as well as the claim to partnership and equality at the center of the cooperation. This increased attention to social relations, as well as potential areas of conflict meant they could be dealt with anticipatively or simply averted. Consequent regular exchanges and transparent communication turned out to be one of the important preconditions in maintaining those mutually appreciative relationships and avoiding potential misunderstandings and conflicts. It is worth mentioning here that towards the end of the cooperation, that regularity in communication was temporarily broken off. At that time “independent” activities and decisions without the involvement of the partners were practiced on both sides, leading to some misunderstandings and situations of mistrust³³. Despite such moments of dissent and tension: in the big picture, the so-called “cultural differences” could not be seen as a relevant source of disruption.

VII. Unconscious bias: “Incorporated inequality”

This optimistic assessment must not obscure the fact that inequality also manifests itself on a deeper level which is difficult to access and beyond well-meaning intention. What is meant here are little reflected upon, hierarchical routines of mutual attribution and evaluation, which also represent a challenge to collaboration. Such prejudices are empirically difficult to recall, since they function like unconscious and super-personal interpretative films. They are concealed in the seemingly self-evident nature of actions and thoughtless utterances and usually reveal themselves only in a critical retrospective. They can be seen, for example, in the astonished exclamation of the experienced Swiss scenographer when faced with the computer-animated exhibition plans of his Ugandan colleagues: «They are further ad-

³³ For example, the Swiss partners felt ignored in the decision-making process over what truck should be purchased or rented and under what conditions for the Mobile Milk Museum. Conversely, the Ugandan partners were included very late in a publication project in which they felt misrepresented, causing some bad blood.

vanced than we are!», in which the idea of African backwardness resonates. Prejudices were also expressed in the Swiss team's initial, latent fear that the Ugandan partners would not fulfill their obligations, would embezzle funds or be unable to carry out certain activities independently. Such anticipations sometimes resulted in a seemingly paternalistic need for control, expressed for example in constant questions about the current status of activities or in gentle pressure to push processes forward. In these practices, hegemonic orders in the sense of internalized, asymmetrical routines of mutual positioning manifested themselves in a subtle way. They are rooted in the «contact history» (Clifford, 1997:16), the mutual history of reception as well as the specific cultural orders of knowledge resulting from them. They influence how the project partners perceive themselves and the other, and how they relate to each other. Here, regular critical review is crucial.

Despite the intention and the “good will” to work together consistently on equal terms, there is the danger that a subliminal imbalance of power will take effect in the collaboration processes and in negotiations about which knowledge is legitimate or which approach is appropriate. Inadvertently, historically grown, internalized and unconscious dominance relations reproduce themselves in the mutual attributions, practices and decisions. This was also evident, for example, in the discussions about the postponement of the exhibition opening dates of the Ugandan museums: after the date for the opening in the UNM had already been set weeks earlier, the Swiss team, for practical and personal reasons, pushed through a later opening of the exhibition in Kampala and in Mbarara – although this thwarted the holiday plans of a Ugandan partner and necessitated looking for an alternative space for a photo exhibition planned later. Whether this would have been conceivable the other way around remains uncertain. Such dynamics are treacherous, since they do not take place intentionally and subtly undermine the explicit claim to equal collaboration. As a precautionary measure great care was taken to reflect critically on the mode of cooperation, decision-making processes and communication practices and to identify subliminal manifestations of dominance.

In many cases, these were only recognizable retrospectively, because deadlines and practical constraints in the concrete action sometimes obscured the view on ideological claims. In addition, the question also arises as to what extent an exaggerated consideration and focus on equal participation cannot again be an expression of dominance. The following quotes were recorded during a joint exhibition workshop in Kampala:

Well, I pretty much held off this morning because I have some questions about the procedure. If we already call our project “points of view”, we make sure that both sides have enough space in processes

of categorization [with regard to the planned exhibition concept] or indeed the clustering which then also structure the way of thinking³⁴.

Another European project partner countered this statement:

I find it more important to engage in the interaction and also to discuss certain concepts or possible implementations, rather than deliberately withholding, because then I would feel that this again would be tantamount to patronizing.

These kinds of reflections on ideological aspects, such as subtle power relations, were rated differently by the partners. They were particularly important to the European team, while they did not seem to matter much to the Ugandan partners. This can be explained *inter alia* by the different motivations that led the three institutions to work together. For the EMZ, dealing with the colonial history and the hegemonic heritage was an important motivation for cooperation.

