

# Going Against the Grain: A Podcast on Projects within the CoMuse Cosmos

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**Abstract:** Within the ‘Collaborative Museum’, the podcast ‘Going Against the Grain’ (German: *Gegen die Gewohnheit*) tells its audiences about the collaborative projects of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Reflecting on both their guiding principles and their journey so far, the two podcast hosts share their insights and experiences.

*[Sharing power, podcast, decolonizing]*

## Facts

In order to connect with audiences beyond exhibitions, workshops, tours and social media, CoMuse took up the idea of promoting its projects through a podcast. After a lengthy national tendering process, the CoMuse team, in cooperation with the administrative staff of the *Zentrale Vergabestelle* (central contracting authority) of the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, awarded a contract for twenty podcast episodes to ‘speak low’, a local studio in Berlin. Part of that contract specified inviting a co-host for the podcast to collaborate with the museums’ host to share in researching, producing and assembling the episodes. It is these two co-hosts – Katharina Erben, a freelance cultural editor contracted by speak low, and Anna Schäfers, part of the CoMuse team – who are reflecting on the podcast for this case study.

The title of the podcast, ‘*Gegen die Gewohnheit*’ (‘Going Against the Grain’), references the innovative approach of the CoMuse projects and their call to challenge formerly uncontested museum practices, further explained in the podcast’s subtitle: ‘*Der Podcast zu neuen Formen der Zusammenarbeit im Ethnologischen Museum und im Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin*’ (The podcast on new forms of collaboration at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin). Starting in April 2024, the first eleven episodes were published monthly, after which the programming moved to every two months to accommodate the planned extension of the CoMuse project from 12/2025 to 06/2025.

The episodes are aimed to be between twenty and thirty minutes long. This time frame allows for the intended audience – German-speaking listeners with a basic interest in museums and/or international cultural cooperation – to gather substantial information and acquire an overview on the episode’s topic in a manner that can be relatively easily consumed. Ideally, the listeners are given a chance to learn something new from a reasonable investment of their time and attention. They should feel informed by the episode and comfortably acquainted with explanations and basic background information. The length of the podcast’s episodes so far (June 2025) have varied between 13 minutes and 32 minutes. They typically consist of interviews with project partners of the Ethnologisches Museum and/or the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, as well as with their anchors in the museums themselves. The interviews are post-edited and condensed, and, once approval of a written version has been obtained by the respective interviewees, subsequently connected via the two co-hosts.

## Situating Ourselves in the Podcasting Ecosystem

According to the Audio Monitor 2024, 35.2% of Germans listen to podcasts.<sup>1</sup> Statistically speaking, they are below fifty years of age and have tertiary formal education.<sup>2</sup> Their main aim in listening to podcasts is to gain information (Audio Monitor 2024:22). Perhaps unsurprisingly, no museum podcasts were in the Top 100.<sup>3</sup>

Being podcast listeners themselves, the co-hosts looked at what topical references happened to be around. From among the many shows, we will mention just a few here. We haven’t found any German museum podcasts that work with two cohosts and that invite teams of curators and partners as its guests. A popular series on cultural belongings removed by colonial powers is ‘Stuff the British Stole’<sup>4</sup> (2020 to 2023, then a TV series<sup>5</sup>). It takes an irreverent look at how the British Empire acquired objects. While it is thematically linked, we couldn’t hope to produce such an irreverent view. The Humboldt Forum, on the other hand, produces the podcast ‘99 Questions’.<sup>6</sup> It dives deep into topics in English or Spanish and has little in the way of framing to help lay audiences understand. Our aim was to be more easily accessible to laypeople and regular museum visitors with a basic interest in museums and their international collaborations. Neither of the podcast hosts are involved in the projects discussed, so

1 [https://www.online-audio-monitor.de/wp-content/uploads/Bericht-OAM\\_2024.pdf](https://www.online-audio-monitor.de/wp-content/uploads/Bericht-OAM_2024.pdf):75, accessed July 09, 2025.

2 <https://de.statista.com/themen/4343/podcasts/#topicOverview>, accessed July 09, 2025.

3 <https://podwatch.io/charts/>, accessed July 09, 2025.

4 <https://open.spotify.com/show/7y2q3VMC6WLsMIFXT3TyO7>, accessed July 09, 2025.

5 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuff\\_the\\_British\\_Stole](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuff_the_British_Stole), accessed September 12, 2025.

6 <https://open.spotify.com/show/2ifA301m2qWMMu8bFz3SFG>, accessed July 09, 2025.

we tend to ask questions that outsiders may pose and that we imagine would interest an open-minded museum visitor as well as ourselves. But since we do have a little more background knowledge than the ordinary museum visitor, we can ask for some possibly more hidden facts. Our questions can borrow from inner-museum discussions and point the listeners to current trends and proceedings in museum work that might not have been manifested in exhibitions as yet.

