Introduction to the Special Issue

CoMuse: The Collaborative Museum Forging New Paths in Transcultural Museum Work

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Ethnographic and non-European art collections currently form a field that is particularly prominent in the public eye, since the methods of curating, exhibiting and working with cultural belongings have undergone significant changes over the past twenty years. These changes are rooted in postcolonial and decolonial approaches, especially since the institutions housing these collections are confronted with ongoing debates about their entanglement with histories of colonialism and unequal power relations (e.g., Sarr and Savoy 2018; Hicks 2021; von Oswald 2022). Consequently, new approaches were and still are needed to establish and sustain fair relationships between museums and the communities of the collections' places of origin (Deutscher Kulturrat 2019).

The current practice of cooperation and collaboration in ethnographic and anthropological museums shapes and is shaped by the debate surrounding social and cultural anthropology as a whole. Since the early beginnings of the discipline, anthropologists have practised and theorized collaborative curating and collaborative and participatory research, both in and outside museums. Examples include Boas and his colleagues, Latin American anthropologists working with social movements and African-American activist anthropologists (Fluehr-Lobban 2008:176). As ethnographic texts were 'hierarchical arrangements of discourses' (Clifford 1986:17), new research paradigms envisioned writing with and not purely about one's interlocutors, preferably in a dialog-

ZfE | JSCA 150 (2025) 129–140 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8856

ical fashion with feedback loops and openness for co-interpretation (Crapanzano 1980; Marcus and Fisher 1986; Tedlock 1979). Sharing authority, rather than writing about the 'other' from a position of authority (Lassiter 2001:138), needed a reflexive approach that took into account historical and contemporary structures of domination and inequality. This meant collaborating throughout the entire research process, including writing and distribution (Rappaport 2008:2). The need for cooperation and participation between researchers and their subjects has not ceased to be of interest over the last four decades. However, when examined closely, the percentage of truly collaborative projects, i.e. those in which the research partners have an equal say in the design of the research, the authorship of the results and acknowledgement of the achievement, is small. There are different reasons for this. Firstly, academic research is time-intensive, covering many months or even years through different stages, from preparation to 'actual' research and writing: including research partners in this process requires the appropriate resources to enable them to participate and contribute on equal footing. Secondly, academic achievements are part of a career economy in which individual expertise and authorship, materialized in degrees and publications, is the currency of the academic market.

In this respect, the 'new' museums' collaboration models and practices seem to have an advantage, since their economy is different, and distributing authority, responsibility as well as acknowledgement and merit is common practice in many museum contexts these days. Many museums wanting to transform themselves aim to 'foster collaborative relationships on [an] equal footing with diverse stakeholders and willingly assume the risks entailed by entertaining novel positions' (Marstine 2011:7), thereby creating new authorities and work routines. Collaborative research into the intricate histories of artefacts from non-European contexts can counteract historical inequalities and thus contribute to a new ethic that embraces the decentralization of knowledge as a paramount value and the shared use of cultural belongings (Abiti 2019). This acknowledges postcolonial approaches by questioning the manifold hierarchical relationships imbued in the museums' workings. Moreover, collaborative work can help to create and develop new perspectives around the present and past lives of cultural belongings, thus creating 'fresh' relationships between people, objects and practices.

The 'New Museology' that emerged in the 1980s (Vergo 1989) inspired curators and academics to reconsider and reorganize exhibition-making practices. The concept of the museum as a 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997) transformed the notion of what a museum could achieve for and with all those involved in its creation. The 'New Museology' and the theoretical and practical activities surrounding collaboration have gained momentum by sharpening our understanding of museums and collections as tools for producing knowledge that are closely linked to governmentality and the production and representation of hierarchy and inequality (e.g. Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; cf. Ballestero and Petschelies 2023).

Feminist theory has further inspired the ethics of collaboration in museums, envisioning them as places that uphold an ideal of social life-promoting, integrated relations

between self and other, self and nature, in a non-repressive, caring environment (Hein 2007:33). Hein (2007:39) adds that museums should prioritize process and practice over product and consumption, thereby exercising radical transparency. This approach prioritizes ethical responsibilities towards 'source communities'[1] and Indigenous peoples (e.g. Kreps 2011), fundamentally changing established roles and the self-perception of curatorial expertise and authority. This differs significantly from the academic economy, where the final product, such as a publication or a successful third-party funding proposal, is what is recognized. The contributions to this special issue follow this practice-oriented approach, emphasizing the processual intricacies of collaborations in describing and reflecting on a selected number of projects realized within the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst's CoMuse strategy. Furthermore, there is a need to bring closer together the agendas of museums and universities within the new collaborative paradigm of collection research, linking the different networks in the areas of the respective collections' origins (cf. Dilger et al. 2025).

The Collaborative Museum/CoMuse: The Project

For the final opening ceremony of the Humboldt Forum in 2022, over eighty international cooperation partners were invited to Berlin, all of whom had been part of the planning process for the new exhibition spaces. Coming from diverse regional and professional backgrounds – such as Achiles Bufure, a museum director from Tanzania; Deepak Tolange, a film maker from Nepal; Michael Yahgulanaas, a visual artist from the American Northwest Coast, and Orlando Villegas, a community member from a rural part of Amazonia – these international delegates worked together in four thematic workshops. As a result of this encounter, they jointly developed a paper containing 'ideas, proposals and expectations' for an equitable future work on the museum collections, the 'Joint declaration of the Global Cultural Assembly 2022 DIGNITY – CONTINUITY – TRANSPARENCY', 'Dignity Declaration' for short, which identified the values of dignity, continuity and transparency as the most significant pillars for the possible future of museum work, and became a guideline for the planning of the programme of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in the following years.

Among the ideas of the partners, prominent requests were the decentralization of knowledge and the circulation of people, ideas and cultural belongings. The two museums have therefore formed the Collaborative Museum[2], a large-scale three-year project, which explores new ways of dealing with the collections on many levels of the institu-

1 'Source Community' is a contested term. It refers to cultural experts from areas of the respective collections' origin.

2 Further information can be found here: https://comuse.org/en/, accessed 23.02.2026

tions in collaboration with various experts from the regions of origin. It is an important aspect of the project that many different working fields of the museums are addressed, such as curatorship, (provenance) research, outreach and conservation. This is of course not entirely new, but the scale of over forty subprojects running over the three years and the continuous critical companionship of the international partners makes it unique.

The Collaborative Museum is one crucial step in the process of decolonizing collections and turning museums into fully transparent collecting institutions that offer their material and immaterial collections to those who strive for shared research and reconnection. In considering 'collections as relations' (Dilger et al. 2025), the project aims to pave the way for the establishment of more symmetrical approaches to collection-based work, research and exhibition in post-colonial settings.

Why Collaborative – Why Museum?

For many years, collaborative approaches have shaped museum work, producing 'remarkable exchanges of knowledge (…) and multi-vocal exhibitions, which highlight different perspectives on the material on display' (Herle 2023; see also von Poser and Baumann 2016; Bachich 2022; Walda-Mandel et al. 2025). Peers and Brown state that relationships between museums and 'source communities' … 'are the most important manifestations of the new curatorial praxis' (2007:531). Also, in the Berlin context, this practice is not new, and projects with, e.g., Yup'ik from Alaska from 1997 onwards (Fienup-Riordan 2005) or with local partners from Yakutia since 2008 (Lavaulx-Vrécourt & Nahser 2018) have been successfully conducted. More recent examples include the long-term collaborative exchange with partners in Tanzania (Reyels et al. 2017) and collaborative connections with partners in Venezuela (Scholz 2017).

Approximately thirty years ago, the idea of museum collections as 'contact zones' shaped the way collaborative work in these institutions was described. With the notion of a contact zone, James Clifford (1997) introduced a model for a space in which groups from diverse backgrounds, often affected by asymmetrical power relations, come together to work on the collections. In the following years, the notion of a contact zone has been widely used to describe forms of cross-cultural collaboration between curators, researchers and cultural experts from the regions of the respective collections' origins, but the concept itself has also been criticized. In particular, the implication of equitable access that is suggested by the notion of a contact zone has been accused of muting neo-colonial continuities while maintaining the hegemonic position of museums (Boast 2011; Message 2015; Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020). Collaborative programmes in general must remain alert to the persistent power asymmetries in collaborative research in a postcolonial setting (Scholz 2019).

Therefore, it was crucial to find ways of overcoming the systemic barriers and raising collaborative work to a new level. In this respect, it is necessary to conceive of col-

lections as active bearers of historical injustice and violence (Geismar 2015:188) while at the same time seeing objects and artefacts as an integral part of a 'network in which people and things are entangled' (Fausto 2020:11). It also requires constant reflection on the intersecting positionalities of all the actors involved (Smith 2012). In the end, the relational aspect of collections is the core perspective that must be approached in a socioculturally sensitive and transparent way (Bell 2017, Dilger et al. 2025) if it is to free itself from accusations of mere tokenism (Golding and Modest 2016). It further must de-hierarchize knowledge systems and present a comfortable space for different research approaches (cf. Mithlo 2004; Moutu 2007; Wali 2023; Basu 2024).

Since collaborative approaches also require a new structure in the institutions, some structural adjustments have been launched in the wake of the Humboldt Forum's opening. One permanent curatorial position for transcultural cooperation has been introduced alongside one curatorial position for the visual media (historical film and photograph collections) and another for contemporary art in a global context. Furthermore, four permanent positions for postcolonial provenance research that are organizationally linked to the Zentralarchiv of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz have been set up to support exhibition production with background research on the chosen cultural belongings (Binter et al. 2022; cf. Förster et al. 2018).

A further important preparatory step was the digitization of the historical inventories (Erwerbungsbücher des Ethnologischen Museums) and all the acquisition files from 1830 to 1947 (Deterts and Ortlieb 2024). All these sources are now available online and ease the planning of projects for researchers and experts from all over the world. Also, the digitization of the material collections has continued, and currently there are over 125,000 objects visible online from the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst[3] (cf. Koch 2019).

In parallel, the research infrastructures in Dahlem are continuously being improved (von Poser 2023) in order to make the collections physically available to visiting fellows, researchers, and delegations. Rooms have been fitted with digital equipment for online workshops with partners from all over the world, and objects are prepared for collaborative work in a large restoration department (Gabsch 2023).

Through proactive provenance research and the resulting contact with relevant communities of implication, through existing contacts and recent requests from different regions of the world, and finally through public calls, collaboration partners have been found for a variety of projects.

One challenge that immediately became apparent was that building the necessary mutual trust for collaborative projects takes a long time and that partners in the world expect a sustainable, long-term partnership (Abungu 2019) – two points that are counteracted by the short-term project logics of German funding institutions (cf. Zenker and Vonderau 2023:146f.). It is therefore extremely important to ensure that the mu-

3 https://recherche.smb.museum/?language=de&limit=15&sort=relevance&controls=none&collectionKey=EM*&collectionKey=AKu*, accessed 23.2.2026.

seums' internal permanent structures can maintain the projects that have been started, at least in a reduced capacity, even in the case of funding shortages.

Another relevant network that has been initiated in response to the Dignity Declaration is the Global Cultural Assembly, a permanent board of cultural specialists from different regions and backgrounds that oversees the planning of collaboration and exhibition work in the Humboldt Forum (see the article of Dias and Scholz in this issue). This group also includes community representatives from Berlin because connections to the collections are also widely present in urban society (Schultz 2011).

The production of exhibitions and related writings is certainly more demanding in a collaborative setting than it would be without the inclusion of collaboration partners. It requires considerably more time, effort and engagement due to more complex coordination, but in the end the integration of multiple positionalities and perspectives yields enrichment on various levels.

This framework represents an essential step in the decolonization of the collections, with close attention being paid to the wishes and needs of the partners, as dictated in the paper 'Dignity, Continuity, Transparency' mentioned above. The resulting approaches often do not follow a simple logic of restitution, but are much more subtle, differentiated and diverse (e.g. von Poser 2017).

Many current processes of collaboration with various regions of the world are linked to the historical collections and the stories of acquisition and appropriation behind them. Moreover, media attention is often focused particularly on these areas.

This volume aims to bring together experiences from several of the Collaborative Museum's subprojects in the form of workshop reports and to present them to a broader readership, as the editors believe that this not only adds value to the field of museum anthropology but also carries wider implications for the discipline as a whole.

The contributions trace the changing landscape of collaborative museum practice by examining two interconnected areas: institutional transformation, and the work with cultural belongings. While the first cluster addresses the structural, communicational and technological changes needed to support collaboration within museum institutions, the second cluster explores the epistemic, ethical and emotional aspects of engaging with communities and collections across diverse historical and geopolitical contexts. Together, these articles highlight how contemporary ethnological museums grapple with inherited inequalities while experimenting with new models of co-production, relational accountability and shared authority. Instead of viewing institutional reform and collaborative collections work as separate fields, the section demonstrates how they influence and limit each other: structural changes enable collaborative practices, which in their turn reveal the strengths and weaknesses of existing institutional arrangements.

Institutional Structure and Transformation

This cluster brings together articles that examine how ethnological museums seek to reconfigure their organizational structures, communication practices and technological infrastructures to support more equitable forms of collaboration. The contributions reveal that institutional transformation is not merely a matter of adopting new tools or workflows but requires a more profound rethinking of authority, accountability and epistemic responsibility.

The article by Szöke, Ungar and Wischer frames these debates by outlining the conceptual and practical tensions that are inherent in institutional collaboration. Building on this, Erben and Schäfers provide a media-ethnographic analysis of the CoMuse podcast, showing how multilingual interviews, approval processes and guests' discomfort reveal the frictions that arise when democratizing institutional voices through a public-facing medium. Sigsfeld complements this with a critical examination of restitution governance, demonstrating how collaborative aspirations are frequently contained by structural limitations, legal frameworks and political shifts. Finally, Navarro offers a theoretically innovative and practice-oriented perspective on digital transformation, criticizing digital coloniality while proposing low-tech, care-centred alternatives that prioritize partner contexts over institutional efficiency.

Together, these articles trace the micropolitics of institutional change, illustrating that collaboration demands not only new methods but also new modes of communication, infrastructural experimentation and sensitivity to the uneven terrains on which museum work unfolds.

If institutional change forms the enabling environment for collaborative practice, the second cluster demonstrates what becomes possible when such conditions are taken seriously—namely, diverse forms of working with collections and cultural belongings that foreground community agency, relational ethics and epistemic plurality.

