

# Intertwined Memories

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**Abstract:** What traces of colonial and Nazi violence can be found in the Humboldt Forum exhibitions? How relevant is this heritage for democracy today? In the collaborative project 'Intertwined Memories,' people from Berlin's diverse urban society, international partners from Namibia, Rwanda, Jamaica and Israel, and employees of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum are working together to develop educational formats for schoolchildren and adults.

The combination of the architecture and history of the Humboldt Forum with the exhibition of anthropological collections from colonial contexts has created a tension that has been articulated in numerous debates since the museum opened. Dialogue-based educational programs create the opportunity to negotiate controversial topics with different visitor groups. We see criticism of anti-Semitism and racism as two important building blocks of our educational formats.

*[Holocaust, Collective memories, Colonialism, Education]*

## Intertwined Memories

In his 2024 book, the historian Hanno Hochmuth calls Berlin 'the Rome of contemporary history' (Hochmuth 2024). Those who study ancient history must travel to Rome, while those who want to understand important historical events of the twentieth century, such as the collapse of the German Empire, National Socialism, the Holocaust, the division of Germany, or the fall of the Berlin Wall, must also go to Berlin.

If Berlin is the Rome of contemporary history, the Humboldt Forum is the Colosseum. No other historical place in Germany is the subject of so many contemporary historical discourses and public debates. The partial reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, which now houses the Humboldt Forum, was made possible by the lobbyist Wilhelm von Boddien, a 2002 Bundestag resolution and an aid association called 'Förderverein Berliner Schloss e. V.', who did not shy away from donors from the political far right. The imposing palace building in the centre of Berlin is not just an event venue or a museum, but also a constructed place of remembrance and thus an arena for negotiating social discourses surrounding memory culture.

Even before it opened its doors, the Humboldt Forum was heavily criticized for its unreflective handling of the exhibits from the collections of the Ethnologisches Muse-



Fig. 1 Roey Zeevi during a guided tour for the project 'Intertwined memories', December 1, 2024, (Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Frank Sperling)

um and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. The question of the museum's involvement in colonial crimes sparked a debate about memories of German colonialism, which had previously been largely absent from society. The impact of the architecture and the exhibits reinforced each other as a kind of serendipitous effect for the missing public debate on German colonialism. The provenance of some of the artefacts prominently displayed from colonial or other violent contexts, and the reconstruction of the architecture of the Prussian imperial palace, fuelled further criticism.

For several years now, the programme of institutions working within the Humboldt Forum have clearly reflected their engagement with these issues. In particular, the programme seeks to collaborate with representatives of the so-called communities of origin in order to develop new, multi-perspective strategies for dealing with collection items. One of the major collaborative programmes at the Humboldt Forum is the 'Collaborative Museum' of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, in which the museums work on collaborative projects with partners from Indigenous communities, educators, scholars and artists from all over the world on issues surrounding its collections. One of the many projects within the Collaborative Museum's program is the project 'Intertwined Memories: Traces of Colonialism and the Shoah in the Berlin Palace and the Ethnological Collections', an educational project which began in early 2023.

## The Intertwining of Crimes

The first impulse for starting the project was the realization that, while the Humboldt Forum was strongly committed to addressing colonialism, none of its cultural programmes or its trail on the History of the Site dealt with the issue of Nazi Germany or the Holocaust, although the former castle was used by many people and institutions between 1933 and 1945. However, as a visual representative of the former Prussian palace, it should be a reminder that the palace stood for anti-democratic politics, imperialism, militarism and anti-Semitism. Even after the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1918 and during the Nazi era, when it was no longer a site of political power, the castle housed, for example, the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft (today's Max-Planck-Gesellschaft). The society promoted, managed and carried out research and science that provided the alleged 'proof' for the racist ideologies on which the crimes of colonialism and the Holocaust were based. The aim of 'Intertwined Memories' is to address the entangled discourses and negotiation processes of memory that are present or covertly present in the Humboldt Forum through the history of the site and the ethnological collections displayed there today.

In order to create educational programmes which convey multiple perspectives, the project brought together a large number of people with different cultural and professional backgrounds: from Israel (the educator Roey Zeevi), Rwanda (the sociologist Assumpta Mugiraneza), Jamaica (the curator Imani Tafari-Ama) and Namibia (the artist Tuli Mekondjo), as well as people from Berlin's civil society (Alex Stolze, an east Berlin-based Jewish musician, and Christian Hajer, a qualified landscape planner and freelance educator), alongside colleagues from the Stiftung Humboldt Forum's educational department (Marc Wrasse) and the authors as curators for education, trans-cultural collaboration and project coordinators at the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst respectively.