With this in mind, and after some discussion, the podcast team decided on German as the main language for the podcast, the German taxpayer being the one funding the production. However, our interview guests are invited to speak the language they are most comfortable in or that they use to communicate with their project partners within the museum. That means that the interviewees' contributions are broadcast in the speakers' own voices and phrasing. Following Nick Couldry, 'treating voice as a value means discriminating against frameworks of social economic and political organization that deny or undermine voice, such as neoliberalism' (Couldry 2010:2) – an aim the co-hosts wholeheartedly follow. In addition, just as within the projects themselves,

we need to consider new acts of cooperation and a new story that can motivate cooperation among those who have not worked together before [...] Vital, too, are acts of exchange. One way of thinking about new acts of political exchange is in terms of listening. [...] By listening, we acknowledge each other's status as beings capable of giving an account of ourselves and the world we share. (ibid.:145f.)

It is our belief that the podcast can only profit from being accessible to its interviewees and thus offers greater multiperspectivity to its audiences.

Of the languages the interviewees use, English and French are those that the co-hosts speak themselves and of which they would like to assume a basic understanding among the podcast's audience. In order for the intended audience to understand the interviewees more clearly, however, their narratives are summarized in the transitional texts in German. For other languages (so far Tok Pisin and Spanish), we use German voice-over recordings by professional actors to give larger audiences a chance to understand. The published episodes are accompanied by a transcript, so that listeners can read along or translate the interviews with automated services.

The renowned and awarded audiobook and podcast publishing studio 'speak low' is in charge of distributing the podcast. Speak low uses Podigee as its hosting platform,<sup>7</sup> which then publishes the episodes to standard distributors like Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Deezer etc. Once published, the museums also embed the podcast, its show notes and the transcript on their web pages.

The podcast format has been well received in-house and by German audiences, as shown in private communications received by the authors. While a look at the statistics reveals that the series would profit from more marketing, it turns out that for

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.podigee.com/en/>, accessed March 27, 2025.

propagation of the podcast too, voice matters: the most popular episode, ‘Verflochtene Erinnerungen’,<sup>8</sup> is the one that one of the guests has been promoting tirelessly via his networks. As the tracking shows, the second and third most listened to episodes, ‘Die Global Cultural Assembly’<sup>9</sup> and ‘A Slice of Life’<sup>10</sup> were also enthusiastically promoted in the guests’ or colleagues’ social media.

## Neutrality, Superiority, Tango

What does it mean that the podcast is called ‘Gegen die Gewohnheit’ or ‘Going Against the Grain’? What grains or habits do we aim to break with? In 2024, a study by the Institut für Museumsforschung found that museums enjoy public confidence when they are perceived as politically neutral<sup>11</sup> and unbiased. Historically, anthropological museums are not neutral, neither as scientific institutions nor as exhibition spaces. As part of the imperial colonial project of the 19th and early 20th centuries, they received or even placed orders with colonial administrators and military personnel for so-called objects. In their exhibitions they presented them as ‘other’, alien and exotic to the German museum visitors, who were perceived as coherent and standard, while claiming to know all there was to know about them. Even long after Germany had been forced to part with its colonies, a notion of cultural superiority was still prominent in many of the museums’ relations with the countries, communities and individuals whose belongings constituted the museums’ collections.

This inherited sense of superiority and entitlement is the grain the podcast wants to go against, the obstinate habit that anthropological museums have made considerable efforts to shed in the last few decades, the traces of which, however, have proved just as unyielding as their pursuit. The CoMuse projects and their attempts to collaborate on an egalitarian level are proof of this pursuit. But imagine the museum and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz as a very big ship: changing direction is hard. If you want to do something different, you need to get a lot of people on board to go along, say yes, and then work on the change. Changing habits takes energy and, above all, a willingness to embrace change. To cite Konrad Lorenz: ‘Let’s throw one of our favourite ideas overboard every day; it’ll keep us young and healthy’ (Lorenz 1973:88).

8 <https://comuse.org/en/podcast/7-intertwined-memories>, accessed July 04, 2025.

9 <https://comuse.org/podcast-folge/1-die-global-cultural-assembly>, accessed July 10, 2025.

10 <https://comuse.org/podcast-folge/6-a-slice-of-life>, accessed July 10, 2025.

11 ‘Das Vertrauen in Museen speist sich aus der Perzeption von Neutralität. Menschen, die Museen als neutral und unparteiisch wahrnehmen, vertrauen diesen wesentlich stärker als diejenigen, die diese Neutralität nicht anerkennen.’ Press release on the study, <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/pressmitteilung/artikel/2024/04/19/deutschlandweite-studie-museen-geniessen-hoehchstes-vertrauen.html>, accessed March 27, 2025.

