

From Objects to *Measina*: Reanimating the Sāmoan Collection at the Übersee-Museum Bremen in Cooperation with the National University of Samoa

Stephanie Walda-Mandel

Linden-Museum Stuttgart

Mitiana Arbon

Australian National University, Canberra

Matiu Matavai Tautunu

Centre for Samoan Studies, The National University of Samoa

Abstract: The last few years have seen increasing calls for German institutions to change their approach to collections from colonial contexts. Concomitantly, pressure has been put on museums to digitize and open up collections to new audiences, which has been further exacerbated by access issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article addresses developments at the Übersee-Museum Bremen as it seeks to re-examine, reorganize and reconnect its Oceanic (in particular Sāmoan) collection in partnership with the National University of Samoa (NUS). Through a collaborative approach that involves a curator and an academic intern of Sāmoan descent working in the museum in Bremen, the Übersee-Museum is revamping its museological practices and interpretation as it develops its first digital project on Oceania. Through workshops with partners in Sāmoa, the team develops topics and plans content informed by Sāmoan perspectives. Working across disciplinary boundaries, the exhibition highlights novel insights into fluid configurations of cultural practices and environmental cosmologies based on the interplay of material collections. This article examines some examples of the ways in which interpretative authority on the part of the curators in Bremen is relinquished and shifted towards Sāmoan perspectives on *measina* (treasures) within museum spaces, both physical and virtual.

[*ethnographic Museums, exhibitions, Decolonization, Samoa, collaboration, Cultural Heritage, scientific exchange*]

E talalasi Sāmoa (big/many tellings of/for Sāmoa)
Sāmoan proverb

Introduction

A well-known *alagaupu* (proverb) is *e talalasi Sāmoa* (big/many tellings of/for Sāmoa), emphasizing and acknowledging the multiplicities of perspectives and interpretations

that are engendered within a Sāmoan world view. In this article, we invoke it as a guiding value underpinning the Oceania Digital Project at the Übersee-Museum Bremen, which seeks to create and acknowledge new perspectives, discovered across and enacted through its historical Sāmoan collections. As the museum re-examines, re-organizes and reconnects its Oceania collection – in particular Sāmoan *measina* (treasures/heritage) – in partnership with cultural and scientific departments at the National University of Samoa, here we highlight the importance and lessons of this pilot project in reapproaching colonial collections and opening up the many tellings of/for Sāmoa.

In particular, we emphasize the centrality of including Sāmoan voices and of critical engagement with them in museum spaces as fundamental to the task of decolonizing the museum through the re-centring of multiple Sāmoan perspectives, often been sidelined in Eurocentric curatorial visions. In doing so, this article sketches the reshaping of the cultural landscape in Germany in relationship to Oceanic collections, with particular interest in the presence of Sāmoan ideas. This is followed by an outline of the Übersee-Museum's collection from Sāmoa, the ongoing challenge in articulating Sāmoan identities and values within the museum and the ongoing work of staff and colleagues to bridge and decolonize these spaces through the Oceania Digital Project. In particular, we highlight the ongoing work of the *Measina Show and Tell* project as an experimental space for a cultural dialogue that bridges museum collections and Sāmoan cultural knowledge in an online format.

German Museums: Colonial Collections and Changing Oceanic Contexts

The last decade has seen significant shifts across European museum landscapes, as debates on cultural restitution to former European colonies attest. While the scope of the Oceania Digital Project addressed in this article does not delve into questions of restitution, these ongoing discussions continue to set the tone of engagement by and the anxiety of cultural institutions in the twenty-first century, as German museums continue to develop new strategies to grapple with their colonial collections. As Rainier Buschman (2018:223) estimates, the scale of this colonial 'grappling' for German museums is astronomical, with well over 250,000 artefacts having been removed from former German colonies in Oceania prior to World War I. These statistics pale in comparison to the innumerable research papers, documents, photographs, scientific specimens and undocumented private collections that have accumulated in the wake of German colonial entanglements.

On 8 February 2022, the Übersee-Museum repatriated Hawaiian *iwi kūpuna* (ancestral human remains) to native Hawaiian representatives of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. This reflects the ongoing efforts needed to address the vast collections of ances-

tral human remains from Oceania that remain within many German institutions (see Winkelmann 2020:41). Since 2018, the Deutscher Museumsbund has attempted to grapple holistically with the heritage sector's difficult legacies through its *Guidelines for the Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts* published in German, English and French. Revised three times since its initial publication, the guidelines 'hope to encourage all museums to enter into a transparent and constructive dialogue about colonial inheritance – on both the national and the international level,' by providing an initial framework for practical support through case studies and international perspectives on cultural significance and decolonial opportunities in the management of related collections (Deutscher Museumsbund 2021:5).

