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For Collaboration in and a broad Understanding of Provenance Research

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VI.

Cooperation Projects on Cameroonian Collections
Experiences and Perspectives

Projets de coopération sur les collections camerounaises
Expériences et perspectives

Introduction

Introduction: For Collaboration in and a broad Understanding of Provanance Research

Thomas Laely

There has been a lot going on in the field of ethnological museums recently, we are in a time of upheaval and new beginnings. If you have worked in an ethnological museum for a longer period of time, the speed and radicality with which essential parameters are shifting and the breadth that these shifts are reaching in a short time is astonishing. Not only has provenance research become a *conditio sine qua non* for ethnological museums today, but also what is meant by provenance research is in the process of change as well. Provenance is a term and concept strongly determined by Western epistemologies. In terms of its content, it is strongly influenced, indeed impregnated in its everyday museological understanding by the Western art market, in which the series of previous owners, whose “genealogy”, as it were, determines to a large extent the interest in and value of an object – this reflects the logic of historically and legally oriented provenance research.¹ It is clear, however, that today’s understanding is increasingly moving away from a pure history of collecting, a temporal series of collectors and previous stations, and opening up to a more inclusive understanding and approach to museum work – the focus is less on the physical location and ownership of an object, but opening up in the direction of its interactions with the environment, especially the social environment. This shift, too, is not to be understood in isolation, but in the broader context of the new museum work;

thus, a corresponding “social shift” can also be observed right into the innermost realm of museum work, conservation and restoration, as exemplified by a conference organised in September 2021 by the Hamburg *MARKK Museum (am Rothenbaum/Kulturen und Künste der Welt)* under the meaningful title “From Conservation to Conversation”.

We have seen an increasing emphasis recently on the fact that the study of provenance is not simply the uncovering of a straight line to an object’s “primal” origin or creation. Relationships and bonds between people and objects – often expressed in the language of “cultural heritage” – are significantly more intricate. It would be an untenable reduction to assume that objects are always traceable to and uniquely connected with a “source community” – all too often neither a source nor a community can be identified and located. The conception of descent-essentialist relations between things and people, according to which the former are understood as “materialised”, “material culture”, is connected with the “dominant (and socially hermetic) Western idea of ‘one object, one culture, one creator’”, as Erica Lehrer, taking up a formulation already expressed by Richard Handler in 1991, put it in a nutshell.²

Rather, the significantly more complex and diverse meanings and relationships of objects argue for abandoning the assumption of taken-for-granted ethno-cultural boundaries and containers and for broadening the notion of ties and relationships between objects and communities, for example, toward a notion of “communities of implication” in the sense of Erica Lehrer, who draws on the Council of Europe’s definition “to include people who are ‘affected’ by or can be said to be ‘implicated’ in certain tangible or intangible cultural products, in ethical terms”.³ With her understanding of “implication”, she wants to highlight the need to reckon with the very particular character of one’s historical and contemporary connection to a given object, which means asking questions such as “What other groups have claims to this object, and *how does my relation with it relate to theirs?*”.⁴

So, what does cooperation have to do with provenance research? The examples presented in the following chapter all highlight the central role cooperation plays in this endeavour. Collaboration is nothing surprising in itself, but a core element of methodology when working from an anthropological approach – and ethnographic museums and collections will also be committed to such an approach to a large extent. (Social and cultural) anthropologists generally have and seek a counterpart whose cooperation they require – collaboration is inscribed in the DNA of ethnological methods, as it were.

This is all the more true in the narrower field we are concerned with here: Reappraising colonial collections in the sense of decolonisation cannot be done by museums, collection curators or other museum experts alone if it is to be pursued seriously. After all, the central postulates are the breaking up of a monopoly on interpretation and the admission of a multicentric perspective and polyphony, all under the sign of the opening and transparency of the collections and museum institutions.

There is no way without cooperation. However, there are different forms of collaboration and several contents. It can be joint work on collections by museum people with representatives of communities of 'implication' or with museums from the societies from which the objects come, or between researchers from both and more sides; it can be about processing and reappraising the history from all implicated sides, about questions of representation, accessibility and ownership of the objects as well as the future handling of them as the examples in this chapters illustrate.