From the previous findings of the analysis of the collaboration it becomes clear that the claim of a consistent cooperation “on an equal footing” is difficult to fulfil due to the unequal prerequisites mentioned above. Does this repeated, rhetorical emphasis on equal rights not obscure existing power relations in the first place? The self-critical reflection in the course of the cooperation process led to ever new questions: Do the “right” museums work together? Wouldn’t a Swiss museum of local history, dealing primarily with its own cultural heritage, much like the Ugandan partner museums, have been the appropriate partner? Is it not, in turn, an expression of a neo-colonial and not only a self-critical attitude that the reflective exhibition, which discusses the partnership itself on a meta-level, is taking place precisely at the Swiss museum? Were the communities whose objects can be seen in the milk exhibitions adequately included? Or are traditional, one-sided representational practices reproduced here – only on an intra-national rather than an international level? Isn’t the whole project an artificial “laboratory situation” in which cooperation becomes an end in itself? Were the Ugandan partners forced to constantly reflect on possible power relations, even though they might not have been so interested in these questions? Is perhaps the penetrating claim to equality and democracy ultimately a cultural imperialist assertion of a “western” value? Or were the Ugandan partners even abused for the purpose of a postcolonial self-confirmation³⁵?

VIII. Results and effects of the cooperation

Even if collaboration on an equal footing, while never fully attainable, should remain the ultimate goal, the cooperation project, in our opinion, shows a considerable number of highly pleasing and positive effects: A

³⁴ Internal recording.

³⁵ Cf. BOAST R., 2011.

large part of the set goals could be achieved and were partly exceeded, to the benefit of all three partner museums. Within a relatively short period of time, three highly regarded and very positively rated exhibitions on the subject of milk were held in Uganda, as was the Points of View exhibition in Switzerland. According to one of the curators of the UNM, the special feature of the cooperation lies in the common planning and implementation of the project from the ground up:

There is a lot to learn from this collaboration because it is different from most collaborations that happen in this country or in Africa. Most collaborations are North-South ending. You find a company or individual or organization that looks for funds in Switzerland or in Europe to pay for a project and then you get the partners that say: “We have this money, we are coming to do this”. But this is a cooperation we were starting from scratch. Compared to previous cooperations with other institutions in Europe or the USA in which projects were partly imposed on local needs, this had a very positive effect on the initiative of the employees, the success and the effectiveness of the project³⁶.

The Drink Deeply! Milk Exhibition has had a beneficial effect on the reputation of the UNM. It received broad public attention and was praised not only by regional media but also by local dignitaries. The same applies to the ICC. Thousands of children and adults were thus connected with their cultural heritage and learned new (and traditional) things about milk culture(s) in their country and abroad. The interactive educational museum work for children was further developed and expanded. Free admission also allowed urban street children and those living in precarious situations to visit the exhibition. Special events were organized for these target groups, partly sponsored by the local dairy industry. The connection between the two Ugandan museums and the local communities could be strengthened by their participation in the exhibition concept, by the preceding research, but also by their inclusion in the accompanying programs of the exhibitions. In the Mbarara region where the ICC is located, the exhibition led to a sustainable networking of various stakeholders involved and interest groups in the local dairy sector. A special “Day of the Milk” that resulted from these connections and involvements, is from now on planned as an annual event.

By depicting both, Ugandan as well as Swiss dairy cultures in the two Ugandan exhibitions, and by interpreting the “own” and the “other” from both sides, the traditional, one-sided direction of representation and the common center-periphery logic were broken. «This is a new era now», remarked the senior curator of the Igongo Cultural Center in his speech at the exhibition’s opening: «Until now, we had African objects being displayed in European Museums. Now, here we have European objects exhibited in an African museum». The relations between the museums and their emp-

³⁶ Interview in Zurich, September 2017.

loyees were strengthened. On the basis of this relationship of trust, further steps in the cooperation project can be taken, the cooperation does not end with the four exhibitions. The aim is a long-term, institutionalized and transnational partnership.