While the quantity of artefacts from Papua New Guinea dominates Oceanic collections in Germany (Buschman 2018), the last two decades have seen a renewed interest in exploring German colonial legacies with Sāmoa. As Tobias Sperlich (2008) has emphasized, the exhibition *Talofa! Samoa, Südsee* (1998) at the Museum der Weltkulturen in Frankfurt was arguably the first major special exhibition to be focused on Sāmoan material culture in Germany since colonial times. This was followed by several other Sāmoan special exhibitions, including *Samoa 1904: People, Landscape and Culture in the South Pacific One Hundred Years Ago* (2004) at the Bochum Museum, and most recently Hilke ThodeArora's 2014 exhibition *From Samoa with Love? Samoa-Völkerschauen im Deutschen Kaiserreich: eine Spurensuche* at the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich. Tackling the sensitive fact that two-thirds of Munich's Sāmoan artefacts originate from colonial Völkerschauen (human zoos), Thode-Arora's exhibition was a first step in moving towards newly engaged and community-oriented curation incorporating Sāmoan viewpoints and sensitivities around genealogies, rank and oral traditions (see Thode-Arora 2018:62–63). Since then, the presence and visibility of Sāmoan artists and their practice in Germany has grown exponentially, with several high profile Sāmoan artists, such as Michael Tuffery, Yuki Kihara, Rosanna Raymond and Raymond Sagapolutele, represented across major German public art and museum collections. Visitors to the recently opened Humboldt Forum in Berlin will find art such as Greg Semu's biblically inspired tableaux *Auto Portrait with 12 Disciples* on permanent display opposite *measina* from the German colonial period.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize the explicit and deeper genealogical entanglements of the German colonial period for many Sāmoans. These extend beyond the materiality of the museum and are part of a more active and community-constructed understanding of Sāmoan cultural identity and colonial legacies. As noted by Misa Telefoni Retzlaff, a Sāmoan politician and writer of German ancestry, 'The German legacy in Samoa is an enduring legacy. It is both historical and contemporary because it is a story that continues and still has no end in sight' (quoted in Schorch et al. 2020:136). Ongoing institutional changes in Germany to include contemporary Sāmoan cultural input and creative perspectives represent a milestone. Yet, as this article suggests, much more is needed to address the deeper structural issues affecting the overall interpretation, conservation and care of German colonial collections from

Sāmoa. This includes the need for a greater effort by museums to continually explore and loosen interpretative sovereignty over historical collections, and to address the vastly asymmetrical access of Sāmoans to their globally dispersed measina.

The Sāmoan Collection at the Übersee-Museum Bremen

As Safua Akeli Amaama (2021:130) has emphasized, the emergence of European colonial projects in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in the expansive movements of cultural objects from communities across Oceania. Today, the vast majority of Sāmoa's material culture created before the mid-twentieth century is found in collections and institutions overseas, compounding the relatively limited opportunities to engage with Sāmoan artistic and material heritage within Sāmoa itself (Mallon 2003:9). Bridging these knowledge divides is being slowly addressed through the ongoing collaborations of the Oceania Digital Project by means of workshoping, and the presence and embodied learning of the Sāmoan curator and academic intern. Attempting to understand the collection and its potential value is central to the desire of Sāmoans to be able to access their displaced historical material heritage. For the Übersee-Museum, this also addresses one of the existential challenges in justifying tangible public outcomes to funders. Of immediate significance is the reorganization and refinement of the collection's metadata by the Sāmoan curator. In particular, this involves the use of Sāmoan language terms to describe relationships within the material, such as *lalaga* (woven cultural items) for well-known genres of mats, or the (re)identification of items of significance in the collection in relation to cultural structures such as the *fā'amatai* (chiefly political system). Throughout this project, the identification of measina names in Sāmoan is one of the contributions made by Sāmoan staff in the Übersee-Museum to reconnect and culturally re-evaluate the collections' metadata.

Totalling over 1,080 items, the Übersee-Museum's historic ethnographic collection from Sāmoa is formed around a core collection of approximately 500 measina purchased from the German colonial scientist Otto Tetens. Founder of what is today the Mulinu'u Weather Observatory, Tetens acquired and assembled this collection between 1902 and 1906 through his relationships with high-ranking Sāmoans (see Sperlich 2014) and his scientific travels across Sāmoa. Subsequent additions to the collection were also made through donations by individuals and families associated with German colonial interests, including several pieces from the first Governor of German Samoa, Wilhelm Solf, and from Wilhelm Souchon, a later life-resident of the city of Bremen and former admiral in the German Imperial Navy.

Due to the historic breadth and scope of the Übersee-Museum's interests, the collection reveals an unusual glimpse into diverse historical practices. The core collection has material ranging from vernacular items such as *'umete* (cooking bowls), coconut leaf plates, and *pola* (coconut leaf blinds), to measina associated with the *fā'amatai* and

cultural prestige, such as several types of *tanoa fai'ava* (kava bowls) and *ipu tau'ava* (kava cups) used in politically important kava ceremonies. Other items include political adornments such as *fue* (fly whisks) in both *ali'i* (high chief) and *tulāfale* (orator) forms and *to'oto'o* (orator's staff), including an unusual form labelled as a *to'oto'o tau-le'ale'a* (staff for untitled men). Several undocumented items have also been identified by Sāmoan staff – for example, previously listed single items that in fact constitute elements of a multi-piece *tuiga* (ceremonial headdress).