Engaging with Cultural Belongings

The articles in this cluster document a wide variety of collaborative efforts involving collections, cultural belongings and community knowledge systems, emphasizing the creativity, complexity and challenges of such work across global contexts. Together, these contributions demonstrate how provenance research, co-curation, the revitalization of knowledge and community-centred storytelling can transform museum practices from within.

Some articles—such as Bokop and Tolange's investigation of Nepali heritage and illicit artifact trafficking, or Krebs's work with Uyghur diaspora communities—highlight collaboration by carefully tracing material histories, emotional connections, or diasporic identities. Others, including the articles by Ellendorf and Mbala, Dias and

Scholz, and by Steffens, Quintupil and Bayer, focus on community-led processes of cultural revitalization, restitution and storytelling, emphasizing the emotional and political work involved in building long-term relationships. Contributions like those from the Talking Mats team or Stillfried, Schien and Cardozo show how inter-epistemic conversations, child-centred pedagogy and artistic projects can open up new ways of reconnecting with cultural belongings. Meanwhile, the articles by Knapp, Rodriguez and Mengel and by Schüren, Bayer, García and Dressen present examples of ongoing, trust-based collaborations that challenge archival ethics, sensory access and the ontological assumptions that have long shaped museum collections. Scholz's contribution emphasises the potential for long-term cooperation to evolve into deep, meaningful relationships, as demonstrated by the partnership between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Kotiria community in Colombia. By contrast, Wölfel et al. emphasise the role of replicas in fostering dialogue and supporting heritage building within a local community in Guatemala. Alternative approaches to knowledge production in museums are also explored, such as interdisciplinary discussions, as demonstrated by Kabalan, Perrot and Tebbe. Helber and Scholz's article further develops this idea, focusing on the educational potential of objects and how the Humboldt Forum can address urgent global issues. The special issue concludes with Mareile Flitsch's contribution on the 'Workspace Series', a pioneering format by the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (2022-2024). This innovative approach promoted transparency in knowledge production, sharing museum collections and research with diverse stakeholders. This external perspective enriches the special issue, providing a thought-provoking conclusion.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue show that collaborative museum practice is neither merely a technical process nor a set of strict ideals. Instead, it is an ongoing negotiation involving infrastructures, epistemologies and historical responsibilities. The institutional contributions demonstrate how collaboration depends on reorganizing the fundamental conditions under which museums operate. Meanwhile, the collections-focused articles reveal how these structural changes are tested, reinterpreted and sometimes undone through direct encounters with communities, objects and lived histories. What emerges is a view of collaboration as a mutually influencing process: institutional change enables new ways of engagement, but it is through sustained involvement that the limits, blind spots and possibilities of institutional transformation become clear. By tracing these reciprocal dynamics, the special issue advocates a more integrated understanding of collaborative work, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of governance and practice, digital and material infrastructures, and of affective, political and epistemic commitments. In doing so, it helps to reframe what ethnological museums can and should be in light of ongoing postcolonial, technological and ecological challenges.

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The Collaborative Museum? Navigating Bureaucracy, Structure and Hope at the Ethnological Museum and Asian Art Museum, Berlin

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Abstract: This article examines the complexities and structural challenges of collaboration in ethnographic museum work through a case study of the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse) project at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin. In response to the growing demands for decolonization, inclusivity and epistemic justice, CoMuse aims to operationalize collaborative practice not merely as an ethical ideal but also as a structural intervention. Drawing on ethnographic observations and institutional analysis, the article situates collaboration within broader institutional entanglements such as contract law, labour regulation, digital infrastructure and administrative procedures, showing how these shape and often constrain relational forms of knowledge production. The paper argues that if collaboration is to be more than symbolic, it requires sustained engagement with the material and procedural infrastructures of museum work. The paper also highlights the tensions between bureaucratic regimes and relational accountability and explores how new roles, workflows and digital strategies can enable more equitable institutional transformation. Rather than presenting a model, CoMuse is offered as a situated attempt to rethink authority, co-authorship and institutional responsibility under the pressures of historical accountability and global entanglement.
[Decolonizing museums, museum collaborations, institutional transformation, museum bureaucracy]

Museum Collaborations

It is noon on a Wednesday. The late summer sun bounces back from the windows of the reconstructed Prussian castle in the centre of Berlin. Some light rays illuminate the table where museum staff discuss their ongoing projects. Perhaps their enthusiasm for contributing to a more just museum practice is strengthened at that moment, transcending the mere reflections on the baroque façade.

These moments of contextual enthusiasm are not simply displays of naive institutional optimism. Instead, they signal a future-focused attitude in daily museum work of delicate

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opportunities where hopes for fairer collaborations are expressed, even as they acknowledge current structural limitations.

Recent calls for decolonization, inclusivity and community engagement have intensified the pressure on ethnographic museums to reckon with their colonial foundations, not only in respect of what is displayed, but also in how knowledge is produced, structured and shared. Within this discourse, collaboration has emerged as both an ethical imperative and a methodological challenge, especially for historically marginalized and Indigenous communities. As Scholz and Turner (Scholz 2019; Turner 2021) note, collaboration in this context entails more than consultative inclusion: it requires rethinking institutional authority and redistributing curatorial power. When communities or international partners lead exhibition development, shape thematic direction, or co-determine research priorities, these practices begin to disrupt long-standing asymmetries in ethnological and general museum work. At the same time, the discourse on collaboration has expanded to address the museum's role within both the communities of implication and the broader public sphere in which the institution is situated. Mutibwa et al. (Mutibwa et al. 2018) argue that museums must move from their passive custodianship of collections to become active, dialogical spaces that facilitate the co-production and circulation of knowledge. This perspective aligns with Wang's (Wang 2023) Indigenous Museum Values Framework, which calls for community-centric models of museum practice that sustain cultural traditions through relational engagement and shared stewardship. Such frameworks are critical not only for expanding representational diversity, but also for reconfiguring institutional processes to acknowledge the epistemic and political agency of marginalized communities. Critiques of museum decolonization have grown increasingly nuanced, engaging with the complex entanglements of power, representation and the enduring legacies of colonialism in contemporary museum practice (Chipangura 2020). Social anthropological and museological scholarship has interrogated not only the ethical and epistemological dimensions of collections and curatorial authority, but also the structural constraints that inhibit meaningful institutional transformation. While decolonial discourse has gained considerable traction within museum agendas, a growing body of critical work warns that many initiatives risk becoming performative or tokenistic (Bacci 2024; Matilde 2025; Pirazan 2025), gestures that symbolically acknowledge colonial histories without substantively altering the institutional logics that sustain them. Here, the phrase 'institutional logics' denotes the funding structures, administrative procedures and temporal frameworks that shape museum work, particularly project-based financing and European grant cycles with predefined milestones. These structures often conflict with the slower, relational temporalities that are necessary for sustained collaboration, thereby constraining the transformative potential of decolonial initiatives.

Wali and Collins (Wali and Collins 2023) argue that, although museums have increasingly invoked the language of diversity and decolonization, their operational practices often continue to reproduce Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalize In-

digenous voices and those of communities implicated in colonial collecting practices. In a related critique, Liuni (Liuni 2023) examines the spatial and aesthetic dimensions of museum architecture and exhibition design, challenging the assumed neutrality of these forms. She contends that such spatial configurations frequently reinforce dominant ideological narratives, thus undermining the very decolonial commitments they purport to advance. Similarly, Duarte (Duarte 2024) highlights the persistence of colonial ideologies within museum governance structures, demonstrating how these frameworks actively contribute to the continued marginalization of historically oppressed communities.

These critiques underscore that decolonization cannot be achieved through symbolic gestures or isolated reforms. Instead, it requires a sustained confrontation with the institutional imaginaries, infrastructures and modes of authority through which museums have historically operated and through which colonial hierarchies continue to be reproduced in the present.

The politics inherent in the display and representation of collections further complicate the notion of decolonization within museums. As Schorch and Hakiwai (Schorch and Hakiwai 2013) demonstrate, museums frequently present themselves as forums for dialogue while simultaneously reproducing colonial biases through representational frameworks that constrain the articulation of Indigenous practices and perspectives. Rather than enabling genuine engagement, such frameworks often delimit what can be said, shown, or recognized as legitimate knowledge. In a similar vein, Tolia-Kelly and Raymond (Tolia-Kelly and Raymond 2019) argue that meaningful decolonization requires a fundamental re-evaluation of curatorial practice, one that confronts historical injustices and institutional power relations instead of relying on superficial strategies aimed at symbolically appeasing criticism. From this perspective, decolonization emerges not as an additive gesture but as a structural and epistemic intervention.

From the standpoint of social and cultural anthropology, these dynamics can be understood through a relational conception of knowledge and authority. Building on Strathern's (Strathern 1991) argument that relations are not secondary to entities but constitutive of them, collaboration in museums can be analysed as a reconfiguration of relations, rather than the simple inclusion of additional voices. Such a perspective foregrounds how institutional practices, curatorial roles and epistemic hierarchies are continuously produced through interaction, negotiation and partial connection. Collaboration, in this sense, does not dissolve asymmetries but renders them visible, making apparent the frictions that arise when heterogeneous actors, temporalities and expectations intersect within institutional settings.

In this regard, collaboration can also be approached as a cautiously future-oriented practice. Following Tsing's (Tsing 2005) understanding of friction as a generative force emerging from uneven and contested encounters, collaborative museum work may be read not as a utopian project, but as an orientation toward alternative possibilities that unfold within, rather than beyond, structural constraints. Such an approach allows

for optimism without denying the persistence of inequality, foregrounding process, contingency and the partial nature of institutional change.

Scholarship has further emphasized that interventions aimed at decolonizing museum practice must be grounded in collaborative models that prioritize community voices and relational forms of authority. Viau-Courville (Viau-Courville 2021) highlights the necessity of moving away from narratives dictated by institutional expertise towards dialogical processes in which curatorial authority is shared and continuously negotiated. This shift points towards participatory exhibition practices in which curation is understood as an ongoing collaborative process rather than a unilateral act defined by established professional roles (Chipangura 2023). Crucially, such approaches resist reducing collaboration to tokenistic inclusion by foregrounding co-production as a practice embedded in long-term relationships, accountability and situated knowledge.

Building on these debates, scholars such as Copeland et al. and Chipangura (Copeland es al. 2020; Chipangura 2023) have stressed that meaningful decolonization requires reciprocal relationships that redistribute authority rather than reproduce extractive dynamics within new ethical framings. These concerns resonate with broader museological discussions of institutional reflexivity and the limits of reform (Boast 2011; Golding and Modest 2016; Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020), highlighting the frictions that arise when collaborative ideals meet entrenched bureaucratic, legal and epistemic structures.

It is within this analytically productive tension that initiatives such as the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse) are situated. By embedding collaborative practices across curatorial work, provenance research, exhibition development and institutional infrastructure, CoMuse approaches decolonization as an ongoing, reflexive process rather than a fixed end state. At the same time, the project makes visible the challenges inherent in this work: questions about who sets research agendas, determines object interpretation or defines success remain contested, particularly when collaborative aspirations encounter institutional timelines, legal frameworks and funding logics. Rather than resolving these tensions, CoMuse treats them as part of the collaborative process itself, working through friction, constraints and negotiation to create the conditions for sustained engagement, shared responsibility and the careful articulation of relational futures within existing institutional limits.

A Collaborative Museum

In response to sustained critiques of their colonial entanglements and epistemic authority, such as those outlined above, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst initiated a pilot project in 2023 called the Collaborative Museum or CoMuse. Framed as a structural intervention in the institutional processes of heritage work, CoMuse seeks to operationalize decolonial commitments by engaging

the situated knowledge and agency of international partners. Drawing on the heterogeneous expertise of museum staff, the project foregrounds the need to reconfigure collection-based practices through dialogical and participatory formats. At its core, CoMuse aims to redistribute curatorial authority by enabling partners—often individuals or communities with historical, affective, or epistemic ties to the collections—to determine thematic orientations, identify cultural belongings for engagement and initiate projects within the CoMuse framework. In this way, the initiative aims to move beyond symbolic inclusion towards structurally embedded forms of co-authorship and institutional transformation. Conceptually, CoMuse understands collaboration not as a project-bound add-on but as a relational and process-oriented practice embedded in everyday institutional work. The model is grounded in a shared understanding of collaboration shaped by principles such as transparency, reciprocity, respect, shared responsibility, knowledge exchange and co-determination. Collaborative processes are structured around the joint articulation of goals and long-term visions, followed by the collective identification of thematic fields, including research, exhibition-making, mediation and engagement with diverse publics. These orientations inform the selection of concrete collaboration formats ranging from collection-based research and restitution processes to digitalization, co-curation and advisory structures. Moreover, presentation formats, such as exhibitions, publications, events, or digital outputs, are treated as contingent outcomes rather than predetermined endpoints. Residencies and other forms of sustained engagement play a key role in enabling the time-intensive processes of relationship-building, exchange and reflexive negotiation on which collaboration depends.

The following section traces how this conceptual framework was translated into institutional practice by reconstructing the planning and design phase of the CoMuse initiative.

Planning and designing the CoMuse initiative

An internal committee composed of museum staff selected the first round of CoMuse projects. A central requirement for all projects was that they be co-conceived and co-produced with international partners or members of Berlin's civil society. These partners included individuals and communities with personal or ancestral connections to the collections, as well as actors engaging objects through cultural, artistic, or scholarly practice. Rather than treating these collaborations as external contributions, CoMuse considers them constitutive of the museum's ongoing epistemic and ethical reorientation.

CoMuse deliberately goes beyond a project-based logic by addressing the structural conditions that shape institutional practice more broadly. In shifting the focus from individual collaborations to the systemic dimensions of museum work, the initiative recognizes that multiple, interrelated domains ranging from staffing, contracting and

labour structures to decision-making hierarchies require sustained critical engagement. This recognition does not arise from a lack of awareness by museum staff or leadership regarding these institutional challenges. Instead, it reflects a chronic under-resourcing of transformative work, particularly regarding human resources. CoMuse thus also sought to intervene at this infrastructural level by attempting to carve out space – both discursively and materially – for structural change within the constraints of the existing institutional and bureaucratic apparatus.