As its subtitle suggests, the podcast takes a closer look at these transitional processes: the change of aims and attitudes in collaborations, their practical implementation and what the participants have learned during their endeavour to try something new as a team. A recurring question we ask our guests in each episode is what they identify as the goal of this specific collaboration, referring to both the anticipated benefits for the museum, its partnering institution or community and the joint venture. Somewhat surprisingly, in addition to these goals, which may be set out in contracts before the start of the collaboration, our guests often mention how they have benefited from these collaborations personally and professionally, how they have learned and grown, how the project has broadened their minds, the positive emotions they've experienced and the boost it has had on their work output – in short, how the collaborations have changed them.

It was a very conscious decision to have the podcast hosted by a team of two: one host from within and one from outside the museum. These different perspectives from different training, custom and employment statuses allow a broader view to be taken of the topics discussed and for a range within the interaction with the studio guests. Another principle of our work for the podcast was that the projects featured in each episode should ideally be discussed with all the collaborating parties involved, the museum being just one of them. This practice aligns with the overall policy of the Collaborative Museum: it takes two to tango. As Couldry states: 'voice is the process of articulating the world from a distinctive embodied position. Failing to respect the inherent differences between voices means, once again, failing to recognize voice at all' (Couldry 2010:8). Thus, it was of major importance that project representatives from the museum team would always be paired with their project partners from outside to tell the story of their project with more than one voice – if not physically inside the studio, then via a conference call into the speak low recording booth in Berlin. For the episodes on 'The Gungervaa, a Mongolian shrine'<sup>12</sup> and 'Collaborative research with Indigenous groups in Alaska',<sup>13</sup> for instance, the interview was conducted with some of the guests sitting next to us and some of them calling in remotely.

If we didn't have an opportunity to talk to the museum's project partners directly, however, because of a faulty or non-existent internet connection with their respective home regions, the German project partners would pre-record the answers to our questions during one of their visits, and we would edit the footage into the studio interview accordingly. Examples of this are the episode 'A slice of life',<sup>14</sup> for which audio recordings were made with project participants in the village of Napamogona in Papua New Guinea, or the episode 'Long term collaboration with the village community

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12 <https://comuse.org/podcast-folge/4-der-gungervaa-ein-mongolischer-schrein>, accessed July 10, 2025.

13 <https://comuse.org/en/podcast/13-collaborative-projects-with-indigenous-groups-on-the-north-west-coast-of-america>, accessed August 5, 2025.

14 Cf. above.

Macucu in Colombia,<sup>15</sup> with footage from the Rio Negro region. In rare cases, we also produced episodes without participation from museum colleagues because they were unavailable<sup>16</sup> or because the episode already had a lot of interviewees.<sup>17</sup>

## Production: Showing Guests a Good Time and Approval Processes

Among the many stratagems within CoMuse, we look for projects that we believe can profitably be mediated in a podcast to a larger museum audience. Priority is given to projects in which the partners spend time in Berlin, as recording together in speak low's studio helps create an engaging and warm atmosphere both for the interviewees and later for the podcast audience. The usual course of action is as follows: once a general interest in contributing their time and sharing an inside view of the collaboration has been shown by the project participants, the podcast hosts read up on the project and formulate the initial questions. These questions are then shared with the project partners and discussed, ideally in an initial meeting between partners and hosts, so that everybody gets to know everybody else before the recording. The future interviewees are free to add questions, suggest more rewarding ones, or strike out those they feel uncomfortable talking about.

The next meeting will then generally take place in the recording studio in Berlin Kreuzberg. Its largest recording suite accommodates up to six people, but the recording equipment can be set up at a conference table on site in the Humboldt Forum if there is a tight project schedule requiring the group of interviewees to stay in the Forum's vicinity.<sup>18</sup> The discussion in the studio will last between 45 and 90 minutes, depending on the size of the group, the participants' personal temperament and the course the conversation takes.

The studio then provides the hosts with an audio file of the recording and an automated transcript. In a shared process, we choose which of the many stories shared during the studio session will make it to the much shorter episode. Then one of the hosts drafts a structure of the episode (usually Katharina Erben), and the other one writes the transitional texts (usually Anna Schäfers), with a ping-pong of discussions in between. The written version of the episode is then sent to the interviewees for their comments and approval or requests for changes, and if a topic is deemed politically sensitive, to the museum's in-house press office for official endorsement. Only with everybody's approval will the hosts return to the studio to record the additional sound

15 <https://comuse.org/podcast-folge/11-langzeitkooperation-mit-der-dorf-gemeinschaft-macucu-in-kolumbien>, accessed July 10, 2025.

16 <https://comuse.org/podcast-folge/5-aspekte-des-islam>, accessed July 10, 2025.

17 Cf. above.

18 As, for example in episodes 1 and 7, cf. above for both.

bits. The sound engineer will then combine these new recordings with the original interview, add music and thus create a proper episode. This audio is then sent to the hosts and the press officer for approval.