Of particular interest to Sāmoan historians and cultural practitioners is the presence of a large volume of rare *lalaga* intended for use by high-ranking families, such as *'ie sina* (white shaggy mats) of several different grades, sizes and qualities (see Schoeffel 1999:126–127). While relatively widespread during Tetens' time in Sāmoa, but no longer being made, their cultural significance makes them a potential item for local revitalization work based on historical examples (Sperlich 2008:283). The presence of these *'ie sina* is further enriched by several other genres of *lalaga*, including *fuipani* (black shaggy rugs), sometimes referred to as *'ie uli*. In addition to these, there is a genre described as *'ie taele* (reddish-brown shaggy rugs) and two other coloured tones of 'shaggy' mats yet to be identified. These are complemented by a broader range of approximately 150 other mats, ranging from genres such as *fala moe* (sleeping mats) and *fala* (sitting mats) to *'ie toga* (fine mats). The heightened cultural interest in traditionally valuable *lalaga* can be juxtaposed with the collection's wider potential range of significance, including, for example, *mailei 'iole* (bamboo rat traps), fishing equipment, children's toy boats and even a Sāmoan *kirikiti* (cricket) bat (see Sacks 2017).

Despite not having had formal academic training in the field of ethnology, Tetens' collecting activities suggest an intriguing and typological view of Sāmoan material culture and practices. Certain items demonstrate various stages of 'making', such as incomplete *'ie toga* left at various stages of weaving, along with associated bundles of material such as *lau'ie* (pandanus leaf for fine mats). Other process-related items include those used for various practices of making *siapo* (bark cloth), for example, the collection of *'upeti* leaf print and carved boards for printing *siapo 'elei* (printed *siapo*). Also included are several 'paintbrushes' of pandanus seeds used for *siapo ma-manu* (freehand drawn bark cloth), various pounders and boards for different grades of beating, and coconut shell containers with residual black ink for the designs. The typological thinking underpinning Tetens' collecting might suggest a strong reading, if not the direct influence, of Augustin Krämer's (1903; 1902) contemporaneous monograph on Sāmoan material culture. No such extensive and comprehensive study of Sāmoan culture, life and material culture existed at this point. This view is supported by Sperlich (2014:299–300), who noted that Tetens had met Krämer briefly before his departure to Sāmoa and may have been introduced to collecting through his uncle, Alfred Tetens, an employee of the Sāmoan-centred and Hamburg-based Godeffroy und Sohn trading company. The range of *measina* might suggest a premeditated intention on Tetens' part to sell the collection to an ethnographic museum on his return to Germany. However, this aim does not undermine the collections cultural value as Sāmoan.

Rather, the diverse range of items represented provides a strong basis in the project for the temporal re-evaluation of Sāmoan practices, thus providing a basis for suggested development, by the National University of Samoa, of a course on historical material cultures that are no longer accessible to local Sāmoans.

Complementing the ethnographic collection is a vast supporting archive of primary source materials, such as letters, diaries and historical photographs. Consisting of over 250 photographs, prints, plates, and postcards, the Sāmoan historical photographic collection is drawn primarily from the prolific and well-known commercial studios of the Burton Brothers – Alfred Tattersall and Thomas Andrews – in popular circulation during German colonial rule of Sāmoa (Sperlich 2014:296). Several images found in the collection have raised interest from heritage practitioners in Sāmoa as previously unseen examples from the colonial period. This includes two of the only known photos of the old Vaimea prison taken post-construction. Mislabelled in the Übersee-Museum collection as a ‘European house’, they were recently re-identified by Dionne Fonoti, an academic interlocutor at the Centre for Samoan Studies (CSS) at NUS. The significance of the original building is amplified by its connection to Mau Movement independence activists during the New Zealand colonial administration (see Ah Tong 2022). Its re-identification has led to its inclusion in ongoing heritage assessments, as Sāmoa grapples to manage its deteriorating sites of colonial heritage, instigated by the 2020 demolition of the nationally significant Apia Courthouse (see World Monuments Fund 2020).

Other representative materials include, for example, extensive research ephemera, notes and correspondence, including extensive diary and research notations related to Otto Tetens’ collection and time in Sāmoa. These include previously untranslated handwritten documents in English, German and Sāmoan covering topics from geography to traditional mythology in Sāmoa. These materials complement the Übersee-Museum’s unpublished holdings of natural history specimens from Sāmoa, including plants and animal specimens preserved in alcohol and acquired in the early 1900s from the Godeffroy Museum of Hamburg (see Buschmann 2018:200–201).

‘The *fale* is backwards’: Sāmoan Perspectives within the Übersee-Museum Bremen

When entering the Oceania exhibition at the Übersee-Museum, it was almost impossible to miss the permanent Sāmoan display that was taken down in 2022 to make way for the new permanent exhibition. Opened in 2003, this particular section was cleverly constructed within the space of a semi-abstracted *fale tele* (meeting house), with related measina displayed and arranged in the style of a *fono* (meeting). The orientation of the space was reorganized to include appropriate floor seating through beanbag seating for

visitors. In the centre of the space, the *tanoa* 'ava was set up in front of the corresponding *pou* (pillar) for the *kava* servers. This pillar is labelled in German and Sāmoan with *Zeremonialjungfraultaupou* (ceremonial hostess), denoting the ceremonial server seated in front of the *tanoa* 'ava. Around the *fale tele*, each of the pillars corresponded with the correct associated rank and titles of the *matai* (chiefs) in hypothetical attendance, such as high chief/ali'i and orator/tulafale. While the effect in its totality showed a level of detail and spatial awareness by the German curator that is not often seen in European museums, it unfortunately missed the embodied reality of such spaces as enacted relationally by Sāmoan users.