One of the earliest and most persistent challenges for the CoMuse team was the divergent understandings of what 'collaboration' entails. Far from being marginal, this conceptual and practical tension reflects the broader structural ambiguity that often accompanies co-creative institutional projects. As Lynch and Alberti (Lynch and Alberti 2009) observe, genuinely collaborative processes demand a delicate equilibrium among participants balancing openness, negotiation and shared authority, yet they frequently falter under the weight of divergent expectations, institutional asymmetries and the complex entanglements of multiple stakeholders. Similar critiques have been raised by Golding and Modest (Golding and Modest 2013), who caution that collaboration, while frequently invoked, is rarely treated as a central structuring principle. In response, the CoMuse project sought to embed collaboration as both a methodological principle and an organizational commitment. This involved rethinking existing workflow structures to increase flexibility and responsiveness, including introducing more iterative project cycles and timeframes for collaborative consultations on issues such as conservation and curation. A new team structure was created (around twenty newly employed personnel) to include roles tasked with mediating between institutional protocols and partners' demands, ensuring that collaborative intentions could be translated into operational realities. These included, for example, a postcolonial provenance researcher for in-depth research with partners, a restitution coordinator and the coordinator of a newly developed CoMuse fellowship program. At the level of curatorial practice, CoMuse adopted a co-curation model in which external partners were not simply consulted but empowered to shape thematic direction, object selection and narrative framing from the earliest stages. These interventions, while still constrained by broader institutional limitations, marked a shift towards treating collaboration as a form of situated labour, one that demands time, trust and ongoing negotiation, rather than one-off gestures or token inclusion.

Alongside these structural and procedural adjustments, the CoMuse team also began developing digital strategies (Navarro, this volume) to support and reflect collaborative principles. This work included, among other things, a critical reassessment of the museum's central database—long a domain of institutional classification and internal accountability—with a view to reimagining how it might accommodate the epistemic contributions of partner communities and the relational contexts in which such knowledge is produced. Rather than treating digital infrastructure as a purely technical concern, the team saw the database as a focal point for negotiating how collaboration could be materially embedded within everyday institutional practice.

A museum database working group examined how institutional frameworks shape the acknowledgment of collaborative knowledge. Drawing on sustained work with communities, a workflow was co-developed with partners. Rather than framing this as an external contribution to an established system, the proposal foregrounded collaboration as an epistemic process that had already shaped how data should be structured, attributed and contextualized.

The database is seen not just as a neutral tool but also as a mechanism that coordinates relations among people, knowledge and authority. The questions raised—whose contributions are visible, how their origins are documented and which knowledge forms are recognizable—point to the institutional work involved in reproducing or challenging epistemic hierarchies in daily practice. According to Strathern (Strathern 1991), these negotiations show that relations are not secondary to institutions but are constitutive of them: the database does more than store knowledge; it actively creates relations of accountability, ownership and authorship.

These issues became more urgent with the recent addition of a provenance module aimed at documenting multi-sited, postcolonial provenance research carried out with communities of origin. While the module enhances transparency, it also reveals the tensions between relational knowledge practices and infrastructural systems focused on standardization, documentation and auditability. Participants repeatedly discussed how knowledge shared by partners could be acknowledged meaningfully without losing sight of the social, historical, and political contexts in which it was developed. This dilemma aligns with Smith's (Smith 2012) critique of institutional knowledge practices that appropriate Indigenous expertise while disconnecting it from the relationships and responsibilities that give it meaning.

Rather than viewing these issues as technical problems to be fixed, the database working group exemplifies how collaborative museum practices develop through ongoing negotiations within institutional settings. The challenge is not merely to add new knowledge forms to existing systems but also to question how these systems organize recognition, value and authority. This discussion demonstrates how decolonial commitments are enacted—or limited—by everyday institutional practices, where aspirations for shared authority must be continually revised within inherited bureaucratic and epistemic frameworks.

Facing Structures and Bureaucracy

Participating in the CoMuse initiative highlighted how decolonial goals are often shaped and limited by daily bureaucratic practices. Instead of only appearing during curatorial choices or collaborations, the most significant challenges are found within the administrative processes, legal systems and institutional routines that either enable or restrict collaboration. Our key realization was that genuine decolonization in mu-

seum work requires engaging with these foundational governance and accountability structures.

Decolonizing museum bureaucracy requires a thorough review of the institutional procedures, governance systems and legal frameworks that uphold colonial hierarchies and unequal power dynamics. Such change is essential for creating museums that can effectively represent, connect with and be accountable to marginalized and Indigenous communities. Although collaboration is often seen as a key approach, it is usually understood at the level of research, exhibitions, or audience outreach, rather than as an action integrated within the institution's administrative structure. As Ariese and Wróblewska (Ariese and Wróblewska 2021) state, museums with colonial histories need a fundamental shift not only in their knowledge systems, but also in their bureaucratic processes for managing knowledge, authority and partnerships. Without this transformation, decolonization efforts risk being countered by the very institutional practices they aim to change.

The authors therefore aimed to engage the administrative domain as a critical site of decolonial intervention. We recognized that the contractual basis of collaboration is fundamental to the success of any joint endeavour. Transparent, accessible and equitable administrative procedures are essential for building and maintaining mutual trust. However, like all institutions under the auspices of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK), the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst operate under national and supranational regulatory regimes – most notably public procurement and contract law – that are often ill-suited to the complexities of international and community-based partnerships.

Among the most acute challenges were the language of contractual agreements and legal constraints. Contracts were issued exclusively in German and were legally valid only in that language, making them inaccessible to many international partners and requiring time-consuming translation and mediation by museum staff. Furthermore, these contracts were often preceded by a formal bidding process – even for long-standing relationships – which could cause confusion or alienation when partners were unexpectedly asked to submit competitive offers to participate in co-creative work. These practices, while formally compliant, conflicted with the relational and processual ethos that underpins collaborative engagement.

Financial transactions added another layer of structural friction. Partners based in countries outside the SWIFT banking network often faced significant delays or outright rejections of international transfers. In some cases, collaborators lacked access to formal banking systems altogether, forcing staff to devise ad hoc solutions for remuneration and resource distribution. These bureaucratic obstacles not only strained museum staff but also risked eroding trust, undermining relational accountability and, in effect, devaluing the contributions and knowledge of community partners. In this sense, the museum's administrative apparatus emerged as a site where Eurocentric power structures or colonial residues persist – not necessarily intentionally, but through the

rigid preservation of forms that are ill-equipped for ethical and equitable international collaboration.

Another significant challenge emerged regarding German labour law, specifically the legal obligation to prevent so-called 'pseudo-self-employment' (*Scheinselbstständigkeit*). This designation applies when an individual is formally contracted as self-employed but, under legal criteria, should be classified as an employee and thus enrolled in the national social security system. In the context of CoMuse, this regulation required staff to assess the employment status of every contracted individual – including those receiving small honoraria – on a case-by-case basis. These assessments are often complex and time-consuming, frequently requiring several months to complete. The burden of documentation placed on international collaborators, many of whom are unfamiliar with German administrative and legal procedures, compounded these delays and frequently led to confusion or frustration.

The operational practices for administering collaboration, as stated above, clearly reveal the Eurocentric idea that underpins today's museum bureaucracy: cooperation occurs when there is a written contract, an agreed timeline is followed and public funds are documented through orders and receipts.

On the other hand, the challenges were not limited to the German bureaucracy alone: often, the partner organization's bureaucracy was equally obstructive to cooperation. Important information, perhaps obvious to partners, was not communicated, contracts were delayed and unrealistic demands were made. Consequently, part of the Comuse administration's role involved resolving cross-cultural misunderstandings, negotiating demands and devising flexible solutions acceptable to both parties.

This situation underscores the broader tension inherent in transnational collaboration: the assumption that nationally specific bureaucratic frameworks are universally applicable and comprehensible.

Besides co-curatorial work and the questioning of representation, effective collaboration demands a recognition of diverse forms of co-working.

In the CoMuse initiative, administrative procedures needed to be flexible, transparent and responsive to accommodate diverse legal, linguistic and infrastructural contexts across partner organizations. This often meant providing extra time for questions and clarifications and investing in staff training to improve communication with international partners and handle unfamiliar legal and administrative hurdles. Such adjustments could reduce misunderstandings and procedural inequalities when feasible. However, in cases where adjustments were not possible, collaboration risked perpetuating exclusion through opaque procedures and rigid legal systems, despite decolonial aims. From these experiences, we strongly advise institutions involved in collaborative projects to recognize administrative processes as critical points where inclusion or exclusion can be shaped.

Drawing on the complex experiences of managing international collaborations, the Collaborative Museum has taken initial steps towards co-produced project management. One such development is the introduction of a CoMuse Fellowship in Berlin.

This fellowship is intended to create space and time for collaborative work on site, addressing the challenges of long-distance cooperation that typically relies on digital modes of communication. It is based on a standardized contractual framework that includes provisions for travel, visa costs, accommodation and subsistence. The museum arranges accommodation. The fellowship is not outcome-driven, and it is explicitly not structured as a '*Werkvertrag*' in the sense of European contract law, which presupposes the delivery of a completed product within a specified timeframe. Instead, the fellowship format allows for open-ended collaboration that is free from the instrumental demands that are often placed on project outcomes by European institutions seeking to showcase partnership results.

In parallel with this, CoMuse has expanded the number of collection visits to four hundred visits in a year, including project partners in their regions of origin, but also by individuals or groups visiting the Berlin collections. These visits have fostered dialogue and shared reflections on the holdings. However, they also pose logistical and financial challenges, particularly for travel and hospitality arrangements. In response, the museum administration has introduced new budget categories ('*Titelgruppen*') to facilitate funding for guest hospitality, thereby institutionalizing practices of welcome and trust-building.

More broadly, CoMuse is engaged in standardizing contractual procedures that incorporate feedback from partner institutions. It has become evident to us that both content-related and contractual objectives must remain flexible throughout collaborative projects. Contracts must allow for modifications to timelines and budgets, necessitating frequent addenda and follow-up agreements. The management of such amendments has thus become a central component of CoMuse's administrative practice.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, decolonizing the museum is not confined to the gallery space or the exhibition label. Instead, it penetrates the very structures through which institutions operate: bureaucracies, databases, legal frameworks and internal hierarchies of labour and expertise. CoMuse, as an institutional intervention, does not present a solution to these entanglements, but it still offers a case study of how collaboration might be reimagined as a situated, ongoing form of negotiation that is material, procedural and epistemic. It also emphasizes that collaboration is complex and time-consuming. Therefore, experienced individuals are needed with the diplomatic skills to work effectively with international partners and navigate the structural particularities of German institutions.

The examples from CoMuse illustrate both the possibilities and the persistent frictions of institutional transformation. From rethinking workflows and staffing structures to embedding partner knowledge in the museum's digital architecture, the ini-

tiative seeks to realign everyday practices with decolonial commitments. These efforts, however, are continually mediated by broader regulatory regimes, such as contract law, labour legislation and financial infrastructure, that often inhibit rather than enable relational accountability. In this sense, CoMuse makes visible the often invisible scaffolding of power that underpins the modern museum. The ethnographic insights presented here suggest that meaningful change requires not only amplifying marginalized voices but also critically reconfiguring the institutional mechanisms that govern representation, authorship and authority. As a mode of practice, decolonization cannot be reduced to inclusion or thematic curation. It must engage the museum as a site of ongoing structural negotiation, one in which bureaucratic procedures, digital tools and curatorial ethics are understood as co-constitutive.

In the light bouncing off the Humboldt Forum's reconstructed façade, the aspirations for a more just museum practice may sometimes seem symbolic. Yet within the small-scale negotiations around meeting tables, database modules and collaborative contracts, we see the slow work of structural rethinking unfolding. If there is hope in these efforts, it lies not in the promise of institutional redemption but in the commitment to stay the course by remaining accountable, reflexive and open to the transformative demands that decolonial collaboration continues to pose.

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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.

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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.[1] Statistically speaking, they are below fifty years of age and have tertiary formal education.[2] 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.[3]

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'[4] (2020 to 2023, then a TV series[5]). 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'.[6] 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: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/7y2q3VMC6WLsMlFXT3TyO7, accessed July 09, 2025.
5 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,[7] 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

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

propagation of the podcast too, voice matters: the most popular episode, 'Verflochtene Erinnerungen',[8] 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'[9] and 'A Slice of Life',[10] 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[11] 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/pressemitteilung/artikel/2024/04/19/deutschlandweite-studie-museen-geniessen-hoechstes-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'[12] and 'Collaborative research with Indigenous groups in Alaska',[13] 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',[14] 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

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',[15] with footage from the Rio Negro region. In rare cases, we also produced episodes without participation from museum colleagues because they were unavailable[16] or because the episode already had a lot of interviewees.[17]

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.[18] 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-dorfgemeinschaft-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'[19] featured guests from two branches of Islam that are rather different in their beliefs, priorities and practices. Though both communities had co-cu-

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.[20] 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,[21] 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

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.

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Restitution: Between Containment and Cooperation

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Abstract: Museum practice has been shaped decisively in recent years by a 'collaborative turn'. Celebrated with optimism and critiqued with wariness alike, collaboration has become central to how anthropological museums approach their work. Beyond individual collaborative projects, museums are now facing the deeper challenge of structural change. When it comes to restitution, collaboration can open up meaningful pathways. At the same time, however, restitution constitutes and in many ways exposes the limits of collaboration. This article explores the potentials and boundaries of collaboration in the context of restitution. While many structural challenges remain unresolved, the paper argues that there are possibilities to reshape restitution in more ethical terms, and that museums have the agency to do so.
[restitution, repatriation, collaboration, restitution governance]

Introduction

Collaborative formats in museums are not at all recent but have been firmly embedded in museum practice since the new museology debates of the later twentieth century and have been celebrated and criticized alike. In recent years, however, they have gained even more importance. Following a more decided phase of institutional reflexivity over the past ten to fifteen years, anthropological museums in Germany and elsewhere are increasingly treating collaborative approaches as a cornerstone of their work (Scholz 2017; Labischinski 2020; Ballestero and Petschelies 2023).

Collaboration has therefore become a central response of anthropological museums as they navigate their colonial legacies and the future of the cultural belongings in their 'care' or housed in their 'collections'. This turn towards collaboration reflects an awareness that the authoritative and exclusive position that institutions formerly occupied is no longer tenable, ethically justifiable or beneficial. It is essential to approach collaboration critically as both a discursive formation and a discursive practice, particularly in relation to restitution, given that the history of restitution is primarily one of refusal, denial and the persistence of coloniality.[1, 2, 3]

1 Coloniality as a condition and system of power refers to the reproduction of relations and structures of inequality and exploitation in the aftermath of or beyond formal colonialism (see Quijano 2000; Lugones 2007).

2 See Open Restitution Africa's research into the history of restitution cases (Open Restitution Africa: Climbing Mountains. openrestitution.africa. https://openrestitution.africa/climbing-mountains/, accessed April 2, 2025).