Currently, at the instigation of the Ugandan museums, the next phase will be the research and exhibition project “Traditional Medicine in Transition. The role of museums as agents of change for culturally embedded and sustainable knowledge transfer in Uganda and Switzerland”, with a term currently planned until 2026. A new project team with the necessary expertise and specialized knowledge on both the Ugandan and Swiss sides has been put together and the necessary funding has been raised to a large extent. Medicine and health, in turn, are areas that are marked by a power imbalance in knowledge production and a Eurocentric understanding. After initial discussions and meetings in Uganda and Switzerland, the Ugandan participants have been in north-eastern Switzerland for initial exploratory research, just before the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic. The local Swiss medicinal plant knowledge and the corresponding practices are to be contrasted with those of Uganda in the (travelling) exhibitions in Uganda as well as in Switzerland, and related, very topical issues including bio-piracy are to be raised.

IX. Conclusion

The case study discussed in this paper documents, among other, an attempt to work on and overcome neocolonial conditions and practices in the context of museum work. It has revealed that even if the goal of a transnational North-South project focuses strongly on sharing and collaboration on equal terms, hierarchical tendencies in the processes of knowledge production and general collaboration can hardly be avoided. They remain an ongoing challenge due to unequal structural preconditions and – even more difficult to detect – “incorporated inequalities”, unconscious bias and mutual social positioning. Under these conditions, equality cannot be seen as something static, a fixed state, but as an attitude. Striving for awareness of power structures and privileges must be an ongoing process and is never entirely completed. This process requires continuous negotiations and repositioning between the partners, a continuous highly self-critical reviewing, a decidedly attentive collaborative practice and a generally benevolent basic attitude³⁷. Only in this way can unconscious relations of dominance, internalized feelings of superiority or inferiority, and epistemic injustice be overcome – a basic prerequisite for postcolonial museum work – on an individual interactive level and on the macro-level.

³⁷ Cf. GLOKAL, 2017, p.77.

Decolonization of museums cannot be reduced to repatriation or returns of artefacts coming out of colonial contexts – there are many other forms of colonialism and dominance. Just as urgent is transforming the institution itself. Decolonization in this context must mean rethinking the structure of the museum, its aims, alignments, its practices of representing and “othering”, patrimonialization, and all above: its understanding of knowledge and – the assumptions behind and processes – of knowledge production. Decolonization must be a continuous process; it is rather an aspiration and claim than a state. At the heart of decolonization of museums must be an opening towards external partners and their forms of knowledge – and in particular a willingness to enter into mutual commitments on the basis of partnership. In the process, cultural history museums have to acknowledge and integrate different forms of knowledge and not only the epistemic tradition of western science. When museums in Africa as well as in Europe adopt more inclusive curatorial practices they can become «pluriversal places» (Mataga, 2018:58) creating spaces where a range of epistemologies may co-exist which are relevant today to the environments which they are located in.

REFERENCES

- ALVAREZ CL.,
 2001 *Recapturing Worlds. The Original Multiversity Proposal*,
http://vlal.bol.ucla.edu/multiversity/Right_menu_items/Claude_proposal.htm .
- AMES M.,
 1992 *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press.
- APPADURAI A.,
 2000 *Modernity at Large. Cultural dimensions of globalization*, Minneapolis.
- AUSTIN G.,
 2007 “Reciprocal comparison and African history: tackling conceptual Eurocentrism in the study of Africa’s economic past”, *African Studies Review*, Volume 50, Number 3 (December), pp. 1-28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27667238>.
- BALANDIER G.,
 1951 “La situation coloniale: approche théorique”, *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, Vol.11, pp.44-79.
- BENNETT T.,
 1995 *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Hove, East Sussex, Psychology Press.
- BERGER P. L., LUCKMANN Th.
 1980 *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*, Frankfurt a. M., Fischer.
- BOAST R.,
 2011 “Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited”, *Museum Anthropology*, 34/ 1, pp.56-70.
- BOSWELL R.,
 2016 “Introduction: Continuities and Contractions in Postcolonial African Anthropologies,” in BOSWELL R., NYAMNJOH F.B. (ed.), *Postcolonial African Anthropologies*, Cape Town, HSRC Press, pp.1-12.
- BOURDIEU P.,
 2009 *Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis auf der ethnologischen Grundlage der kabylischen Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2nd edition (original in French 1972).
- CHANTRAINE R., MOLLE Fl., MUSSO S.,
 2019 “AIDS Politics of Representation and Narratives: A Current Project at the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations (Mucem) in Marseilles, France”, *Oncurating.org*, 42, pp.206-218.
- CLIFFORD J.,
 1997 “Museums as Contact Zones”, in CLIFFORD J.(ed.), *Routes: Travel and Transformation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, pp.188-219.
- DEBIE Y-B.,
 2018 “Restitution: The Tides of History, or a Trend of the Times?”, *Tribal Art*, 89, autumn, pp.146-149.
- FABIAN J.,
 1983 *Time and the Other. How Anthropology makes its Object*, New York, Columbia University Press.