When showing the exhibition in late 2021 to the recently arrived academic intern from the CSS, a *taupou* (ceremonial hostess) herself, she exclaimed loudly, 'Oh, but it's backwards'. That is, the *fale tele* fell short of manifesting the broader arrangement of space relationally required for the completion of the ceremony – in particular the spatial element of the host-guest dichotomy – with the back of the *taupou* placed towards the Übersee-Museum's main atrium and entrance. This distinction is an important orientation for the *taupou*, with the host's delegation facing the arriving party – implied spatially to be the central museum entrance and hall, which acts symbolically in the exhibit as a corresponding *malae* (open area for ceremonial events) facing the main thoroughfare of a village. Such understandings of front and back are central for Sāmoans in a *kava* ceremony, as they organize the host–visitor relationship and the flow of the ceremony (see Van der Ryn 2016:122).

While the above subtleties are lost to most German visitors, they hint at the deeper missed potential that source-community perspectives can bring to enrich museum experiences. Now that the permanent Oceania exhibition is to be renewed, this *fale* will not be rebuilt in the new exhibition. Instead the importance of Sāmoan bodies in the museum should be seen as the starting point or first step in turning the perspective around. To turn the *fale* around means recognizing the 'front-facing' and 'back-facing' of Sāmoan culture. The 'front-facing' is the German public's view and understanding of the performative and visible parts of Sāmoan culture; the 'back-facing' represents the reality of the hosts, the messiness of the organization, and the preparations required by the host family for an event to be culturally appropriate.

In the remainder of this article, we delve a little into this 'back-facing' dimension and explore the cultural 'clutter' and tensions that come from collaboration projects where Sāmoan and German staff work together in European museums. In the project, these Sāmoan staff take on not just the role of publicly sharing Sāmoan culture and making it accessible to German audiences through exhibitions; they also become responsible to their communities in sifting through the cultural 'clutter' of the collection in '[...] order to gain appropriate focus, perspective and direction in terms of making sense of our indigenous knowledges and history for the contemporary present' (Tui Atua 2005:61).

The Oceania Digital Project: A Collaboration with the National University of Samoa

The Oceania Digital Project *The Blue Continent – A Platform for Dialogue, Perspectives, and Insights from the Pacific Islands*¹ was created from the collaboration of the NUS and the Übersee-Museum Bremen. It was set out to create a virtual space in which knowledge was jointly created and made available to people in the Pacific and all over the world as a new form of engagement. It was meant to bring stories from the Pacific region to life. Funded by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany in Berlin, the project commenced in April 2021 and was running for three years and included several components. The first was the three-year curatorial residency for a Sāmoan scholar and an academic internship, both held at the Übersee-Museum. These positions were filled from April 2021 to December 2023 by Mitiana Arbon and from October 2021 to April 2023 by Aigauasooosooaumaimalouamaua Nialuga to share their expertise and knowledge with the other members of the project team. A second component was a collaboration between the Übersee-Museum and the NUS, and workshops with NUS staff from the Environmental Science Department, its CSS and members of the Übersee-Museum. In these workshops, scholars from Bremen and Apia discussed the topics of the Oceania Digital Project, and presented individual research projects focusing for example on soil and climate change, monitoring freshwater quality in the Vaisigano River or siapo (Sāmoan tapa cloth). This aspect was particularly important in terms of capacity-building, as emerging Sāmoan researchers, who were at the beginning of their careers, were given the opportunity to present their work. In this context, the goal was collective learning to develop lasting skills on both sides (see also Antweiler 2020).

The project was designed to involve partners from different disciplines on both sides, the Übersee-Museum and the NUS. All of the above components were building blocks that lead to the larger goal of creating different platforms for dialogue with communities in the Pacific through which knowledge and interpretations of objects and themes could be shared. The thought behind it was to facilitate various layers of online communication and storytelling, rather than using one central web stage for a larger outreach. The various ideas for the Oceania Digital Project were being developed jointly between the partners to make different knowledge systems visible and accessible. As a first step towards creating a dialogue with Sāmoan communities besides the staff of the NUS, a Facebook page – ‘Oceanic Collection Voyages’² – was launched by the Sāmoan staff at the Übersee-Museum to share historical photographs and collection material with the public to enter into a dialog. Facebook was chosen, as

1 Available at: <https://blue-continent.de/>, accessed 09 May 2025.

2 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Oceania-Collection-Voyages-103916155581873/>, accessed 15 March 2023.

it is the preferred platform of exchange, and information sharing among younger and older generations in the Pacific and it uses the least data.

Originally, several trips by Sāmoan scientists to Bremen and by team members of the Übersee-Museum to Sāmoa were planned in order to work together on the collections and the themes of the Oceania Digital Project. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which began at the start of the project, these trips were postponed to a later date within the project and partly transformed into online events. The project funds were partly used to create the technical conditions on the Sāmoan side so that the team could work together in regular online meetings, which were originally planned to be held in person. In these workshops, common goals and expectations were formulated, and a start was made by introducing the collections of the Übersee-Museum that originate from Sāmoa in order to work together with these material holdings.