3 As a discursive formation, collaboration can be understood as the conceptual and normative frame-

 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8859

The article will reflect upon restitution[4] and collaboration, arguing that while collaboration can open up meaningful pathways to restitution, it also constitutes and in many ways exposes the limits of collaboration. Regardless of the structural challenges that pose profound challenges to restitution, particularly to its implementation in meaningful and just ways, it will also be argued that there are concrete possibilities to reshape restitution in more ethical and accountable terms.[5]

Collaboration as Containment? Historic Tensions between Collaboration and Return

If one looks at the long history of restitution claims, it is evident that historically collaboration has been put forth and posited against restitution. In many cases – frequently in the absence of legal or policy grounds for restitution and due to a lack of political will – collaboration has been proposed as a purportedly acceptable alternative.

Most recently, the new director of the British Museum, Nicholas Cullinan, stated in an interview that, rather than 'undoing' the collections, the museum's future lies in collaborations (Kendall Adams 2025). The British Museum, Cullinan suggested, is a 'global museum for everyone and [is] not going to be embarrassed about that anymore' (ibid.). An earlier example dating back to the 1960s is a request from the Congolese government for the repatriation of works exhibited by the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren) as part of a travelling exhibition in the United States and Cana-

work that renders certain approaches possible, necessary and desirable. As a discursive practice, it takes shape in the concrete methods and means through which collaboration is enacted and negotiated. This article can only delve into these selectively; more systematic research could untangle the intricate dynamics of restitution and collaboration in different settings and under different conditions.

4 The article refers to the restitution of cultural belongings taken in so-called 'colonial contexts' (explicitly widely framed). Restitution, repatriation and return are used interchangeably here throughout. The terminology used to describe appropriated and musealized entities is necessarily contested: they may be artefacts, animated or sacred items, belongings, or (more-than-human) beings understood not as material property but as kin. I will mostly use the overarching term 'cultural belongings' here throughout to foreground their embeddedness in social, spiritual and historical relations, whatever their ontological status, or their relational bonds with people and communities (see e.g. Gouaffo 2023).

5 This article is based on analytical reflection and is informed by my current position as restitution coordinator of the Ethnological Museum and Museum of Asian Art in Berlin, as well as research conducted on restitution frameworks as a 2024 postdoctoral fellow of MECILA (The Maria Sibylla Merian Centre Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America). It draws on critical museum studies and is influenced by my positionality as a German-Latin American (non-Indigenous, *white*) social scientist and museum practitioner. The cases referenced, which refer to broader trends in the 'Western' museum sector, though focusing primarily on the German context, were selected based on their illustrative value for demonstrating structural patterns and tensions in restitution practice, particularly as they relate to collaboration.

da (Savoy 2021:20). The museum holds extensive collections from the Congo, taken during Belgium's colonial rule through coercive, extractive and violent means. The museum rejected the request and instead offered cooperation in the construction of a national museum as a precondition for potential loans (ibid.).

As standard practices of museum collaboration, the manufacture of replicas or the negotiation of temporary loans have similarly been deployed in efforts to circumvent restitution. A striking example dates back to the 1930s, when Oba Akenzua II (1899–1978), monarch of the Kingdom of Benin, requested the return of two royal throne stools looted during the 1897 British military expedition and later acquired by the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin.[6] The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin declined the request but offered to produce replicas at the Oba's expense (Peraldi 2017:26). The replicas were dispatched from Germany in 1938, bearing the inscription: 'Replica of Oba Eresoyen's Stool / Oba Esigie's Stool, 1897 Benin Expedition war trophy now in the State Museum in Berlin' (ibid.). Decades later, Nigerian curator Ekpo Eyo attempted unsuccessfully to secure Benin Bronzes as loans for an exhibition accompanying the 1977 World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). The Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (the institutional context I am situated in at the time of writing as restitution coordinator of its Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst) had refused Eyo's permanent loan request to display the Benin Bronzes in its possession a couple of years earlier, in 1972. The British Museum declined the loan of the original Queen Idia mask, which became the FESTAC festival's logo, from its collections. The British Museum still houses the replica that it offered as the alternative (Savoy 2021:90). While loan requests have been denied during restitution debates, they have also been offered as substitutes for returns. In 2009, for example, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz declined a request by Nso' authority Fon Sehm Mbinglo I for the restitution of the Ngonnso', the mother or founding ancestral figure of the Nso' people in present-day Cameroon, taken by German colonial officers in the context of German colonization. Instead, the Foundation proposed a loan, conditional upon adherence to museum conservation standards (Gram and Schoofs 2022:43).

Together, such cases demonstrate how collaboration and its associated mechanisms have at times functioned as a strategy of institutional retention and have served to postpone and displace demands or slow down processes of return. Rather than enabling return, collaboration has at times been mobilized to sustain institutional authority. At the same time, it is a key framework through which restitution is negotiated and, as I shall argue, it can be expanded upon and reimagined from here onwards. The following section turns to this ambivalence.

6 The 1897 British military invasion of the Kingdom of Benin was followed by looting of its cultural heritage (e.g. Digital Benin: Oral History. Prof. Osarhieme Benson Osadolor – British Invasion of Benin. https://digitalbenin.org/oral-history/interactive/81, accessed July 29, 2025). This in turn led to the dispersal of Benin's royal and cultural heritage across museums and private collections worldwide, with the so-called Benin Bronzes becoming emblematic of such colonial plunder.

Between Collaboration and Restitution

'Western' anthropological museums have undergone several discursive shifts in recent decades. These range from earlier claims to be fulfilling an encyclopaedic mission, to embodying universality, to more recent narratives of circulation or shared stewardship, and most recently collaboration (e.g. Abungu 2008; von Bose 2016; Tsogang Fossi 2025). On the one hand, collaboration may function as a renewed legitimizing strategy (Labischinski 2020). It can serve as a means through which museums seek to maintain relevance, while continuing to inscribe themselves in the futures of the cultural belongings and entities that have been turned into the museum objects they are being asked to relinquish. This raises the question: has 'collaboration' become the new buzzword, following the rhetorical appropriation and dilution of 'decolonization'? In this reading, collaboration risks becoming a mechanism of containment, offering engagement without surrendering control. It increasingly appears to overshadow both the surrendering of institutional spaces and of authority, and the acknowledgement of sovereignty over cultural heritage by descendant and Indigenous stakeholders and communities.

On the other hand, museums remain important sites for engaging with colonialism, colonial legacies and the challenges of decolonization. In Germany and elsewhere, change-oriented museum practice is currently threatened by reactionary and right-wing politics and attacks on pluralist memory politics. What is more, restitution cannot be reduced to one-off performative and self-contained acts that abdicate responsibility. Instead, restitution must be embedded in long-term commitments which require building ethical relations around accountability (Sarr and Savoy 2018). In this sense, collaboration can be and often is a strongly voiced demand by descendant communities. Museums living up to their responsibilities can entail, precisely, committing to the duties of care that result from their amassing of cultural belongings. This is particularly relevant given the indiscriminate conservation treatment with biocides, which have rendered many artefacts hazardous, complicating access and return. This calls for a further shift in institutional self-understanding, from museums as bastions of 'expert' knowledge to facilitators of engagement. Glicéria Tupinambá, for instance, who played a key role in the repatriation of an *Encantado*, a Tupinambá feather cape, from the National Museum of Denmark,[7] envisions museums as potential spaces of encounter where Indigenous voices activate objects and bring them back to life again (Tupinambá and Brulon Soares 2023).

7 The Tupinambá feather mantle originates from the Tupinambá people. Within Tupinambá cosmology, the mantle is not merely an artefact or cultural belonging but an *Encantado*, a being with spiritual presence, agency and ongoing relational significance. It is understood as a living entity connected to ancestry, memory, and territory (Tupinambá et al. 2024). It was taken to Europe from present-day Brazil in the seventeenth century during the early period of colonial contact. The mantle came into the collection of the National Museum of Denmark in the nineteenth century. In 2024 it was transferred from Denmark's Nationalmuseet to Brazil's Museu Nacional.

As restitution increasingly becomes a cornerstone of contemporary museum practice, there is a growing emphasis on processes that emerge from and are shaped by collaboration. In many instances, collaboration is a necessary precondition for meaningful restitution. A significant example and precedent for the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin was the collaborative project 'Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures' (2019–2022), jointly undertaken by the museum and partners from the National Museum of Namibia (Binter and Ha-Eiros 2021). The collaborative project enabled deep engagement with the cultural belongings from Namibia by bringing together diverse sources of knowledge, forms of expertise and perspectives (Binter 2025). Instead of focusing primarily on the cultural belongings with links to the German genocide against the OvaHerero and Nama, the Namibian experts foregrounded earlier belongings, focusing on exploring their potential for future creative uses and cultural practices (Binter et al. 2024:95). As part of the project, twenty-three selected items were transferred to Windhoek for research and community engagement, and in 2024 ownership was permanently transferred by the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. This process illustrates the productive potential of dialogue, shared research and circulation as steps towards restitution. Yet despite such advances, restitution is still too often treated as the *conclusion* to a process, one involving extensive provenance research into concrete contexts of appropriation that must predate any return dialogues. However, scholars and practitioners have long argued that restitution should not be viewed as an endpoint, but as a step within an ongoing process of (re-)engagement, reconnection and repair.

How far can collaboration go, however, when it is restricted by structures governing restitution that remain fundamentally unchanged? The next section considers how these structural conditions – national and international legal frameworks, institutional governance and policy ambiguities – shape and often limit the scope of restitution, posing constraints on collaborative aspirations.

Structural Conditions Governing Restitution

Museums are embedded in the structures of a (post- and neo-)colonial world and nation state-based world system. Within this system, restitution is implemented according to the (modern-colonial) logics of ownership. Historically, struggles for restitution have mainly been marked by asymmetry, by one-sided efforts and an unwillingness to establish (binding) mechanisms for return. Attempts to apply the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property retrospectively have failed. A 'right to restitution' was ultimately excluded from the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). As a result, in the absence of enforceable international legal grounds, restitution has continued to depend largely on bilateral

negotiations and political will (van Beurden 2024:54). Cases of restitution are governed not only by public property law, such as the regulations around the de-accessioning of public goods,[8] but also to a large extent by 'political and diplomatic calculations' (Losson 2022:198).[9]

As scholars have argued, restitution has largely been shaped by a regime which privileges the nation-state, tends to support the nationalization of cultural heritage, and is shaped by universalist claims to science and essentialist views of culture (Bienkowski 2016; Acuto and Flores 2019). In such a system, defined by state-to-state diplomacy, descendant communities and subnational stakeholders lack the formal means to claim the return of cultural belongings. Whether or not communities are able to engage in restitution processes internationally depends on the national legal frameworks that govern their right to self-determination (Ochoa Jiménez 2019, 2022).

In Germany, no specialized legislation exists to address the return of cultural belongings removed from their places of origin prior to 2007, when the *Kulturgutschutzgesetz* came into force, a law which does not apply retrospectively. As a result, claimants lack formal judicial pathways to pursue restitution.[10] Restitution has so far relied primarily on political will, guided by the Framework Principles, a position paper issued in 2019, and will henceforth be informed by the newly issued Guidelines.[11][12] These provide a basis for the repatriation of human remains, and the restitution of 'artefacts from colonial contexts [...] appropriated in a way which is no longer legally and/or ethically justifiable.'[13] In practice, cases have relied on demonstrating the context of injustice in the removal of cultural belongings, as well as on their special significance, as recommended by the German Museums Association's Guidelines (2021).[14] Yet this

8 See Pöschl (2024) for a detailed account.

9 See Aguigah (2023), Aguigah and König (2025).

10 See Thielecke (2020), Thielecke and Geißdorf (2021), for detailed accounts from the legal perspective.

11 Auswärtiges Amt. Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts. https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2210152/b2731f8b59210c77c68177cdcd3d03de/190412-stm-m-sammlungsgut-kolonial-kontext-en-data.pdf, accessed July 24, 2025.

12 The new Guidelines, published on 14 October 2025 during the final stages of this article's editing, expand upon the 2019 Framework Principles. Among other aspects, they foreground dialogue with 'societies of origin' and 'states of origin,' emphasize an interdisciplinary approach to (provenance) research, and call for museums to take an active role in repatriating human remains and identifying objects that were unethically or illegally appropriated. They further underscore respect for the individual ontological, epistemological and spiritual dimensions of each restitution process, as well as the unconditional nature of returns. See: Der Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien: Gemeinsame Leitlinien zum Umgang mit Kulturgütern und menschlichen Überresten aus kolonialen Kontexten. https://kulturstaatsminister.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Downloads/Aufarbeiten/CDR_251014_Gemeinsame_Leitlinien_Koloniales.pdf, accessed October 22, 2025.

13 See footnote 10 (Framework Principles, 2019:6) and footnote 12 (Gemeinsame Leitlinien, 2025:10).

14 For an overview of open restitution cases in Germany, see the civil society-led Restitution Monitor (Fues, Thomas: German Colonial Restitution Monitor. Dekolonial Erinnern/decolonial memories. https://dekolonial-erinnern.de/german-colonial-restitution-monitor/, accessed July 24, 2025).

framework is marked by ambiguities, particularly in terms of how 'unethical' or 'illegitimate' appropriation is defined and assessed, as well as the criteria for determining 'cultural significance'. As with other (non-binding) frameworks, it raises critical questions about the legitimization of claims and the (in-)validation of the criteria put forth, as well as the methodologies that lead up to assessments (see e.g. Bienkowski 2014; Keenan 2023).

Achieving greater accountability when it comes to restitution requires the establishment of clear overarching legal, policy and governance frameworks (Mehler 2024). Such frameworks can provide more solid foundations for return processes. This would include designated funding and help advance good practices that predate restitution, such as facilitating the flow of information on cultural belongings held by museums, as well as in-person visits.[15] Although legal frameworks risk narrowing the scope of returns through restrictive criteria, it could be argued that a legal framework has the potential to empower claimants and establish baseline standards of transparency and due process. Such a law would need to be drafted through broad consultation involving international experts, involved stakeholders, civil-society members and museum professionals. Further discussions are needed surrounding a legal framework and its pitfalls in Germany, where discussions around the possibility of a restitution law have been limited, partly due to the complexity of the federal system. Activists and engaged professionals have specifically called for a law on the repatriation of ancestral remains that would facilitate their return and prohibit their commodification on the art market.[16]

All in all, there remains significant potential for consolidating Germany's restitution governance,[17] particularly when looking at international examples. Countries

15 See Statement by the Expert Network on the Handling of Human Remains, July 1, 2024 (Kulturgutverluste. Stellungnahme des Expert*innen-Netzwerks zum Umgang mit menschlichen Überresten. https://kulturgutverluste.de/sites/default/files/2024-07/2024-07-01_Stellungnahme%20zu%20Restitutionsfonds.pdf, accessed April 2, 2025).