- FEYERABEND P.,
1981 *Wider den Methodenzwang*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp.
- FRICKER M.,
2007 *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- FUCHS M.,
2012 “Kulturbegriffe, Kultur der Moderne, kultureller Wandel”, in BOCKHORST H., REINWAND V.-I., ZACHARIAS W. (Hg.), *Handbuch Kulturelle Bildung*, München, Kopaed, pp.63-67.
- GLOKAL e.V. (ed.),
2017 *Das Märchen von der Augenhöhe. Macht und Solidarität in Nord-Süd-Partnerschaften*, Berlin.
- GRIGO J.
2019 “Points of View. Kritische Reflexion Einer Transnationalen Museumskooperation,” in GROTH S., RITTER Ch. (ed.), *Zusammenarbeit(en). Praktiken der Koordination, Kooperation und Repräsentation in kollaborativen Prozessen*, Bielefeld, Transcript, pp.79-109.
- HALL St.,
1982 “The rediscovery of ideology: Return of the repressed in media studies”, in GUREVITCH M., BENNETT T., CURRAN J., WOOLLACOT J. (ed.), *Culture, Society and the Media*, London, Routledge, pp.52-86.
2004 *Ideologie, Identität, Repräsentation*, Hamburg, Argument Verlag, Ausgewählte Schriften, Band 4.
- HITZLER R., HONER A., MAEDER Ch.,
1994 *Expertenwissen. Die institutionalisierte Kompetenz zur Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit*, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag.
- HOFSTEDE G. J., MINKOV M.,
2004 *Cultures and Organizations – Software of the Mind. Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, Columbus, McGraw Hill.
- HÖRNING K. H., REUTER J.,
2004 *Doing Culture. Neue Positionen zum Verhältnis von Kultur und sozialer Praxis*, Bielefeld, Transcript.
2004 “Doing Culture: Kultur als Praxis”, in HÖRNING K. H., REUTER J. (Hg.), *Doing Culture. Neue Positionen zum Verhältnis von Kultur und sozialer Praxis*, Bielefeld, Transcript, pp.9-15.
- KNORR-CETINA K.,
1999 *Epistemic cultures. How sciences make knowledge*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- KRAVAGNA Chr.,
2015 “Vom ethnologischen Museum zum unmöglichen Kolonialmuseum”, *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaft*, 1, pp.95-100.
- LAELY Th.,
2020 “Restitution and beyond in contemporary museum work: Re-imagining a paradigm of knowledge production and partnership”, *Contemporary Journal of African Studies*, 7 (1):17-38, doi: 10.4314/contjas.v7i1.2.
- LAELY Th., MEYER M., MUGUME A., SCHWERE R.,
2019 “Towards Mutuality in International Museum Cooperation: Reflections on a Swiss-Ugandan Cooperative Museum Project”, *Stedelijk Studies Journal*, 8, spring, doi: 10.54533/StedStud.vol008.art09.