One component of the project, and one of the reasons for receiving funding, was capacity-building and the hope that the Sāmoan academic intern and co-curator will impart their expertise, experience and knowledge back to cultural institutions and projects in Sāmoa. In parallel to the work on the Oceania Digital Project, a new permanent Oceania exhibition (*Der Blaue Kontinent – Inseln im Pazifik*, *The Blue Continent – Islands in the Pacific*) was being developed, which was opened in Bremen in March 2025, and which was inspired by the results of the Oceania Digital Project. This exhibition aimed to change perspectives and allow people in the Pacific region to engage with the exhibition topics. For both projects, there was an academic advisory board to advise the Oceania team, in which two people with Pacific descent participated to share their perspectives: the president of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, Emmanuel Kasarhérou; and the Emmy Award-winning Sāmoan video journalist Maea Lenei Buhre.

Another result of the collaboration between the NUS and the Übersee-Museum was the exhibition *Atalilo: Motifs in Samoan Material Culture*, which opened in Apia, Samoa, in August 2024 showing an impressive collection of Samoan patterns. Some of the objects on display there for three years are on loan from the Übersee-Museum Bremen.

A First Step in Decolonizing the Übersee-Museum Bremen?

Like many others German museum collections, the Übersee-Museum benefited greatly from the colonial structures established in Oceania in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This also applies to the former Städtische Museum of Natural History, Ethnology and Trade (today's Übersee-Museum) and its Oceania collection, which was largely colonial in origin and whose objects came from various acquisition contexts. They may have been exchanged, donated, purchased, looted, plundered or even found their way into the Bremen collection as commissioned works. The names of those who

produced the objects were not usually noted down by the collectors of the time, as these played a subordinate role in respect of them.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the demand for natural history, archaeological and ethnographic objects in museums grew rapidly and could be satisfied in the colonial territories. In addition, numerous new museums were established, which demanded more and more illustrative material. Collections were made by travellers, members of the military and the mission, members of ship crews and museum personnel. This quickly led to a competition among the museums for the best and most impressive pieces from the colonial territories to present to an astonished public in the museums at home. In their collecting frenzy, the museum staff of the time were often dominated by the idea of 'salvage anthropology'. The idea was to collect as many objects as possible before the indigenous cultures were finally changed by the influence of colonial powers and missions and the objects were no longer considered 'authentic'. In this way, the questionable aim was to preserve material culture from Oceania in museums by taking it away from those living there.

Therefore museums and their collections are a controversial space. However, there is now a growing willingness in the German museum landscape to question museum practices and to decolonize museums in order to address and come to terms with the colonial past as described. If museums are to be decolonized, there are various ways to go about it: restitution, repatriation, permanent loans from the societies of origin to German museums, putting collections online, etc.

Another way is to implement cooperation projects with representatives of the source communities. This is one of the paths the Übersee-Museum is currently taking to decolonize its practice.

The Übersee-Museum Bremen represents a white, Western institution, and to decolonize its collections and exhibition practices is an ongoing challenge that has only just begun to be confronted: '... if we understand coloniality not as a residue of the age of imperialism, but rather an ongoing structural feature of global dynamics, the challenge faced by museums in decolonising their practice must be viewed as ongoing' (Whittington 2021:245). These repercussions of the dominant regimes are evident in the holdings and magazines of ethnographic museums in Germany (Von Poser and Baumann 2017:25) because colonialism not only resulted in the loss of land and in cultural objects ending up in the colonizers' museum collections, but it has also gone hand in hand with the loss of knowledge systems (Chilisa 2012:9). One concern of the project was therefore to exchange, share and mutually use the different knowledge systems on both the Übersee-Museum and the Sāmoan sides. Even though many objects originating in the Pacific were not transferred through direct contexts of injustice, it was the broader context of a lack of justice and of the effects of the colonial period that made the collection of such a large number of objects possible. How can curators of a Western-style museum deal with this colonial heritage? How can they make it accessible again to the people of the Pacific? Here, the digital project was viewed as a possible model of access and engagement.

Even when the majority of the Pacific collections at the Übersee-Museum stem from Melanesia (Walda-Mandel 2019:5), the museum decided to go a different way. As the museum also houses an extensive and important collection from Sāmoa, the idea of a collaboration with Sāmoan researchers and institutions was met with great interest. Consequently, the Übersee-Museum contacted the NUS in autumn 2019, and the Oceania curator Stephanie Walda-Mandel travelled to Sāmoa in November of the same year. During this trip, initial contacts were made with NUS staff, and the first concrete ideas for an exhibition on the topics of Diversity, Identity and Migration, Climate Change, Colonialism, and Collections and Resources, as well as the possibilities of joint workshops, were discussed. In particular, Safua Akeli Amaama, Director of the Centre for Samoan Studies, and Patila Amosa, Dean of the Environmental Science Department, were crucial contacts who supported the project from the beginning.

In the course of this first trip, the representatives of various Sāmoan institutions, such as museums, ministries and the university, made it clear how important the digitization of Sāmoan *measina* stored in German museums was for them and for dealing with their cultural heritage. According to them, the *measina* create a link with people and their past, and they are an element in the ongoing formation of cultural identity. Digitization enables Sāmoan scientists to deal with the *measina*, and cultural practitioners would also have the opportunity to take a closer look at cultural techniques through photographs and historical visual materials in order to use them for their own purposes – for example, to inform the revitalization of cultural practices and material culture. In this way, contemporary actors can reconnect with the different styles, materials and designs: ‘People get the opportunity to study old designs, stories, and former artistic interpretations on the computer screen. And relatives have the possibility to view the artworks of their forefathers’ (Voirol 2019:52). Akeli Amaama also emphasizes the importance of the digital repatriation of *measina* and the emergence of digital partnerships between the representatives of different institutions (Akeli Amaama 2021:131). Therefore, one aspect of the project was to digitize the *measina* of the Sāmoan collection – and hopefully also of other Pacific collections in the future – so that they can be shared with the communities and partners in the Pacific, along with the associated information.