Postcolonial provenance research requires, as Isabella Bozsa and others highlight, an expansion of both spatial and temporal dimensions – it must be done from different places, and multi-locality also entails different perspectives and lines of inquiry. Collaboration requires two things above all: a lot of time and a lot of trust on the part of all those involved – this also becomes clear, for example, in the video on the collaboration between Syowia Kyambi and Mareike Späth.⁵ Furthermore, it becomes apparent in the diverse case studies presented that the questions and interests between the side of European museums and researchers and those of the South are not always the same.

Some basic considerations deserve to be noted at the beginning of this chapter. Provenance research can actually only ever be a prelude, a start, and must reach beyond the narrower issue to larger questions that lie beyond it, for example those of the power of disposal and the handling of these collections. Provenance research must not be limited to drawing and siphoning off additional knowledge from communities of provenance of whatever kind in order to complete the databases of the museums of the North although there is certainly a great need for this. Not least, collaborative provenance research must be integrated more strongly into everyday museum work – in such a way that it cannot simply be a project or a series of projects, but a constant part of museum work, in anthropological as well as in natural history or art

museums. This part of museum work must be made permanent and definitely should be integrated in the ICOM definition of museum and museum activity. The key is not only to initiate cooperation, but also to establish and maintain it in the long term in a sustainable sense and, of course, to provide the necessary human and financial resources.⁶

It is certainly wrong to reduce provenance studies to a defensive stance towards restitution demands. Provenance research must be much more than “collection history” in the narrow sense. It is not only the context of acquisition that is of interest, but also the context of “origin” – not only the presence in Western collections, but also the *absence* at the place of production and provenance. We must not forget that the objects have a life, an existence beyond the fact that they were collected.

One of the main problems in provenance research is the prevalent underestimation or overlooking of the constant change and the dynamics in space and time in the regions of provenance of the objects. These and their contexts are undergoing constant change and are all but frozen in time and space. The Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne speaks in this context of “objets mutants”, mutant objects undergoing continuous metamorphosis, just like any life; all things need care and repair, all things are ephemeral like life, which speaks according to his thinking against the “monumentalisation” and permanence of things.⁷ This is a challenge for each individual provenance research. It is a widespread misconception to assume that one can simply return to a presumed, supposed or sometimes actually proven place of origin and starting point of objects and obtain information about the object – as if time had stood still and the people involved in the production, use, maintenance and storage of said objects or the stories surrounding them had not moved. In individual cases, this point of departure or place of manufacture may indeed be discernible, but in many cases it is not. But it is never the case that time has stood still and the implied people on the spot have not moved. This is precisely why translocal, multi-sited and multi-perspective research is needed that is not solely focused on a narrowly defined “provenance”. Finally, we should not ignore but acknowledge all the work and efforts in provenance research, in the narrower and wider sense, that have been undertaken not only in the West and (mostly Northern) Europe, but in the rest of the world.

- 1 Beltz, Johannes (2021): "Provenienzforschung reicht nicht! Museale Praxis im Zeitalter von Dekolonisierung und Globalisierung", in: Schönberger, Pia (Ed.): *Das Museum im kolonialen Kontext*, Wien, pp. 380–400, p. 395.
- 2 Handler, Richard (1991): "Who Owns the Past? History, Cultural Property, and the Logic of Possessive Individualism", in: Brett Williams (Ed.): *The Politics of Culture*, Washington, DC, pp. 63–74;
Lehrer, Erica (2020): "Material Kin: 'Communities of Implication' in Post-Colonial, Post-Holocaust Polish Ethnographic Collections," in: Margareta von Oswald, Jonas Tinius (Eds): *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, Leuven, p. 292;
- 3 Lehrer, 2020, *Material Kin*, p. 304, Council of Europe (2005): *Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*. Council of Europe Treaty Series, 199, Article 2: Definitions.
- 4 Ibid., emphasis in original.
- 5 See the contribution of Syowia Kyambi in this Volume.
- 6 Beltz, 2021, *Provenienzforschung reicht nicht*, p. 394.
- 7 Diagne, Souleymane Bachir (2020): "Musée des Mutants", on: *Esprit*, July/August 2020, <https://esprit.presse.fr/article/souleymane-bachir-diagne/musee-des-mutants-42835>; accessed 10 April 2023.