- LAELY Th., MEYER M., SCHWERE R.,
2018 “Rethinking Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe. Do we need a new paradigm?”, in LAELY Th., MEYER M., SCHWERE R. (Hg.), *Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe. A New Field of Museum Studies*, Bielefeld/Kampala, Transcript Verlag/Fountain Publishers, pp.3-21.
- LAELY Th., MEYER M., SCHWERE R. (eds.).
2018 *Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe. A New Field for Museum Studies*, Bielefeld/Kampala, Transcript Verlag/Fountain Publishers.
- LATOUR B.,
1984 *The pasteurization of France*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press.
1991 *Nous n’avons jamais été modernes: Essai d’anthropologie symétrique*, Paris, La Découverte.
- LEHRER E.,
2020 *Material Kin: “Communities of Implication” in Post-Colonial, Post-Holocaust Polish Ethnographic Collections*, in VON OSWALD M., TINNIUS J. (Eds.), *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, pp.288-323,
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jqxp.21>, accessed 20 Nov. 2022.
- MATAGA J.,
2018 “Shifting Knowledge Boundaries in Museums. Museum Objects, Local Communities and Curatorial Shifts in African Museums”, in LAELY Th., MEYER M., SCHWERE R. (Hg.), *Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe. A New Field of Museum Studies*, Bielefeld: Transcript und Kampala: Fountain Publishers. pp. 57-68
- MAYRAND P.,
2014 “The New Museology Proclaimed”, *Museum International*, 66, n°1-4 (January), pp.115-118.
- MIGNOLO W.,
2011 “Museums in the Colonial Horizon of Modernity: Fred Wilson’s Mining the Museum (1992)”, in HARRIS J. (Ed.), *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, pp.71-85.
- MÜLLER Chr.,
2003 *Projektmanagement in Forschungs- und Entwicklungskooperationen – eine empirische Analyse in der Biotechnologie*, Dissertation, Bad Harzburg.
- NEUBERT D.,
2001 “Die Globalisierung eines Organisationsmodells. Nicht-Regierungsorganisationen in Afrika”, in BAUER U., EGBERT H., JÄGER F. (eds), *Interkulturelle Beziehungen und Kulturwandel in Afrika. Beiträge zur Globalisierungsdebatte*, Frankfurt a. M. et al, Peter Lang, pp.1-69.
- NEUBERT D., MACAMO E.,
2004 “Wer weiß hier was? Lokales Wissen und der Globalitätsanspruch der Wissenschaft”, in SCHAREIKA N., BIRSCHENK Th. (eds), *Lokales Wissen: Sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Münster, Lit Verlag (Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung, 11), pp.93-122.
- PRATT M. L.,
1992 *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, Routledge.
- RECKWITZ A.,
2003 “Grundelemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken: Eine sozialtheoretische Perspektive”, *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, Jg. 32, 4/2003, pp.282-301.

- 2004 “Die Reproduktion und die Subversion sozialer Praktiken. Zugleich ein Kommentar zu Pierre Bourdieu und Judith Butler”, in HÖRNING K. A. (Hg.), *Neue Positionen zum Verhältnis von Kultur und sozialer Praxis*, Bielefeld, Transcript, pp.40-54.
- 2005 “Kulturelle Differenzen aus praxeologischer Perspektive: Kulturelle Globalisierung jenseits von Modernisierungstheorie und Kulturessentialismus”, SRUBAR I. (Hg.), *Kulturen vergleichen – sozial- und kulturwissenschaftliche Grundlagen und Kontroversen*, Wiesbaden, VS, pp.92-111.
- 2006 *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien. Zur Entwicklung eines Theorieprogramms. Studienausgabe*, Weilerswist, Velbrück.
- SANJEK R.,
2015 *Mutuality: Anthropology’s Changing Terms of Engagement*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812290318>.
- SARR F., BÉNÉDICTE S.,
2018 *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture/UMR 7220 (CNRS – ENS Paris Saclay – Université Paris Nanterre).
- SCHATZKI Th. R.,
2009 *Social Practices. A Wittgensteinian approach to human activity and the social*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- SCHMIDT R., WOLTERS DORFF V.,
2008 *Symbolische Gewalt. Herrschaftsanalyse nach Pierre Bourdieu*, Konstanz, UVK.
- SHELTON A. A.,
2001 “Unsettling the Meaning. Critical Museology, Art and Anthropological Discourse”, in BOUQUET M. (ed.), *Academic Anthropology and the Museum: Back to the Future*, New York City, Berghahn Books, pp.142-161.
2012 “Museums and Anthropologies: Practices and Narratives”, in MACDONALD Sh. (ed), *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Chichester, Blackwell, pp.64-80.
2013 *Critical Museology. A manifesto*, in *Museums Worlds*, Vol.1, n°1, pp.7-23.
- STOCKING G. W.,
1992 *The Ethnographer’s Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.
- TAGG J.,
1993 *The Burden of Representation. Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press.
- THONDLANA T.P., MATAGA J., MUNJERI D. (Eds.),
2022 *Independent Museums and Culture Centres in Colonial and Post-colonial Zimbabwe: Non-State Players, Local Communities, and Self-Representation*, London, Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003108238>.