In a digital project, the *measina* can also be used digitally to narrate current topics, and at the same time the collections and their collectors have their own stories that need to be told. With digital storytelling, it is possible to connect the present-day topics with the colonial history of the past. In this way, different layers can be presented and interactively referred to the *measina*. In addition, the space in a permanent exhibition is always limited, and the virtual space makes it possible to make numerous *measina* and their stories accessible without overloading the visitor. With a digital application, visitors can decide for themselves how deeply they want to seek immersion in the subject matter and the object history without over-exerting themselves. Furthermore, material objects can be coupled with film clips, historical photographs, audio recordings and other archival material, which leads to a lively contextualization. In this context,

the new director of the CSS, Matiu Matavai Tautunu, points out that Sāmoan history has been largely written down by non-Sāmoans in other languages: 'But I think we should also now write our own history in our language so that Sāmoan voices are telling Sāmoans significant stories' (in Lumepa Hald 2022). One of the aims was therefore also to sift through and digitize existing archival material on Sāmoa held at the Übersee-Museum so that it can be used by communities in Sāmoa when dealing with their own history and telling their own stories – *e talalasi Sāmoa*.

Although there is a growing awareness in German museums of the issue of decolonizing their collections and the urgently needed inclusion of representatives of the source communities, museums must approach the dissolution of existing structures cautiously. The danger of tokenism is too great (Hicks 2020:9; Whittington 2021:246). A project like this, in which an Indigenous co-curator and an Indigenous academic intern are employed for a limited period of time, carries the danger of tokenism, especially if they are used as figureheads when presenting the project to the outside world. Something similar is also suggested by Götz Aly when he refers to installations in museums that were instigated by a person of colour in order to free the museum of colonial guilt (Aly 2021:18). At the time of the project, the two colleagues with a Sāmoan background were the only people of colour among the Übersee-Museum staff. Museum practitioners need to be aware of this and be careful not to be 'captured'. It must also be clear that project staff from the source communities cannot speak for the whole of the Pacific Islands: '... source communities are not a homogenous entity, given the many different voices and agendas that shape a community. Consequently, it has to be clear who is speaking' (Voirol 2019:54).

This project shows how important it is for ethnographic museums to find new ways of exhibiting and producing non-Eurocentric narratives. It also presents the necessity to give members of the communities from which the collections originate a priority when it comes to exhibition-making and ways of storytelling. Museums need to show a stronger commitment to Indigenous agency and present Indigenous voices in virtual and on-site exhibitions. This also includes not prioritizing written records and seeking to 'reverse the attribution of value in favour of oral accounts, or at least give these equal weight' (Whittington 2021:264). The project made openness, critical self-reflection and transparency necessary in order to make colonial entanglements visible. This is particularly important in light of the fact that approximately 70 percent of the ethnographic collections in the Übersee-Museum originate in former German colonies (see also Buschmann 2018:197) because colonial expansion was coupled with growing collecting activities. One goal of the project was therefore to show how the museum profited from colonial structures and to integrate new approaches and critical questions about the collection from the Sāmoan partners. In this way, the collaboration with scientists from Sāmoa can be perceived as an example of a serious willingness to face uncomfortable truths.

Another aspect of decolonization is to discuss with the Sāmoan partners how we will present measina from the Pacific region virtually, as well as in an on-site exhibition,

without exoticizing attitudes and going beyond a Eurocentric perspective. The staff at the Übersee-Museum was also anxious to learn about Sāmoan expectations on storing, restoring and conserving measina in the future. However, this project was just the first step in answering these questions, and the team is very aware of the fact that there is still a lot more that needs to be done. In working with the Sāmoan partners, the European curators learnt to give up interpretative authority, and thus control, in order to allow multiple perspectives. In this way, they handed over representational power as an important step in the process of decolonization. Together, the team selected objects, developed narratives and discussed different perspectives. This is particularly important when Sāmoan colleagues are correcting entries on measina in the database, showing how essential it is to re-evaluate the existing collections of German museums and archival records stemming from colonial contexts.

Bridging Interpretation and Access: *Measina Show and Tell*

As the Papua New Guinean curator and artist Michael Mel has argued: ‘The marginalisation of indigenous peoples, and the distortion of their stories and experiences through gatekeeping “their collections”, represents a great challenge for institutions today’ (Mel 2019:86). The ongoing collaboration with the NUS is an attempt to address such distortions within the collection through an active re-centring of and reconnection with Sāmoan knowledge. One such attempt is through digital online engagement with staff within the museum’s storage units through the workshop series *Measina Show and Tell*. Running between September and December 2022, *Measina Show and Tell* was an online interactive experience between CSS staff and the Übersee-Museum. Consisting of six sessions, these were broken down into one introductory overview presentation and five thematic workshops focused on: Carving, Adornments, Va’a ma Faiva (Boats and Fishing), Lalaga (Weaving), and Siapo (Bark Cloth). Selected by the Sāmoan curatorial staff in Bremen in consultation with CSS staff, these thematic sections were an opportunity for historic measina in Bremen to be displayed via Zoom to invited participants, and handled on request for the duration of the session.