16 See Petition on the formation of the new Federal Government, January 19, 2025 (Fues, Thomas: Petition to Germany's next government. Dekolonial Erinnern/decolonial memories. https://dekolonial-erinnern.de/petition-to-the-future-german-government/, accessed April 2, 2025). See: Der Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien: Gemeinsame Leitlinien zum Umgang mit Kulturgütern und menschlichen Überresten aus kolonialen Kontexten. https://kulturstaatsminister.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Downloads/Aufarbeiten/CDR_251014_Gemeinsame_Leitlinien_Koloniales.pdf, accessed October 22, 2025.

17 Several important steps have been taken in Germany in recent years, following decades of activist and scholarly efforts to make Germany address its colonial past, including collections from colonial contexts and their restitution. These include the establishment of a dedicated funding line for colonial-context provenance research at the German Lost Art Foundation in 2019, the launch of the Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts in 2021, and the *Bundestag* Budget Committee's October 2024 funding approval for a designated Contact Point for Ancestral Remains. Nevertheless, a comprehensive approach to restitution was not implemented by the 2021–2024 federal government (Fues 2024). A restitution fund of 2.4 Mio. Euros – contingent on the clarification of responsibilities between the

such as the Netherlands[18] and Switzerland,[19] for instance, have set up commissions as advisory bodies tasked with reviewing claims and issuing recommendations. These precedents show how external expertise can support restitution processes while promoting transparency through the public accessibility of provenance research findings and the resulting recommendations. From the perspective of how processes might be opened up further, they point to the importance of redesigning (institutional) decision-making structures to allow external input by non-institutional voices that goes beyond consultation.

Despite constraints embedded in broader governance systems, there are pathways to strengthen accountability, transparency and ethical commitment within current museum restitution practices. Their institutional structures, decision-making procedures and policies shape how these broader frameworks are interpreted and enacted in practice. The following section turns to these institutional workings.

Institutional Responsibilities and Ethical Restitution Practice

Museum practices concerned with the future of cultural belongings or entities, often grounded in partnerships such as collaborative provenance research, face significant challenges when it comes to the concrete process of restitution. Restitution tests the limits of such partnerships, demanding critical reflection on both the overarching restitution governance framework and the institutional procedures through which it is enacted.

Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media – was not implemented before the collapse of the governing coalition at the end of 2024 (ibid.). The new 2025 Guidelines (see footnote 20) stipulate that the Federal Foreign Office will lead talks on restitution and that the federal government, the states and municipalities share the 'responsibility' for providing funding for restitutions and repatriations (2025:14). At the time of writing, the scope and operationalization of this funding remain unclear. In procedural terms, the Guidelines establish communication channels for return requests and emphasize the required consent of the state of origin in restitution procedures. They also express the intention to create a unified procedure among the federal state, the states and municipalities, in cooperation with the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media. In addition, the Guidelines announce the formation of an expert body tasked with providing advice and guidance on repatriation and restitution processes. However, the Guidelines leave the detailed procedures to be defined at a later stage. The specific mandate and role of the expert body remain unclear at the time of writing.

18 Colonial Collections Committee. https://committee.kolonialecollecties.nl, accessed April 2, 2025.

19 Swiss Federal Office of Culture, Latest News 2023 (Bundesamt für Kultur: Bundesrat schafft eine unabhängige Kommission für historisch belastetes Kulturerbe. https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/aktuelles/aktuelles---archiv/aktuelles-2023/bundesrat-schafft-eine-unabhaengigekommission-historisch-belastetes-kulturerbe.html, accessed April 2, 2025).

At the individual institutional level, museums play a pivotal role in shaping how restitution is implemented in practice and in direct communication with descendant communities and restitution stakeholders. Provenance research approaches, dialogue frameworks and internal governance structures determine how returns are implemented. Institutional approaches take on heightened significance given the absence of binding legal obligations. In practice, museums are often caught between meaningful community collaborations and the limitations imposed by the superseding governance of restitution. Further constraints arise given the absence of established institutional procedures for evaluating restitution requests beyond basic legal assessments. Decision-making processes are often opaque and hierarchical, leaving descendant communities and other stakeholders without clarity on criteria, procedures and timelines. As Bienkowski (2014) among others has argued, this risks reproducing harm and coloniality in the restitution processes themselves.

While overarching frameworks set the structural conditions under which restitution is possible, institutional practices shape how restitution is negotiated and enacted in practical terms. As argued here, there is the potential to take further an ethical restitution practice at the institutional level. This entails, at a minimum, making publicly available clear information on governance structures, procedures, contact persons for restitution inquiries and, where appropriate, detailed restitution reports.[20] Improving procedural accountability is essential: both the so far ad-hoc nature of many restitution processes in Germany and institutional opaqueness under the larger restitution framework have undermined trust by descendant communities.

As briefly mentioned above, there are significant limits to the decolonizing potential of restitution due to both its inscription in a world-system marked by ongoing coloniality and systems governing relationality marked by coloniality. As a result, restitution is often caught up in epistemological and ontological tensions arising from its relation to not just hegemonic ownership, but also the 'science' regime. Even though every case of restitution is unique and varies greatly in the way it unfolds, institutions must engage in reflective learning to refine their responses and procedures. Experiences from other museums, particularly those shaped by community- and Indigenous-led processes, can help inform the development of institutional guidelines, including policies for the proactive identification of potential cases of return as an ethical obligation going beyond the reactive response to claims.

Regardless, then, of the critical questions that can and should be raised about restitution, it remains important to ask: what (concrete or immediate) potential exists for greater accountability and for facilitating restitution as a cornerstone of postcolonial collaborative museum work?

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20 The Museum der Kulturen Basel, for instance, recently published a report online following the restitution to Veddah cultural centres in Sri Lanka (Museum der Kulturen Basel: Provenance Research. Restitution Dambana, Sri Lanka. https://www.mkb.ch/dam/jcr:0ea359e3-d70d-482c8120-34a147ac39b3/Bericht%20zur%20Restitution%20Dambana.pdf, accessed April 2, 2025).

Rethinking Knowledge Production and Engagement towards Restitution

In the past century, (anthropological) scholarship has reflected profoundly upon the ethics of knowledge production, especially in relation to the enduring power of coloniality. In this view, collaboration is a political practice embedded in unequal structures of power and recognition. Engaging with debates on epistemic justice allows for a deeper interrogation of how collaborative museum practices may reinforce or resist the very colonial structures they seek to redress. Far from being emancipatory a priori, collaboration must be situated within debates about the politics of knowledge, epistemic authority and representation, and reciprocity (e.g. Escobar 2003; Leyva et al. 2015). Likewise, museum restitution must be understood as a site of negotiation shaped by asymmetries in voice, access and valuation of knowledge.

If restitution is to be taken seriously as part of a broader socio-cultural process (Rassool in von Bose and Kuhn 2024), knowledge production surrounding restitution is not to be understood as an academic activity alone but as part of a wider process of social reckoning (van Beurden 2024). The first step towards more ethical restitution is to address the processes of knowledge production and negotiation that precede it. To confront knowledge hierarchies inscribed in restitution practices, the research supporting cases and legitimizing decisions requires re-evaluation. Knowledge that informs return processes cannot be generated solely or primarily from within institutions. Restitution can no longer rely on a narrow understanding of provenance research as an evidentiary exercise, caught within the (problematic) dichotomy of 'legitimate' versus 'illegitimate' acquisition (von Bose and Kuhn 2024). As Tsogang Fossi puts it:

> What makes colonial collections [a] rather sensitive heritage [...] is not only the fact that entities have been taken with violence and violation, cunning or threats, death and desecration, but also the impossibility of re-evaluating them because the conditions for these cross-interpretations are arrogantly denied by certain actors or are politically hindered by a mode of operation that is strikingly reminiscent of colonial patterns of domination. (Tsogang Fossi 2025:109)

Over the past decade, postcolonial provenance research has emerged as an interdisciplinary and relational field, something which needs to be integrated more firmly within institutional approaches. Provenance research is increasingly understood as a cooperative and open-ended process of knowledge production that critically engages with historical and ongoing power dynamics and investigates the origins and histories of cultural belongings through a close exchange between diverse holders of knowledge (Binter et al. 2024:93). This approach moves beyond archive-based methods by embracing embodied, oral and performative knowledge traditions (ibid.). To displace institutional authority and monopoly over judgements, new methodologies must be embraced. Such methodological shifts are also crucial for structuring the relational pro-

cesses through which institutions and descendant communities and other stakeholders engage with restitution demands. This includes creating spaces for multi-perspective exchange, negotiation of standpoints, co-produced solutions and the development of joint (and creative) approaches.

One possible example of such dialogical engagement is the 2021 resumption of dialogue around the return of Ngonnso' (introduced above), following years of stalled exchanges and a process riddled with tensions and diverging standpoints surrounding the determination of the historical context of the loss and the circumstances of appropriation. Activities and protests by the campaign #BringBackNgonnso led by Sylvie Njobati have played a crucial role in drawing public attention to the longstanding restitution claim. Cooperation with Verena Rodatus, curator at the Ethnologisches Museum, led to a jointly curated online workshop that brought together Cameroonian historians, diaspora activists, Nso' community members, museum professionals, provenance researchers and representatives from various German institutions (Gram and Schoofs 2022: 43). The workshop marked an important attempt to approach restitution as a more dialogical process.[21] The workshop's participants were able to discern the violent appropriation of Ngonnso' during the German colonial period, and, on the basis of descendant community knowledge, the central, cultural significance of Ngonnso' for the Nso' people.

Restitution practice, then, must be rooted in prior learnings and be adaptive to each context. It must respect Indigenous and cultural protocols and embrace what has been called a 'dialogue of knowledges' by decolonial approaches (see e.g. Leyva et al. 2015). Reframing restitution as part of a broader collaborative (but community-defined) approach to the care of collections allows returns to be embedded in processes of engagement, ritual and revitalization and not constitute an 'endpoint' to an adversarial, legalistic and bureaucratic process which can end up or often has ended up reproducing harm in the process.

In sum, addressing both the overarching governance framework and the institutional practices informed by them opens up ways of conceiving and practicing restitution not just as a transfer of ownership and/or the return of a museum object, but as *part* of collaborative attempts at building possibly new relations and giving meaning to ethical museum practice.

21 The Board of Trustees of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz gave way to the restitution of the Ngonnso in 2022, but the entity remains in Berlin while the recently formed Cameroonian Restitution Commission decides on an overarching restitution plan and presents the German side with a government-backed return request. See: Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, press release, June 28 2022 (Ethnologisches Museum: Returning the Ngonnso' to Cameroon, https://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/ethnologisches-museum-path-is-clear-for-returning-the-ngonnso-to-cameroon/, accessed April 2, 2025).

Conclusion

As argued here, addressing both governance frameworks and institutional practices opens up the possibility of a museum restitution practice that is ethical, accountable and (more) relational, being situated within a larger commitment to care and of building descendant community-and Indigenous-defined futures. In any case, collaboration must not become another instrument of institutional power. It should never be imposed, however indirectly, as a precondition for negotiating returns. Restitution may at times take the form of a refusal to collaborate and as a rightful, decolonizing claim. Ultimately, however, each case of restitution unfolds within a unique context of political dynamics, power relations and discursive strategies. To grasp the concrete power relations and nuances, we need in-depth case-study research, ethnographies of collaboration and restitution processes, exploring how they are negotiated, and identifying the intricate dynamics in concrete cases (e.g. Ballestero and Petschelies 2023). Further collaborative, transdisciplinary reflections as represented in this issue of *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (2026) will be essential for shaping museum collaboration and more just and forward-looking practices of restitution.

Author's Note

An AI-based tool (ChatGPT) was used for spelling and grammar correction, as well as for the minor linguistic revision of existing sentences (language editing only); the author remains responsible for all content.

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Situating the Digital Strategy of the Collaborative Museum

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Abstract: This article aims to formulate and frame the digital strategy of the Collaborative Museum conceptually and to outline the main lines of its immediate implementation plan from a reflexive perspective. The digital strategy is presented as a practice, 'a doing', of situated knowledge with specific intentions and urgencies. The article will highlight the fundamental principles of designing access and circulation as core areas of action in the structuring and conception of specific digital projects. By concentrating on the foundational aspects of the digital strategy and offering specific examples of use, I hope to share some of the possibilities and limitations of using digital technologies in decolonial museum work in a way that resonates with readers who access this article.
[digital strategy, decolonial, designing access, circulation principle, cosmotechnics, cosmopolitics]

Introduction

> It matters what subjects we use to think other subjects;
> it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories;
> it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts,
> what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties bind ties.
> It matters what stories create worlds, what worlds create stories.[1]
> Donna J. Haraway

In an era when digital transformation is reshaping how people engage with culture and identity, a digital strategy is no longer optional for museums – it is essential.[2] Digital strategies for museums in the Western world often focus on a close analysis of what

1 Haraway 2016:35. Haraway notes that she has borrowed this idea from Marilyn Strathern (Strathern 1990).

2 By 2007, awareness of the need to address the digital within museum studies and practices as a vehicle for transformation and renewal had become established in English-speaking academic environments (Din et al. 2007). This awareness has grown internationally in recent years, leading to major initiatives in Germany such as museum4punkt0 and NFID4Culture. On the European level, large-scale projects such as ECCCH The Cultural Heritage Cloud reflect the same trend towards digitalization, serving diverse communities of professionals and researchers working with heritage.