Structured summary

Presentation: The present paper provides insights into the dynamics of the collaboration process between three museums in Uganda and Switzerland. Since 2015, three museums in Kampala and Mbarara in Uganda, and in Zurich in Switzerland, have undertaken an unusual collaboration. They engage in joint research in Uganda and in Switzerland following an approach of “reverse” and “reciprocal anthropology” and co-create exhibitions in dialogue. At the same time questions of present and future functions of ethnographic museums in Europe and in Africa were continually debated, and cooperation has become increasingly important, not least in the light of discussions on colonial collections and the need and potential forms of restitution and ownership of museum artefacts outside of their areas of origin. Each of the three museums involved are operating within entangled in specific historical, economic and political contexts. Special attention is paid to the conditions and processes of knowledge creation. After the introductory discussion of the peculiarities and different situations of (the cultural-historical) in Europe and in Africa as well as the recent discourses on decolonization, it addresses the challenges of collaborating on an equal footing striven for in a transcontinental project framed by structural inequalities.

Method: The article is based on material as gathered in the course of the collaboration of three cultural history museums, two in Uganda, one in Switzerland, that has been ongoing since 2015. The joint research, alternating in Uganda and in Switzerland followed an approach of “reverse” and “reciprocal anthropology” with the ambition to co-curate exhibitions in dialogue on equal terms. In order to gain insight into the processes of cooperation, mutual expectations and behavior, a (Swiss) documentary filmmaker was commissioned to accompany and document all the important phases and stages of the process. This approach primarily pursued methodological considerations. The consistently participatory approach also meant regular monitoring and joint reflection meetings on everyone’s positionality, expectations, further procedures and the milestones to be achieved. The Ugandan exhibitions themselves and their reception by the public were later documented by one Ugandan and one Swiss videographer each – as a guiding principle, the intended reciprocity was to be realized wherever possible. In the second part, the paper presents and analyzes the procedure and results of the partnership in detail. In so doing, we rely primarily on the cinematic, but also on numerous written documents as they came together in the course of the project, as well as on accompanying semi-structured in-depth interviews with the key persons of the project team as well as their superiors and the most important project partners.

Theory: On the one hand, the article takes up recent debates on the decolonization not only of (ethnological) collections but of museum practice in a broad sense. It draws on theories and concepts of museology, not least to contextualize the ongoing processes of questioning of approaches to representation and to relationships between museums and “communities”. To analyze the actual collaboration presented as a case study, we draw on relevant works and discourses on epistemology as well as on the theory of knowledge.

Results: The results to be surveyed are on two levels, firstly on the study of collaboration in the present example, and secondly on the level of the intended decolonization of museum work. As for the collaboration itself, two insights are noteworthy. Firstly, even if a consistently participatory approach is taken in pursuit of equitable involvement and

ownership, hierarchical tendencies in the processes of knowledge production and general collaboration can hardly be avoided. Secondly, despite recurring moments of conflict, of dissent and tension, “cultural differences” cannot be empirically seen as a relevant source of disruption. As for the second point, decolonization cannot be reduced to repatriation or returns of artefacts coming out of colonial contexts – the history of colonialism and dominance takes on many other forms. Just as urgent is transforming the institution itself. Decolonization must mean rethinking the structure of the museum, its aims, alignments, its practices of representing and “patrimonializing”, and above all: its understanding of knowledge and the processes of knowledge production. Decolonization is a process, it is rather an aspiration and claim than a state. At the heart of decolonization of (ethnological and cultural history as well as other) museums must be the opening towards external partners and their forms of knowledge – and, if necessary, in addition to material repatriations, it particularly needs a willingness to enter into mutual commitments on the basis of partnerships.

Discussion: We argue that even if the objective of a transnational “North-South project” is highly focused on collaboration on an “equal footing”, hierarchical tendencies in the processes of knowledge production and general collaboration can hardly be avoided. They remain an ongoing challenge due to unequal structural preconditions and “incorporated inequalities”, unconscious bias and mutual social positioning. Under these conditions, equality cannot be seen as something static, a fixed state, but as the attitude of constantly striving for it. Striving for awareness of power structures and privileges must be an ongoing process and is never entirely completed. This process requires continuous negotiations and repositioning between the partners as well as a constant and critical questioning of one’s own points of view, practices and of collective dynamics. The existing partner relationships can only be transformed, as well as established unequal conditions reshaped, through a continuous highly self-critical reviewing, a decidedly attentive collaboration practice and a general benevolent basic attitude. In the process, cultural history museums have to acknowledge and integrate different forms of knowledge and not only the epistemic tradition of western science.