For each session, CSS academics and the invited audience of Sāmoan material-culture practitioners and artisans from across Sāmoa participated. Hosted in a meeting room at the NUS, Sāmoan participants were given the opportunity to ask questions to Übersee-Museum staff in Bremen on object materiality and care. To help guide each thematic session, a booklet was provided and listed related to measina, including associated metadata, diagrams and historical photos from the Übersee-Museum collection. Additional conversations with CSS staff also raised the importance of other ways of ‘seeing’ and communicating information, and of the relationality of the senses. This included questions, much to the surprise of German staff, as to the scent of certain fibres and the comparative textures of materials, such as the ‘finesness’ of an ‘*ie toga*. These

steps are the start of a longer process of reanimating the Sāmoan collection, as it moves from being a series of cultural objects to *measina*, filled with lived value, knowledge, relationships and diverse Sāmoan perspectives.

Conclusion

As Anita Herle (2003:194) notes, it is important that museums go beyond their role of preserving and documenting important cultural objects and materials to provide opportunities for cross-cultural dialog and innovative collaborations. Pilot projects like this have the potential to connect people and can be empowering for representatives of the source communities from which the collections originate. In the case of Bremen, for the first time, transparency was being created with regard to the collection holdings from the Pacific. In addition, opportunities were being created to open them up in a participatory manner: cultural knowledge was being built up, shared and constructed collectively with colleagues in Sāmoa. In this process, the museum becomes a ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997:188) where long-lasting relationships from the past will be re-shaped in the present with the partners in Sāmoa, provided the Übersee-Museum staff are willing and able to listen to their narratives and include their expertise.

In the past, the relationship between the partners of a museum project often finished at the end of the project. However, this project can only be considered successful if the relationships thereby (re)established are maintained and developed beyond the end of the initiative. These relationships, as well as the participation and involvement of people from the source communities, are particularly important for Sāmoa, as the important Sāmoan collections are located outside Sāmoa (Akeli Amaama 2021:132). At the same time, one thing is already clear: the project demonstrated the importance of bringing more scientists and cultural practitioners from the Pacific, who will need to be invited and supported by cultural institutions if they are to work collaboratively. Additionally, ongoing support for further decolonial practices within cultural institutions is needed, a situation that can only be managed with financial support by the German state.

To discover the different meanings of *measina*, they need to be seen by people from the Pacific, by the people from the communities that produced and used them. This approach leads to new insights and, at the same time, requires patience and understanding from everyone involved, particularly when scientists from different language and cultural backgrounds are sharing their views and experiences (Antweiler 2020). This also raises the question of how the cooperation partners deal with the different working conditions, as well as structural and environmental conditions, at the respective locations of their institutions (Laely et al. 2019:2). Likewise, we need to think about the power dynamics that can resonate in such projects when one of the cooperation

partners has obtained the financial support and is the initiator of the project, and holds the material objects, even when the knowledge lies with both partners.

Curators in German museums need to detach themselves from existing knowledge structures and pose new questions in order to allow new perspectives and multi-perspectivity to (re)emerge. It is hoped that more projects of this kind will be possible in the future, actively involving people from the source communities, from the initial planning of a project to its completion. In doing so, Pacific peoples can actively contribute their expertise and input to stimulate discussions without serving as an instrument for whitewashing the museum.

Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks go to the Federal Foreign Office, which generously supported this collaborative project.

Glossary of Terms

Alagaupu (proverb)
 Ali'i (high chief)
 E talalasi Sāmoa (big/many tellings of/for Sāmoa)
 Fa'amatai (chiefly political system)
 Fala (sitting mats)
 Fala moe (sleeping mats)
 Fale tele (meeting house)
 Fono (meeting)
 Fue (fly whisks)
 Fuipani (black shaggy rugs)
 'ie sina (white shaggy mats)
 'ie toga (fine mats)
 'ie taele (reddish-brown shaggy rugs)
 'ipu tau'ava (kava cups)
 Iwi kūpuna (Māori term for ancestral human remains)
 Kirikiti (cricket)
 Lau'ie (pandanus leaf for fine mats)
 Lalaga (woven cultural items)
 Mailei 'iole (bamboo rat traps)
 Malae (open area for ceremonial events)
 Measina (treasures/heritage)
 Pola (coconut leaf blinds)
 Pou (pillar)
 Siapo (bark cloth)

Siapo 'elei (printed siapo)
 Siapo mamanu (freehand drawn bark cloth)
 Tānoa 'ava (kava bowls)
 Tānoa fai'ava (kava bowls)
 Tulāfale (orator)
 To'oto'o (orator's staff)
 To'oto'o taule'ale'a (staff for untitled men)
 Tuiga (ceremonial headdress)
 Taupou (ceremonial hostess)
 'Upeti (leaf print and carved boards for printing)
 'Umete (cooking bowls)
 Va'a ma Faiva (Boats and Fishing)
 Zeremonialjungfrau/taupou (ceremonial hostess)