 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8860

a digital society expects from a museum, how relevance can be maintained in a digitally networked world and what new forms of communication are enabled by digital technologies and methods (Jank 2019:62–69). These strategies typically emphasize the digital transformation of the entire institution and claim that agile methods increase staff and audience engagement. This, in turn, tends to create more points of access and a wider range of perspectives in museum displays, leading to more online and onsite visitors and, ideally, to greater revenue and financial opportunities for the museum. In these narratives, the museum itself is framed as the primary beneficiary, being celebrated in stories of success.[3]

However, should this idea of 'success' be the reference point in the context of an explicitly decolonial project such as *The Collaborative Museum*?[4] As with older established areas of museum practice, such as education, outreach, or conservation, the digital[5] sphere is deeply entangled with the legacies of narratives and power relations connected to the collections that museums hold. This issue is particularly complex in the case of the two museums in which the Collaborative Museum originated as a large-scale project: the Ethnologisches Museum, and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Both are European public institutions that store and display non-European objects and knowledge. This framing presents a challenge not only for the digital aspect of museum practice, but for every aspect.[6]

Moreover, digital technology has specific characteristics as a form of cultural technology that is embedded in everyday life (Parry 2007) and is used widely outside museum contexts, often enabling and reinforcing new forms of extractivism.[7] For this reason, a deep reflection on digital practices is necessary when reconsidering their cross-sectional implications in decolonial approaches.

From its inception, therefore, the digital strategy of the Collaborative Museum has been shaped by tensions between what is necessary in decolonial settings, what is pre-

3 An illustrative case can be found in the self-description of the digital strategy of the Städel Museum: https://www.staedelmuseum.de/en/digital/digital-strategy.

4 The central aim of The Collaborative Museum is 'to develop multi-perspective approaches to collection-based research and to test new formats for collaborative processes in order to sustainably intensify the decolonization and diversification of museum practice': https://comuse.org/en.

5 Here, I use the term 'digital' to refer to all kinds of digital formats and processes related to digitization, digital outreach and the curation of digital media and technologies within museum practice. All these perspectives correspond to the scope of the digital in museum practice as defined by the Deutscher Museumsbund: https://www.museumsbund.de/themen/digitale-themen-im-museum.

6 See the statement by the Ethnologisches Museum on confronting its colonial history and the implications for current museum practices: https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/colonialism, as well as the statement by the Museum für Asiatische Kunst: https://www.smb.museum/museen-einrichtungen/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/ueber-uns/kolonialismus.

7 Philosopher Remedios Zafra reflects on a form of extractivist self-exploitation that is characteristic of precarious creative labour. She describes a new culture of immaterial work, marked by people isolated in front of screens while connected over the internet (Zafra 2021).

sented as imperative in highly digitalized societies and what is feasible within a narrow context of implementation. Several assumptions need to be questioned, beginning with the need for a digital strategy at all, and continuing with the methods by which it should be designed.

The guiding question at the start of this conceptual work was: How can we build a mindset capable of structuring and guiding (digital) efforts so that it responds meaningfully to the growing demands to decolonize exhibition practices and critically examine collection histories for looted art, colonial entanglements and systematic exclusions?

To address this question, the approach proposed here is that we look beyond the central fields of digital humanities and museum studies to draw instead on critical thinkers and practitioners who understand the decolonial beyond the museum, the digital beyond the screen, sustainability beyond climate concerns. Taking this broader view helps to clarify the motivations and reasoning that led to the current mission statement of the digital strategy for the Collaborative Museum, as well as its implementation plan and its limitations, which are presented below.[8]

Situating a Digital Strategy for the Collaborative Museum

Unlike other digital strategies, that developed for the Collaborative Museum does not aim at a profound digital transformation of the two museums involved, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, as cultural institutions and museums.[9] Nor is it a digitization strategy in the narrow sense of producing digital copies of analogue objects or transferring older media content to new digital formats.[10] However, if fully implemented as conceived, the actions outlined in this strategy will encourage institutional transformation and support access to collections through digitization. I view these changes as side effects of a shift in focus driven by other motivations.

The digital strategy serves instead as a framework for structuring, guiding and sustaining future contributions to the digital sphere as part of the reimagined museum

8 While not central to the scope of this article, significant initiatives relevant to the decolonization of exhibition and collection practices are being undertaken by the international network Global Indigenous Data Alliance: https://www.gida-global.org, as well as by several digital repatriation working groups, including the Passamaquoddy People: https://passamaquoddypeople.com/digital-heritage, and Te Mana Raraunga: https://www.temanararaunga.maori.nz.

9 This task has been developed not only for both museums, but also for other institutions of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz by the Digitale Transformationen team since at least 2018. It is also the aim of the published digital strategy of the Jüdisches Museum Berlin for the years 2023-2025: https://www.jmberlin.de/sites/default/files/media/documents/jmb_digitalstrategie.pdf.

10 This work is primarily being carried out by the department of Musikethnologie, Medien-Technik und Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv. See Mengel 2023: 76–78.

practice of the Collaborative Museum. Its central motivation is to use current digital technologies and media in ways that support fairer museum practices[11] that are still achievable under current conditions. A key goal is to strengthen long-term, sustainable shifts in institutional attitudes, driven primarily by collaborations with international partners across multiple disciplines. These collaborations take the form of technological services and curatorial work involving digital technologies and media, as explained later.

Before outlining the digital strategy in detail, it is important to reflect on several concepts that underpin the thinking behind the terms used below. By doing so, I hope to activate the reader's capacity to connect with these ideas.

Micropolitics and Cosmopolitics

A crucial step in developing the digital strategy for the Collaborative Museum was to bring Suely Rolnik's concept of *micropolitics* (Rolnik 2019)[12] into the dialogue with Isabelle Stengers' concept of *cosmopolitics*.[13] Both ideas have significantly shaped my work over recent years at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Both criticize the dominant and colonial logic of Western modernity, but at complementary levels. Both are therefore essential to any self-critical practice.

For Suely Rolnik, decolonial work takes place within us. She argues that capitalism operates hand in hand with colonialism and extends far beyond the economic sphere. It works intrinsically and inseparably within culture and subjectivity and possesses 'perverse powers, subtler and more difficult to combat'.[14] Rolnik calls for the 'decolonization of the unconscious', urging us to confront internalized logics of oppression by opening ourselves up to other ways of sensing, knowing and relating. She advocates engaging in *micropolitics*, an ongoing multiplicity of revolutionary micro-political processes that arise both from individual subjectivity and from 'temporary communities aspiring to act in that direction [to reappropriate vital forces] in the construction of the commons' (Rolnik 2019:15).

In her vision of *comospolitics*, Isabelle Stengers challenges the scientific and epistemic imperialism that reduces the plurality of worlds and knowledges to a single universal framework. Her primary concern is to explore how diverse forms of knowledge – scientific, Indigenous, experimental and spiritual – can coexist without domination. To

11 These initiatives exemplify practices aligned with the CARE Principles, as articulated by the Global Indigenous Data Alliance: https://www.gida-global.org/gidacarebrief.

12 At the end of this book, Rolnik offers ten suggestions for those who wish to decolonize their unconscious (Rolnik 2019:175–178).

13 Stengers proposes our participation in multiple, irreducible worlds at the level not only of knowledge and concepts (epistemological pluralism), but also of being (ontological pluralism). Stengers 2010:vii.

14 Rolnik illustrates how 'forces and forms' of life operate by describing the performative artwork *Caminhando*, created with a Moebius band by Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (Rolnik 2019:35ff).

achieve this, she calls for a practice of listening and attentiveness to others, both human and non-human. Stengers advocates a kind of ontological pluralism in which knowledge emerges from encounters and embraces uncertainty, complexity and multiplicity.[15] At the same time, she insists that decisions must be made in the presence of those who will bear their consequences.[16]

Bringing together Rolnik's micropolitics and Stengers' cosmopolitics highlights the extensive work required of us as individuals and as members of collaborative projects. These concepts form the intellectual foundation of the Collaborative Museum's digital strategy. They remind us that collaboration is always work in progress, an effort to be undertaken within ourselves and with others, while opening up our collective practices to ways of knowing and creating a reality that may be unfamiliar to us.

Digital Technologies and Digital Media

The terms *digital technologies* and *digital media* are closely related but refer to different concepts. Digital technologies are the complex systems of hardware and software that enable the processing, storage and transmission of information or, more accurately, knowledge. They are, in a sense, to the digital realm what architecture is to a building. In digital technologies, specific functions and purposes are deliberately designed, just as an architect envisions and plans spaces to serve as a shop, an opera house or a restroom. In this way, digital technologies can be understood as cultural technologies: they are shaped by the human practices, biases and social structures within which they are created (Alsaleh 2024).

Consequently, the way digital technologies are designed, implemented and used reflect social values, economic interests and political contexts. From a mainstream perspective, this is not necessarily good news. Philosopher Paul Preciado treats contemporary digital technologies, particularly smartphones, as examples of technologies created 'within systems of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism, meaning they perpetuate exclusionary narratives and hierarchies' (Preciado 2022:60ff). Yet, while Preciado sees these technologies as inherently laden with such power structures, I partly disagree: they are capable of carrying non-exclusionary narratives if they are intentionally designed for that purpose.[17]

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15 Stengers defies strict boundaries between causes and effects, or between conditions and events, creating instead multiple 'universes of value'. She further argues that there are no causes or conditions acting from the outside, as these conditions are themselves immanent values—ingredients acting within specific events—which acquaint us with a logic of qualitative multiplicity (Stengers 2010:194).

16 Stengers speaks of 'symbiotic agreements' to describe events in which different modes of existence stabilize one another. These agreements concern ethical practices of knowledge and decision-making, calling for responsibility in which our actions actively participate in the struggles and challenges of the modes of existence with which we engage (Stengers 2010:35).

17 A noteworthy point of reference for best practice is the *Loulu app*, a freely available game designed to heighten players' awareness of toxic discourses through participation in an interactive fiction framed

Digital media, on the other hand, refers primarily to the formats in which information (or knowledge) is stored and distributed, whether high-resolution images, digitized historical documents, videos or audio files. If digital technologies are comparable to the building's architecture, then digital media are like the materials – wooden floors, concrete walls, etc. – from which the building is made. Digital media thus serve as carriers that hold, and thereby shape, specific forms of knowledge production. However, the impact of digital media is inseparable from the technological infrastructure that supports it. In this sense, digital media form a constitutive part of digital technologies.

From a user's perspective, just as architecture and building materials are experienced together in a space, digital technologies and digital media are deeply intertwined from the moment an idea becomes a project. Meaning emerges only when the two interact, that is, when digital technology and media come together in an application or platform.

This raises the critical question: how can we avoid reproducing, or at least minimizing, the power imbalances and exclusionary narratives embedded in digital systems while working with digital technologies and media?[18]

Cosmotechnics and Conviviality

One inspiring approach to the question posed above is to understand technology – including digital technology – as Yuk Hui does with his concept of *cosmotechnics*.[19] Hui defines cosmotechnics as how cultures integrate their understanding of the cosmos into the technical and moral systems they create. He urges us to reject the monolithic view

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within an Instagram-like platform: https://www.hau4.de/en/onlinetheaterlive-loulu. In a similar sense, the digital application '*Speaking the Truth': Indigenous Perspectives on Jacobsen's Travelogue*, first released during the second opening of the Ethnologisches Museum in 2022, was specifically designed to provide a counter-narrative to the greed and arrogance of 19th-century European museum collecting. It responds to Johan Adrian Jacobsen's 1884 travel report, published as an accompanying volume to newly acquired objects from the Northwest Coast of North America. A simplified version of the application is available here: https://storage.smb.museum/qr/hf/modul19/Jacobsen_EN.pdf. The German version is available here: https://storage.smb.museum/qr/hf/modul19/Jacobsen_DE.pdf.

18 The persistence of these power imbalances is reflected in digital projects such as Digital Benin, whose primary aim is to provide access to collections of objects and knowledge held in Western museums to communities of origin. The project seeks to foster 'an inclusive exploration as part of decolonizing practices in digital heritage'. Initiated by the MARKK in Hamburg and focused on the well-known bronze sculptures looted from Benin City during the Kingdom of Edo, Digital Benin will be transferred to a main host in Nigeria with the aim of 'fostering further research, especially for Nigerian scholars, who are presently disadvantaged by the difficulties in accessing research materials and sources held in European and American museums and archives' (Luther 2022). I understand this (re)placement of hosting as a structural issue in international collaborations with communities of origin.

19 Hui states: 'Scientific and technical thinking emerges under cosmological conditions that are expressed in the relations between humans and their milieus, which are never static. For this reason, I would like to call this conception of technics *cosmotechnics*.' (Hui 2016:18).

of technological development as a single universal trajectory and instead to decolonize our perception of technology.[20] Hui calls for recognition of multiple technological traditions that exist beyond Western frameworks, each rooted in different ways of imagining the relationship between humans, nature and the cosmos.

A second valuable reference is Ivan Illich's idea of conviviality, which can be applied in the context of the Collaborative Museum to how we perceive digital tools. In *Tools for Conviviality* (Illich 1973), Illich defines conviviality as the ability of individuals and communities to use tools in ways that foster autonomy, creativity and social well-being. In this sense, digital technologies can serve human freedom and mutual support. As Illich writes:

> Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. (ibid. 1973:31)

Reading Hui's concept of cosmotechnics alongside Illich's notion of convivial tools helped shift the focus during the development of the digital strategy. It highlights the need to diversify conventional ways of thinking and using digital technologies and media. The digital strategy's task, therefore, is to create practical yet inspiring tools that foster relationships between humans, objects, nature and the cosmos, relationships that may remain unfamiliar to us as European collaborators educated in Western institutions.[21]

Thinking the Digital Within the Collaborative Museum

> If there is one thing that rightfully belongs to anthropology, it is not the task of explaining the world of others, but that of multiplying our world, 'populating it with all those expressions that do not exist outside its expressions'. Because we cannot think *like* the Indians; at most, we can think *with* them.
> (de Castro 2010:211)

20 Hui revisits various histories and philosophies of technology with the aim of decolonizing the minds of philosophers, engineers, architects and designers as a precondition for decolonial design to occur (Hui 2016:269).

21 I understand the term *relationships* in an extended, yet related sense to the term 'Cultural Belongings' as formulated by the Global Cultural Assembly in their statement during the opening gathering of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in 2022: 'They [Cultural Belongings] convey relations between people, localities, cultural and artistic practices, relating to the past, and the present and the future': https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/dignity-continuity-transparency.

The permanent exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst at the Humboldt Forum were partially opened in 2021 and finally opened in 2022, following around seven years of intensive digital-related work. Most of these efforts focused on producing digital media and infrastructures to contextualize the displayed objects and create access points for visitors' journeys through both museums. The primary aim was to provide diverse perspectives and narratives about the objects to a broad audience (Probst and Rostásy 2016).