The project was conceived not as a research project, but rather as an educational project that aimed to develop guided tours and workshops for young people and adults at the Humboldt Forum. The focus is not exclusively on the history of the cultural belongings and the location. Although these serve as a starting point and material basis for the project, the focus is always on current social issues. This is because cultural belongings in ethnological museums can be understood as mediators of relationships. They evoke narratives of dehumanization, loss and trauma, and can only be understood and communicated in their complexity from multiple perspectives. Despite the pain that comes with dealing with cultural belonging, it also has the potential to open up spaces in which solidary remembrance is possible and people affected by racism and anti-Semitism are not pitted against each other. Methodically anchoring the project in the concrete while remaining open to multiple experiences and histories proved to be essential to the educational endeavour. Despite difficult conditions in the face of the political shift to the right in Germany's political landscape and the increasing polariza-



Fig. 2 Assumpta Mugiraneza during a guided tour for the project 'Intertwined memories', December 1, 2024, (Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Frank Sperling)

tion of the left connected to the massacre of the Hamas terrorists on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023 in Israel and the following war in Gaza, the participants did not shy away from the big questions facing humanity.

Roey Zeevi explains this using the example of his many years of work at the Israeli memorial in Yad Vashem: 'My main concern is not history itself. It is about giving teachers the tools to help their students remember the Holocaust so that in the end, students ask themselves questions – moral questions, I would say, all human questions – and that this encounter will be spiritually, emotionally and morally significant for them' (Gegen die Gewohnheit 2024).

### **First phase: Workshop and Residency in Berlin**

The interdisciplinary group, consisting of artists, curators, educators, sociologists and pedagogues, met in the summer of 2024 at the Humboldt Forum to jointly appropriate the location and the ethnological collections for an inclusive work of remembrance and education. In this way, cultural belongings such as fertility dolls from Namibia, Yemeni kippot and looted art made by Maroons from Surinam were examined together in the storage facility from a Jewish and postcolonial perspective. The participants discussed

how humanity is denied in the context of various genocides and how a re-humanization can take place despite irreparable losses. Imani Tafari-Ama commented as follows:

In this sense, the dehumanization was complete. And when I listen to Roey talking about the Shoah and the atrocities against Jews, there was also a concerted amnesia at the time regarding the humanity of Jewish people. And when you think of what happened in Rwanda, when you hear Assumpta's account, there was also the rationalization that the other is not a subject. So our common denominator is the need for re-humanization based on our shared experiences of trauma. And that is a very powerful thing when it comes to developing respect for differences. Even if we don't have the same roots and the same history, we can recognize that we have this common thread of trauma that we are trying to overcome. (Gegen die Gewohnheit 2024)

The two-week meeting consisted of joint tours through the Humboldt Forum and the collections in Dahlem, workshops in the Humboldt Forum, and a multi-day residency at the Deltahaus Rosow/'Neustettlin', where one of the participants, Alex Stolze, runs a cultural centre that also functions as a Jewish cultural space. In view of the gravity of the topics and the occasionally very tense atmosphere, the time spent together in the countryside proved to be very helpful and contributed to bringing the team closer together, relaxing the atmosphere for discussion and opening up spaces for creativity.

## Developing Educational Formats

The participants were always concerned with the concrete development of educational formats that use concrete exhibits on site at locations in the Humboldt Forum and through biographies of people who worked in the palace in one of its stages to make the interconnections clear to young and adult audiences. For example, the sculpture of the Cameroonian Queen Mother Naya was selected, which was stolen from the palace of the capital of the kingdom of Kom (in present-day Cameroon) in 1905 by the German colonial officer Hans Caspar Gans Edler Herr zu Putlitz and then handed over to the museum. It was then included in a Nazi propaganda exhibition ('German Colonial Exhibition') in 1933, along with other objects. The exhibition was a major colonial-political event that had not taken place since the end of the Empire and was an attempt by the colonial revisionist movement to adapt to the Nazi regime. The exhibition was first viewed in Berlin by 240,000 people and later travelled around the German Reich visiting eleven locations, ultimately being seen by a total of 854,000 people. In the travelling exhibition, the focus was on the Germans as a 'people without space', while the people in the former colonies were dehumanized and the territories were presented as a 'space without people'. The achievements of 'German labour' in the 'unjustly' lost colonies were highlighted, as were German soldiers like the colonial

criminals Franz Ritter von Epp, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, Carl Peters and Hermann von Wissmann.

The marginalization, dehumanization and annihilation of German Jews during the National Socialist era can be told in the museum by means of a small pre-colonial gold figure from Costa Rica. It represents a human-animal hybrid and was originally a burial object. The then 'Völkerkunde Museum' (today's Ethnologisches Museum) acquired it during the Nazi era from a pawnbroker. From 1939, the gold and silver holdings of tens of thousands of Jews that had been systematically plundered by the Nazi regime were stored there. In May 1941, five months before the first of a total of 61 deportation trains carrying Berlin Jews to their extermination in the east departed, the central office of the Berlin pawnbroking association offered the museum the gold figure from Costa Rica for sale. The extent of the looting of gold and silver by the Nazi state, as well as the extermination of people, is so great that to this day only a few descendants of the previous owners have been identified. Their stories are missing, as Roey Zeevi underlined in a panel discussion at the Humboldt Forum, when he was asked about his motivation for engaging in the project and replied: 'I want my Jews back' (*Verflochtene Erinnerungen* 2024).