The finished episode is completed with the interviewees' biographies, links and suggested readings related to the episode (as approved by the project participants) and a finalized transcript for the podcast listeners to read along with, translate, or quote. These written features accompanying the episodes are published via podcasting apps and are also uploaded to the museums' webpages.

## Reflection: Guest Experience, Ethics of Storytelling, Institutional Critique

The research and production of the podcast offer insights into museum work that are otherwise hard to come by. Both hosts have learned (and then published in the podcast) new stories about museum work and what colleagues are doing behind closed doors, which usually don't make it into the public domain. This is significant in two respects. On the one hand, it demystifies and humanizes museum work by showing what happens in this publicly funded institution where outsiders may not know what their taxes are paying for. It gives the museum the ability to showcase some of its more 'silent' projects that happen in the object care facilities or during workshops with communities in the objects' societies of origin. Thus, different levels of collaboration are showcased, from the diplomatic to the practical to the artistic.

On the other hand, it allows people from those societies whose voices have been unheard for the longest time inside the museum to tell their stories in their own words. As mentioned above, we found it vital to let the museum's partners use their own language, voice and phrasing wherever possible. All translations and summaries and how we introduce topics are only recorded and published with their explicit approval. To this end, creating a welcoming, open atmosphere inside the studio and in the communication before and after the recording is essential. Our aim was to make the interviewees feel as much at ease in the studio as they hopefully did during the project. We wanted them to feel safe and self-determined; we wanted them to benefit from the experiences and structures that the podcast can provide.

This welcoming atmosphere and the mutual trust established through their power of co-decision may lead to moments of understanding. For example, the podcast episode 'Aspekte des Islam'<sup>19</sup> featured guests from two branches of Islam that are rather different in their beliefs, priorities and practices. Though both communities had co-cu-

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19 Cf. above.

rated an exhibition in the Humboldt Forum, the two women hadn't actually spoken to one another before meeting in the studio. Both had been a bit uneasy before the recording, wondering if they would get along. But the conversation in the podcast studio helped to create moments where they supported each other's opinions, stressed the commonalities of their concerns, nodded at each other affirmatively again and again, and seemed to enjoy the conversation connecting them to each other. We, the podcast hosts, were very happy to have been able to provide a space and an occasion for this propitious encounter. The guests discovered that, despite their differences, the concession to focus on shared values led them further in their conversation than they might otherwise have thought possible.

The range of stories that guests tell vary widely, from academic discourses to sharing very personal and emotional moments, as when members of Indigenous communities told us about their encounters, in the object care facilities of the museum, with the cultural belongings their ancestors had once crafted.<sup>20</sup> Stories like these are all very sensitive. Some guests share their talent in analysing the politics of ethnological museums and its implications for Indigeneity today,<sup>21</sup> others share their personal feelings as well as their professional learning, and yet others are wonderful storytellers and evoke a rich and vivid imagery in their narratives. In their contributions, our guests may choose to put things into order, ask questions themselves, draw surprising conclusions, or fit things into their wider context. This promotes a wonderful variety in the scope of the podcasts, from in-depth episodes on a single object, to special exhibitions summarizing many different views, to educated as well as passionate calls for overall changes in museum politics. We encourage our guests to speak as openly as they feel comfortable doing.

At least, that is the proposal: that the guest may voice criticism as well as praise. But it is sometimes only after the microphones have been turned off that the guests admit that maybe a process has not been running as smoothly as they had earlier described and that obstacles had occurred in the process of the collaboration that neither of the partners had foreseen. Those deep-rooted administrative habits had proved rather difficult to surmount. Despite their concordant goals and efforts, the dialogue between the partners had reached a dead end. We understand that a recorded and broadcast conversation with project externals may not be the right moment to evaluate the project in its shortcomings, and that instead the participants tend to focus on the common achievements and their high expectations for the future.

In summary, the podcast offers us a wonderful chance to get into conversation with people and to inspire both the interviewees and the audience to think about collaborations. It gives the audience a glimpse into different projects that turn more and more

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20 Cf. episode 2, 'Gegen den Strom', <https://comuse.org/podcast-folge/2-gegen-den-strom>, accessed July 10, 2025 and episode 13, 'Collaborative research with Indigenous groups in Alaska', as above.

21 Cf. e. g. episode 1, 'Die Global Cultural Assembly', specifically Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas's statements.

into the core business of museums. The podcast aims to achieve three goals: it presents projects to a broader public, researches and discusses new ways of collaborating, and entertains its audience. In the podcast, the museums publicly state that new forms of collaborating are necessary if they want to stay relevant. With the podcast published, they cannot go back past these statements again. In an ideal world, the museum will find the money to continue the series after the initial twenty episodes have been completed.

## References

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