References

- Ah Tong, Matai'a Lanuola 2022: Old Vaimea prison revives colonial times memory. *Samoa Observer*. <https://www.samoaoobserver.ws/category/samoa/97506>, accessed 15 March 2023.
- Akeli Amaama, Safua 2021: Decolonising Collections and Exhibition Management in 21st Century Samoa. In: German Museums Association ed., *Guidelines for German Museums: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts (3rd Edition)*. Pp. 129–132. Berlin: German Museums Association.
- Aly, Götz 2021: *Das Prachtboot: Wie Deutsche die Kunstschätze der Südsee raubten*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.
- Antweiler, Christoph 2020: Transdisziplinarität als ko-produktives Scheitern? Autoethnographische Reflexionen zu einem Projekt in Thailand. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie / Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology* 145:131–152.
- Buschmann, Rainer F. 2018: Oceanic collections in German museums: Collections, contexts, and exhibits. In: Carreau, Lucie; Clark, Alison; Jelinek, Alana; Lilje, Erna and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Pacific Presences. Volume 1: Oceanic Art and European Museums*. Pp. 197–227. Leiden: Sidestone Press.
- Chilisa, Bagele 2012: *Indigenous Research Methodologies*. California: Sage Publications.
- Clifford, James 1997: *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Deutsche Museumsbund 2021: *Guidelines for German Museums: Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts (3rd Edition)*. Berlin: German Museums Association.
- Herle, Anita 2003: Objects, Agency and Museums: Continuing Dialogues between the Torres Strait and Cambridge. In: Peers, Laura and Alison K. Brown eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*. Pp. 194–207. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hicks, Dan 2020: *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press.
- Krämer, Augustin 1902: *Die Samoa Inseln: Entwurf einer Monographie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Deutsch-Samoas Vol. 1*. Stuttgart: E. Schweizerbartsche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
- Krämer, Augustin 1903. *Die Samoa Inseln: Entwurf einer Monographie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Deutsch-Samoas Vol. 2*. Stuttgart: E. Schweizerbartsche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
- Laely, T., M. Meyer, A. Mugume, and R. Schwere 2019: Towards Mutuality in International Museum Cooperation: Reflections on a Swiss-Ugandan Cooperative Museum Project. *Stedelijk Studies Journal* 8:1–16.

- Lumepa Hald, Fuimaono 2022: Foreign ideals could overwhelm if records lost: academic. *Samoa Observer*. <https://www.samoaoobserver.ws/category/samoa/98561>, accessed 15 March 2023.
- Mallon, Sean 2003: *Samoa Art and Artists: O Measina a Samoa*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Mel, Michael 2019: Privileging Community Voices: Cultural Revitalisation in Museology and Contemporary Art from Papua New Guinea. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 47(1): 76–87.
- Sacks, Benjamin 2017: Running Away with Itself: Missionaries, Islanders and the Reimagining of Cricket in Samoa, 1830–1939. *The Journal of Pacific History* 52(1):34–51.
- Schoeffel, Penelope 1999. Samoan Exchange and Fine Mats: An Historical Reconsideration. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 108(2):117–148.
- Schorch, Philipp, Sean Mallon, and Nina Tonga 2020. Materializing German-Samoan Colonial Legacies, with Sean Mallon and Nina Tonga. In: Philipp Schorch, Noelle M.K.Y. Kahnu, Sean Mallon, Cristian Moreno Pakarati, Mara Mulrooney, Nina Tonga, and Ty P. Kāwika Tengan, *Refocusing Ethnographic Museums through Oceanic Lenses*. Pp. 121–146. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Sperlich, Tobias 2008: *Germany and her 'Ethnographic Treasure Box' – An Anthropology of Collecting in Colonial Samoa*. Doctoral Thesis: University of Oxford.
- Sperlich, Tobias 2014: Photographing Mata'afa Iosefo: Encounters, Interactions and Engagements in Colonial Samoa. *History of Photography* 38(3):296–314.
- Thode-Arora, Hilke 2018: Walking the fine line: From Samoa with Love? at the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich. In: Philipp Schorch, and Conal McCarthy eds., *Curatopia: Museums and the Future of Curatorship*. Pp. 56–71. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Tui Atua, Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi 2005: Clutter in Indigenous Knowledge, Research and History: A Samoan Perspective. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* 25:61–69.
- Van der Ryn, Micah 2016: Which Way is Front?: Spatial Orientation Complications in Contemporary Samoan Villages. *Structure and Dynamics* 9(1):114–135.
- Voirol, Beatrice 2019: Decolonization in the field? Basel – Milingimbi Back and Forth. *Swiss Journal of Sociocultural Anthropology* 24(May):48–57.
- Von Poser, Alexis, and Bianca Baumann 2017: Einleitung. In: Alexis von Poser, and Bianca Baumann eds., *Heikles Erbe: Koloniale Spuren bis in die Gegenwart*. Pp. 14–25. Dresden: Sandstein Verlag.
- Walda-Mandel, Stephanie 2019: The Colonial Heritage: Objects from the Pacific in a German Museum. *Pacific Geographies* 52:4–12.
- Whittington, Vanessa 2021: Decolonising the Museum? Dilemmas, possibilities, alternatives. *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 13(2):245–269.
- Winkelmann, Andreas 2020: Repatriations of human remains from Germany – 1911 to 2019. *Museum and Society* 18(1):40–51.
- World Monuments Fund 2020: Former Apia Courthouse. *World Monuments Watch*. <https://www.wmf.org/project/former-apia-courthouse>, accessed 15 March 2023.