With the launch of the Collaborative Museum in 2023, the focus of digital work gradually shifted. Collaboration, as defined in the first memorandum,[22] emerged as a guiding principle across all areas of museum practice. Consequently, the production of digital media for the exhibition spaces took on new emphasis. For example, before the Collaborative Museum, the purpose of a media station about Lienzo Coixtlahuaca II[23] was to explain what a *lienzo* is, when and where it was created, how and when it came to Berlin, how to interpret it ichnographically, and how to contextualize the place and Indigenous community of Coixtlahuaca.

From 2023 on, with collaboration as the guiding principle, the digital task regarding the same exhibit shifted to documenting, through audio-visual means, the collaborative process of knowledge exchange with representatives of the communities involved. These discussions addressed key questions such as whether the Lienzo should be restored, and if so, how. Video documentation of collaborative research and artistic approaches, produced by and with fellows of the Residency Programme, and of interventions in displayed exhibits and collection visits concerning knowledge exchange and/or restitution processes, has since become an essential line of work.[24]

In the same spirit of collaboration, digital infrastructures and workflows, as well as digital access to non-displayed objects and their associated database information, have become central tools for enabling cooperation. An example is the initial digital contribution to the collaborative project *Talking Mats: Interwoven Stories – Connecting Peoples*.[25] This took the form of an interactive pdf file,[26] a technologically accessible format developed as a working tool for an interdisciplinary workshop in Lamu (Kenya)

22 The memorandum, written prior to the official launch of the Collaborative Museum, was formulated by Lars-Christian Koch and remains unpublished.

23 Also referred to as 'Lienzo Seler II' (Ident. Nr. IV Ca 46178). Basic information from the museum database is accessible here: https://id.smb.museum/object/107917/lienzo-seler-ii, accessed October 23, 2025.

24 Most of the video documentation will be available online in the coming weeks on the website of the Collaborative Museum: https://comuse.org/en, accessed October 23, 225.

25 See the article by Bokop, Sophia / Hassan, Mohamed / Ivanov, Paola / Mahazi, Jasmin / Mwenje, Mohamed / Omar, Munira Mohammed / Perrot, Myriam in this volume.

26 The interactive PDF file is available for download: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/Talking_Mats_Mikekas-Berlin.pdf, accessed October 23, 2025. The first version used during the September 2024 workshop did not include the option to listen to the poems inscribed on eight of the twelve mats.

in September 2024. The pdf compiled and translated German information into English from the museum database, providing access to twelve mats made in Lamu that were previously only available to museum staff. The database information was further enriched with transcriptions and translations of poems in Kiswahili found on some of the mats, as well as findings from provenance research and key details about the collaborative framework.

The decision to use an interactive pdf was based on the assumption that, despite participants' diverse backgrounds and disciplines, all would have a smartphone capable of opening pdf files.[27] The built-in comment function of the pdf made it easy for participants to leave specific feedback or add personal notes. Making the pdf interactive was crucial for navigating a large volume of complex content in a user-friendly way.[28]

In summary, within the Collaborative Museum, the digital serves as both an enabler and an amplifier of collaborative processes. It encompasses technological infrastructure as well as curatorial work involving digital technologies and media.

Importantly, by applying the lessons of Rolnik's micropolitics and Stengers' cosmopolitics, and by envisioning digital outcomes that reflect Hui's cosmotechnics and Illich's convivial tools, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst are not positioned as the primary beneficiaries of this work. Instead, the principal beneficiaries are the collaborative partners: those whose knowledge is embodied in, and connected to, the objects held in the museums' collections.[29]

The central aim of the Collaborative Museum's digital strategy is therefore to narrow the distance between what is held *here,* in the museum's collections and databases, and *there*, in the places and communities to which these objects and forms of knowledge belong. To echo the words of Donna J. Haraway about the task of individuals in the Anthropocene, the digital strategy will be successful if it can 'reciprocally cultivate, in every conceivable way, future epochs that can restore refugia'.[30]

Basic Principles: Designing Access and Circulation

> The world has always been equivalent to our knowledge of it, and the moment we change the principles on which our knowledge is based, reality also changes.
> (Graeber 2019:70)

27 This assumption was based on first-hand observations by project team members who lived in Lamu or have family there. During the workshop, the URL of the interactive PDF file was made accessible via a QR code.

28 For a broader yet targeted perspective on the changes and challenges of user-friendly or human-centred design, see IDEO.ORG 2015.

29 However, I strongly believe that, in a globally connected world, fostering the capacities of partners within their own frameworks indirectly benefits the knowledge and perspectives held by the museum.

30 Haraway refers to her own task as making the Anthropocene as short or narrow as possible (Haraway 2016:155).

Grounded in the conceptual framework outlined so far, I propose two basic principles for structuring a range of actions and projects within the implementation plan for the Collaborative Museum's digital strategy. These principles form the core of the proposed mission statement and are referred to as the *designing access* and *circulation* principles.

Designing access means much more than simply making objects and database information available.[31] The emphasis on *designing* highlights the collaborative process of working together, of forming temporary communities with international partners (Rolnik) to determine what knowledge it is most urgent to access, in what forms (Strengers) and how to shape that access in relation to partners' infrastructural conditions and cosmotechnics (Hui). In practice, this involves exploring and adapting digital technologies and tools, often developed in Western contexts, so that they can become convivial tools (Illich) in environments that may be partially or completely unfamiliar.

The need to move from *making accessible* to *designing access* became evident during the first conceptual draft of a digital application for the collaborative exhibition following the milestone workshop on *Talking Mats: Interwoven Stories – Connecting Peoples*. The initial draft reflected a common museum mindset, placing the mats, old and fragile collection objects, at the centre as the most valuable elements for the digital outreach to make them and the knowledge surrounding them digitally accessible. However, as discussions with project team members who prepared and participated in the workshop made clear, this draft failed to reflect the central aims and messages of the collaborative project.

Listening attentively and becoming more familiar with the cosmotechnics associated with the mats led to a radical shift in the concept and the main message of the digital application. The mats were understood primarily as material carriers of traditional weaving and plaiting techniques, rather than as auratic objects. These techniques were themselves valued as expressions of matrifocal Swahili coastal culture, grounded in a call-and-response oral tradition (Mahazi 2024).

The next draft therefore focused on transmitting knowledge of the milestone workshop orally through a dramaturgically structured scrollytelling format in which a response followed every contribution, and each response led to the next. The contributions, mostly sung or recited poems, were kept in Kiswahili and aimed, both individually and collectively, to evoke the performance of Swahili coastal knowledge rather than explain it.[32]

The second principle, the *circulation principle*,[33] involves making the most of what already exists by re-using digital media and technologies that are (or were) part of the museum's framework. This approach values adaptation as a creative force to minimize

31 I consider enabling online access to the museum's database to be a prerequisite for collaboration, not an endpoint.

32 In doing so, I aimed to translate into digital form Mahazi's intention 'to facilitate the co-creation of new sites of knowledge that incorporate dialogue across epistemologies and traditions' (Mahazi 2024:9).

33 My main inspirations for circular principles are ecofeminism and the circular economy, both of

resource-use and increase sustainability. The aim is to recontextualize recent digital work, adapting it to new needs and ensuring it continues to serve relevant purposes.

A first example of the circulation principle, hopefully implemented before this article is published, involves extending and technically adapting the augmented reality application *A Collection: Many Perspectives*.[34] This application was initially developed to digitally extend three key objects displayed in the section of the Humboldt Forum dedicated to ethnological collections from the northwest coast of North America. It offers three virtual windows providing access to Indigenous voices about the objects' roles and meanings within their First-Nation communities,[35] along with information on their features and histories. Initially, the application was designed for use within the exhibition space through devices provided by the museum.

The digital team of the Collaborative Museum is currently working with a design and innovation studio to make the augmented reality application accessible off site, for example, at the heritage sites or educational institutions of the First-Nation communities to which these objects belong. The proposed solution involves placing a life-size 3D digital scan of each object as a trigger for the augmented experience[36] and adapting the existing navigation and code to meet the technical requirements of distribution platforms such as the Play Store and App Store. Conversations with representatives of the First Nations to agree on whether and how to shape this initiative are about to begin.

As described above, the successful implementation of both principles — *designing access* and *circulation* — depends on profound acts of listening and attentiveness (Stengers). This involves questioning which aspects of our own subjectivities, especially as members of collaborative teams, may have blind spots regarding structural power imbalances. As the Bolivian feminist artivist and thinker María Galindo warns:

> Patriarchal capitalism is able to offer women's rights, colonial capitalism is able to offer Indigenous rights, heterosexist capitalism is able to offer LGBT rights, predatory capitalism is able to talk about environmental protection, the capitalism of the healthy, strong, white man is able to offer rights for the so-called disabled, without altering a single one of its power structures. That is what I am talking about, the idiocy of believing them, the idiocy of playing their game, the idiocy of adopting their language to talk about oneself. (Galindo 2021:93–94)

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which are closely interconnected with social justice in the work of the Spanish anthropologist, environmental engineer and ecofeminist activist Yayo Herrero (Herrero 2022).

34 This digital application was first released during the second opening of the Ethnologisches Museum in September 2022.

35 The collection objects featured are a Chief's Seat belonging to the Heiltsuk First Nation (Ident.-Nr. IV A 2475: https://id.smb.museum/object/819688), a copper plate belonging to the Haida First Nation (Ident.-Nr. IV A 988: https://id.smb.museum/object/1306884), and a Hamatza-Mask belonging to the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation (Ident.-Nr. IV A 1330).

36 The AR Foundation will be used in the current implementation plan to adapt the existing application developed in unity for placing 3D digital scans of the three exhibits.

These words by Galindo resonate especially strongly now, as we await the next iteration of the digital outcome of the *Talking Mats* project. This iteration aims to provide global access to the scrollytelling developed for the Lamu exhibition. All Berlin-based project team members are eager to observe on-site and listen to the feedback from the Lamu-based team members once they have the devices in hand and installed in the exhibition. The next crucial step before implementing the globally accessible version will be to clarify what, when and how to modify the application to reach the audiences that should be prioritized and to test what is feasible in practice.

Practice First: Towards an Implementation Plan

The digital strategy of the Collaborative Museum identifies two main areas of implementation. The first is strengthening the museum's existing online channels, primarily the website of the Collaborative Museum. Besides serving as a general access point to the projects, the website will function as a key implementation area for the digital strategy. It is intended to become the platform for globally circulating digital media that is currently only accessible in Berlin. This includes a substantial body of digital projects produced for the permanent exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, which are currently displayed exclusively in the exhibition rooms of the Humboldt Forum. Examples include video productions such as the multichannel installation on the ongoing restitution process of the Benin bronzes, 'Voices from Nigeria and Europa', as well as digital games like 'Do you want to build a *drua* with us?', which introduces children to the main components and construction process of a Fijian double-hulled boat.

The second main area of implementation focuses on the development of specific collaborative projects. This involves designing and circulating digital technologies tailored to the objectives of each project. While the requirements vary from case to case, these solutions generally involve the use of so-called 'low-tech' tools.[37] Prioritizing low-tech approaches is not only desirable, because it enables the museum to undertake as many tasks as possible with its internal resources,[38] but also necessary when working in contexts with limited digital infrastructures.

37 For the purposes of this article, I interpret 'low-tech' in contrast to 'high-tech'. The former refers to technologies and devices that are simple, relatively inexpensive and widely accessible. For example, developing digital access through a PDF file that can be downloaded to commonly available smartphones constitutes a low-tech approach. Conversely, the creation of a virtual reality application within a three-dimensional digital environment, requiring a high-performance computer and a virtual reality headset, exemplifies a high-tech approach.

38 That is, designing and implementing digital projects that can be realized using the existing skills of current museum staff.

Further areas of implementation include improving digitization processes,[39] supporting the Fellowship programme with one digital residency per year,[40] testing and evaluating digital pilot projects with international partners, and conducting a series of internal workshops to review working dynamics and outcomes.[41]

In a future development phase of the digital strategy, after evaluating the effectiveness of low-tech solutions and the website through various examples of use, I propose focusing on two additional areas that build on the fundamental principles of the strategy, *designing access* and *circulation*.

The first focus will be on exploring ways to dismantle, or at least reduce, existing language barriers, thereby extending access to collections and knowledges held in Berlin.[42]

The second focus will investigate the potential of green IT solutions[43] in relation to the circulation principle.

Specifying the detailed objectives, measures, resources and timelines for each of the ongoing and planned components of the digital strategy is a key task for the implementation plan, but it lies beyond the scope of this article.

Final Remark: a Highly Nutritious Compost

Drawing on the work of the critical thinkers and practitioners mentioned throughout this article, as well as on the experiences gained so far from working at the intersection of non-European objects and knowledges, my goal is to create and implement digital technologies and media that build meaningful bridges to people and knowledge beyond the walls of the museum in Berlin.

Above all, I hope to contribute practical tools and infrastructures that address the immediate needs of the museum work with which I am directly involved. On a deeper

39 The plan includes testing artificial intelligence tools with specific segments of the collection, but only after training a person as an AI expert who already has extensive experience with the sensitive content and the ethical and legal implications of the collections held in the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

40 The first of the fellows with a strong interest in producing a digital outcome from her research is Nhi Duong, who completed her residency between June and August 2025: https://comuse.org/en/fellowship/nhi-duong.

41 The first in this series of evaluation workshops will be the exchange session planned ahead of the next iteration of the 'Talking Mats' project, mentioned above, and scheduled for early October 2025.

42 The first action area I propose to prioritize will be expanding access to information in the museum database, which is currently only available in German. The languages to prioritize will depend on the main languages spoken by the communities connected to the respective convolutes of cultural belongings.

43 The two primary sources currently informing this area of implementation are the guidelines of the Deutscher Museumsbund: https://www.museumsbund.de/green-it-green-durch-it-digitalisierung-und-nachhaltigkeit-im-museum, and the publications of the Green Culture Anlaufstelle: https://www.green-culture.info/wissen, accessed October 23, 2025.

level, the long-term aim of the digital strategy is to leave behind a 'highly nutritious compost' (Haraway 2016:98) of know-how, tools, infrastructure and knowledge for future generations.