The link between colonial racism and antisemitism in science is clearly illustrated by the eugenicist and Nazi racial hygienist Eugen Fischer (1874–1967). As early as 1908, Fischer conducted racist research on genetics in the former colony of German South-West Africa (now Namibia). He later headed the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie in Berlin-Dahlem. In 1933, he was rector of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität during the book burning event, at which he spoke alongside the Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels. As a senator, Fischer was a frequent visitor to the Senate meetings of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft (KWG) in the palace next to the university. The KWG's general administration moved into the new and imposing rooms there as early as 1922, where meetings and the annual general assemblies took place. The Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für ausländisches öffentliches Recht und internationales Recht (Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut for Comparative Public Law and International Law) also used the former imperial property as its headquarters, and their members enjoyed the same view from the rooftop that visitors of the Humboldt Forum do today.

A critical examination of the dome and the cross on the roof of the Humboldt Forum forms the conclusion and connection of the historical discourses on the exhibited cultural artefacts, the role of religion, antisemitism and racism in present-day Berlin in 2025. The 120 million euros made in donations by the 'Förderverein Berliner Schloss' Association were used not only to rebuild the baroque façade, but also to build the dome and the surrounding figures of prophets, which can be seen from afar. A blue and white banner around the dome demands the submission of all people to Christianity: 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given to mankind but the name of Jesus Christ, for the glory of God the Father. At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.' By combining



Fig. 3 Assumpta Mugiraneza, Roey Zeevi, participants from the IRIBA-Centre Kigali and researchers from the Ethnologisches Museum and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum during a workshop on German colonialism in Rwanda near Lake Kivu, October 26, 2025. (Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Patrick Helber)

two Bible verses, the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795–1861) expressed his divine right and his rejection of the 1848 revolution and its democratic ideas. The cross and the inscription emphasized the Hohenzollern's claim to power and were directed against democracy, as well as against the Jewish population of Prussia. Since the banner and cross have been reattached, the reconstruction of the quote has been criticized by Jews, decolonial activists and other secular critics (Oswalt 2024:124). For Indigenous partners whose cultural belongings are exhibited in the Humboldt Forum, the biblical references are a painful reminder of the complicity of Christian missionaries in colonial atrocities and their destruction of Indigenous cultural practices. The connections between the cross on the dome, the hegemonic slogan, the historical events and the collections that tell of colonial and Nazi crimes illustrate the intertwining of histories and memories.

The four above-mentioned examples of interweaving histories, cultural-belongings, biographies and places form part of a guided tour for adults and a four-hour workshop for high-school students. The workshop incorporates elements of theatrical pedagogy,

which expands the programme's knowledge transfer with a more emotional form of education. It was piloted at the Humboldt Forum until July 2025 and is now available to the public (Stiftung Humboldt Forum 2025:39). Despite all the justified criticism of the Humboldt Forum, these collaborative developments open up an opportunity for the complexification of memory discourses, despite or precisely because of the historical burden that weighs on the reconstructed palace and the looted goods exhibited in it.

## **Phase Two: Carrying out Similar Workshops in Other Countries**

Building on the workshops for high-school students and teachers and the guided tours for adults around 'Intertwined Memories' at the Humboldt Forum, the project entered its second phase in autumn 2025. This next stage reflects the interest of our international partners in developing similar educational formats within their own institutions, inspired by the insights gained during the 2024 exchange in Berlin. In October 2025, as part of the 'Decolonial Weekend' in Kigali (Rwanda), a series of workshops took place. Rwandan, German and Israeli educators collaborated to discuss the traces of German colonialism and the Rwandan genocide in 1994 in Kigali and at Lake Kivu in the west of Rwanda. This initiative was developed in close cooperation with the Stiftung Humboldt Forum, our partner Assumpta Mugiraneza from the IRIBA Center in Kigali and the Goethe-Institut Kigali, which is the host of the annual 'Decolonial Weekend'. A mobile 'travelling school' with a group of young Rwandan artists, colleagues from the Stiftung Humboldt Forum, Roey Zeevi from Israel and us visited by minibus sites across Rwanda where traces of the German colonial past are embedded in the countries' landscape and the collective memory and participated in various public talks. In the future, we hope that additional funding will make it possible to expand these workshops to other partner countries, primarily Israel, Namibia and Jamaica.

## Authors' Note

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