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Shiva Linga *kosh*: Visual Research on the Provenance and Meaning of a Sacred Artefact from Nepal

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Abstract: 'Shiva Linga *kosh*: Visual Research on the Provenance and Meaning of a Sacred Artefact from Nepal' explores the origin, provenance and cultural significance of a copper-gilt, four-faced *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* (cover) housed at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin. The researchers are engaged in collection-based, multi-sited, multi-layered visual research developed through mutual collaboration combining archival-related and qualitative methodologies employing filming, observation and interviews in Nepal and Berlin. This article aims to outline the challenges and possibilities of a cooperative research approach, illustrated through selected moments from the shared research process culminating in the documentary film *Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest.*
[Visual Anthropology, Provenance Research, Sacred Artefacts, Knowledge Co-Production, Shiva Linga]

Fig. 1 Lilla Russell-Smith, Lu Tian, Henriette Lavaulx-Vrécourt, Deepak Tolange, and Katharina Plate with the Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877) in the storage rooms of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Dahlem on October 8, 2024. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Pierre Adenis, 2024

 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8861

Introduction

This article reflects on the process, methodological approaches and selected findings of the collaborative project *Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest*. The research-film initiative seeks to deepen understanding of Shiva, Shiva Linga and a Shiva Linga *kosh*, a sacred Hindu artefact held at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin.

Originating with Deepak Tolange's film proposal in September 2022 and supported by 'the Collaborative Museum', the project has evolved through sustained dialogue and joint inquiry. The documentary film *Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest* is set to premiere in 2026, with screenings planned in Berlin and Kathmandu.

Focusing on the four-faced copper-gilded *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh*, acquired in 1993 by the former Museum für Indische Kunst, now part of the South Asian collections of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, the project closely examines its composition, materiality, iconography and inscriptions. Its aim is not only to trace the history of the Shiva Linga *kosh* within the museum's collections, but also to explore the circumstances of its removal from its original context and its subsequent acquisition by the museum.

In addition, the project – especially the film – seeks to raise awareness of the absence of cultural belongings in Nepal. Landlocked between Tibet and India, Nepal is rich in tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Since it opened its borders in the early 1950s following the end of the Rana regime, the country has continued to experience a loss of tangible cultural heritage, despite the existence of legal frameworks. Numerous historical and sacred artefacts have been removed from public shrines, temples, monasteries and homes, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. Dhungel claims that almost fifty percent of Nepal's missing cultural heritage that ended up in Western countries has not been displayed or catalogued from the holdings of government, public and personal collections (2010:4).

The basis for the growing partnership and the central idea to engage with the Shiva Linga *kosh* from the Museum für Asiatische Kunst collection were developed and supported by Dr. Lilla Russell-Smith (Museum für Asiatische Kunst) and Henriette Lavaulx-Vrécourt (Ethnologisches Museum). Both co-curated the Himalaya section of the two museums' exhibitions at the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin City Palace.[1] Although the Shiva Linga *kosh* was initially selected for display at the Humboldt Forum, it was ultimately excluded from the 2022 exhibition due to unresolved questions concerning its sacred significance and provenance. A more in-depth investigation was therefore established as a prerequisite for its future presentation. With a shared commitment to collaborative practice, the Shiva Linga *kosh* became the starting point and focus of a joint research project.

1 The second part of the exhibitions within the Humboldt Forum was inaugurated in September 2022

With the launch of 'the Collaborative Museum' in 2023, provenance researcher Sophia Bokop joined the team, bringing a new dimension to the project. In 2024, at what was an opportune moment, Deepak participated in the CoMuse-Fellowship programme. This period proved crucial for working together to develop a methodology. This collaborative approach integrates archival and qualitative methodologies with visual anthropology and filming in Berlin and various locations across Nepal.

Rather than presenting concrete research results, this contribution outlines the possibilities and challenges of collaborative research, illustrated through selected moments and findings from the shared process of the research partners. In the meantime, it seeks to reveal the complex meanings and implications of sacred objects within museum collections, highlighting the potential of co-produced knowledge emerging from collaborative provenance research and visual anthropology.

Finding a Collaborative Research Design: Reflecting on Methodological Approaches in International Partnership

'Creation happens from the union of two'
Shiva Jangam, Priest at the Indreshwor Mahadev Temple, Panauti, 2024

This collection-based, multi-sited, and multi-layered visual research project was developed through mutual collaboration combining archival and qualitative methodologies with observation, filming, interviews and informal conversations in Nepal and Berlin. The study seeks both to trace the origin and provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh* and to explore its cultural and spiritual significance and meaning, weaving these findings into a cohesive cinematic narrative.

Archival research was conducted in Berlin at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst and the Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The latter houses records from the former Museum für Indische Kunst and the central administrative levels of the museums and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. The limited time available has not allowed a systematic investigation of the archive, so agreements have been made regarding priorities and procedures in archival research.

Language, translation and the recent nature of the archival files presented notable challenges in interweaving archival knowledge with, for example, qualitative and visual data within this international and transdisciplinary collaboration. In the meantime, archive-based research revealed itself to involve the intensive examination of the histories of institutions and collections, not least to allocate the respective sources in addressing specific questions. In this particular case, the early 1990s proved to be challenging in the search for archival sources: in the wake of Germany's reunification, the Staatliche

Museen zu Berlin of East and West Berlin were merged, leading to structural and personnel changes. This is also a period of technological change in museums due to the increasing use of the internet and digital forms of communication. Despite these challenges, this phase of the project offered valuable insights into museum practice and helped shape further questions for collaborative, multi-local research. Unfortunately, due to a lack of proper documentation in Nepal, archival research was not possible.

Qualitative research and field conversations were conducted by Deepak in Nepal. According to the initial film proposal, the envisioned documentary was structured into three chapters: first, the origin and provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877); second, the meaning of Shiva and Shiva Linga, including associated festivals; and third, the loss of Nepal's tangible cultural heritage. In preparation for the film, Deepak witnessed rituals and various festivals dedicated to Shiva and Shiva Linga. As the research progressed, various experts and knowledge bearers were consulted, including historians, culturists, priests, residents of Gyaneshwor in Kathmandu, and representatives from the Department of Archaeology, among others. Their insights and participation significantly informed the research and the film's development.

In the course of the research, questions and findings were shared with each other and also discussed in relation to the current state of research and literature. Each discovery generated further lines of inquiry. An online visual mapping tool supported joint data storage, visualization and knowledge co-production, being particularly useful during periods when collaboration was limited to virtual meetings. A CoMuse Fellowship enabled Deepak to spend three months in Berlin from October to December 2024, allowing the team to work together on site and to engage in shared archival and visual research.

The emergence of topics or contact persons, the necessity to involve further aspects or knowledge bearers and even the need to include initially unconsidered topics have not only shaped the respective interview situations in the presence of the camera or the focus while analysing the archival remains of a museum's history, they also shaped the envisioned documentary: during the editing process, initially imagined chapters were merged, and the final film no longer follows a clearly defined chapter structure but has a single cohesive cinematic narrative. The film's production may also have influenced the process. Combining provenance research with film enables the immediacy of specific moments and multiple perspectives to coexist, reinforcing or questioning one another in equal measures, all in the quest of better learning and understanding.

Various other commitments have tended to limit the time available for research activities, especially in the museum's everyday context and in the day-to-day work of an independent artist and visual anthropologist. All in all, the project is characterized by the parallel nature of the production of a visual outcome in the ongoing joint research process.

A Quest to Understanding Shiva: Who is Shiva? What is Shiva Linga *kosh?*

> 'Shiva is an entity of welfare. Shiva turned into a real being from an abstract. [...] Linga has many meanings. Linga means the point of creation of the world. [...] The union of Shiva and Parvati is the origin of all beings. That is also known as Shiva Linga'
> Prof. Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, Kathmandu, 2024

In Hinduism, Shiva is regarded as one of the greatest gods (see e.g. Bangdel 1987:60; Khanal Parajuli 2023). For example, at Pashupatinath Temple, one of the most significant temples on the bank of the Bagmati River in Kathmandu, he is worshipped as the protector of both the people and the nation as a whole (Schick 1989:25).

The Shiva Linga is considered the mark, emblem, or symbol of Shiva. It is often described as a phallic or cosmic pillar connecting the earth and the universe. A complete Shiva Linga consists of three parts: Rudra (top), Vishnu (middle) and Brahma (bottom), the latter being under the earth. Symbolically, it also represents the union of Shiva and Shakti or Shiva and Parvati, signifying the merging of masculine and feminine energies for the creation of life. There are many forms of Shiva Linga. The *swayambhu* (or self-manifested Shiva Linga) is a naturally formed stone pillar. A Shiva Linga with faces is known as a *mukhalinga*. The Shiva Linga *kosh* in the Berlin collection features four faces and is therefore called *chaturmukha*. Some also refer to it as a *panchamukhal-*

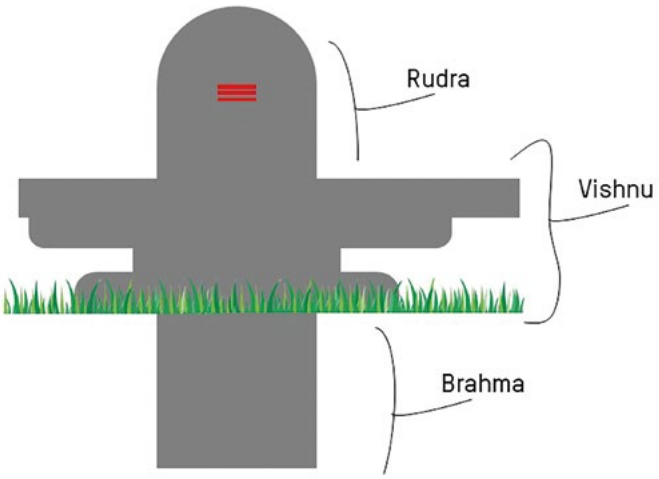

Fig. 2 A complete Shiva Linga showing Rudra, Vishnu, and Brahma parts. Digital art: Deepak Tolange, 2025

Fig. 3 A *swayambhu* stone Shiva Linga enshrined at the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu. Believed to have self-manifested, this sacred Linga is deeply revered by devotees and is central to daily worship and ritual practices honoring Lord Shiva. Photo: Deepak Tolange, 2024

inga (five-faced), with Ishana facing upward, whether symbolic or implied. In Tantric traditions, however, Shiva Linga is believed to have six faces (Khanal Parajuli, 2023; and conversation with Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, 2024).

A Shiva Linga *kosh* is a metal covering or sheath placed over the upper part of the Shiva Linga, specifically the Rudra part. Once consecrated through ritual and infused with life energy (*prāṇa pratiṣṭhā*), the *kosh* is regarded as equivalent to the Shiva Linga itself, embodying the presence of Shiva (conversations with Shiva Jangam, 2024; and Sandhya Khanal Parajuli, 2025).

The *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* currently housed in the collections of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst is, first and foremost, a *kosh* – a sacred covering for the Shiva Linga. Upadhyay explains that removing such an object from its temple context results in the loss of its sacred essence (conversation with Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, 2024). Dhungel writes that when religious art is removed from its original site of spiritual significance, the holy soul of the artefact is lost, leaving only its secular or aesthetic value (2010:8).

The Shiva Linga *kosh*: Insights from Museum and Archival Sources

According to statements made by museum staff, the Shiva Linga *kosh* has been exhibited since the reopening of the Museum für Indische Kunst in Dahlem in October 2000. After extensive renovations of the exhibition spaces in the late 1990s the Shiva Linga *kosh* remained on display even after 2006, when the Museum für Indische Kunst and the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst were merged to form the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. The exhibitions in Dahlem closed in 2017 in preparation for the exhibitions' move to the Humboldt Forum.

In 2000 the Shiva Linga *kosh* as described in the exhibition catalogue, *Magische Götterwelten: Werke aus dem Museum für Indische Kunst* was dated to the year BS[2] 1888 (1831 CE) and referred to as a *panchamukhalinga* (see Yaldiz et al. 2000:149). This article, including two black and white photographs, is likely the first publication on this Shiva Linga *kosh*, significant for its inscription in particular.[3]

Founded in the 1960s out of the collections of the Museum für Völkerkunde, the Museum für Indische Kunst was not only one of the youngest state museums, but also the first of its kind in the German-speaking region.[4] The main motivation for establishing an independent museum was to provide an appropriate venue for presenting 'one of the world's great forms of art', opening it up to an international audience, as well as fostering research on Indian art.[5] Apart from this concept of a general collection and the institution's mission statement, what motivation could have led to the purchase of the Shiva Linga *kosh*, especially at a time of scarce resources due to the reunification of the museums in 1992 and the planned redesign of the Dahlem exhibitions? What is

2 BS stands for Bikram Sambat, a national calendar in Nepal which is also used in parts of India. The BS is a lunisolar calendar based on ancient Hindu traditions, and its new year begins in Baishak (mid-April).

3 The acquisition of 1993 was published in 1994, in the *Jahresbericht der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin* (Bd.: 36). Here, the published photograph does not show the acquisitioned *kosh*. Instead, a similar object can be recognized in the published photograph, reportedly taken by museum staff. The depicted Shiva Linga *kosh* was not identified as part of the Berlin collections. Research in the photo archive of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst revealed that the Shiva Linga *kosh* I 4877 was in front of the museums' professional photographers' camera at least twice: in 1994 four side views were photographed; in the following year, professional photographs were taken of the details and inscriptions.

4 At around the same time, the first Chair of *Indische Kunstgeschichte* or Indian Art History was established at the Freie Universität zu Berlin, following the engagement and commitment of Prof. Herbert Härtel (Reitz [2003] 2006). Prof. Härtel was head of the former Indische Abteilung [Indian Department] of the Museum für Völkerkunde (today: Ethnologisches Museum) from 1953 and from 1963-1986 first director of the newly founded Museum für Indische Kunst.

5 Anlage 3+4, betr. Denkschrift zur Zukunft der Staatlichen Museen; hier: Außerordentliche Sammlungen und europäische/deutsche volkskundliche Sammlungen, Datum unbekannt [Annex 3+4, regarding the memorandum on the future of the State Museums; here: Extraordinary collections and European/German ethnological collections, date unknown], Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Zentralarchiv [SMB-ZA], II/VA 14844.

documented regarding the circumstances of the acquisition and the provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh* in the early 1990s?

The acquisition of the Shiva Linga *kosh* by the Museum für Indische Kunst was recommended in accordance with formal procedures at the regular conference of directors of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in September 1993.[6] Purchased from the Galerie Peter Hardt, Radevormwald, the *kosh* was documented in the same year with inventory number (MIK) I 4877 as follows:[7]

> German: Kupferblech, getrieben und vergoldet. Ø: ;H: ;4-köpfiges Sivalingam mit Devanāgarī und Nandināgarī Inschriften. Nepal. Galerie P. Hardt, Radevormwald, Kauf 1993
>
> English: Copper sheet, embossed and gilded. Ø: ;H: ;4-faced Sivalingam with Devanagari and Nandinagari inscriptions. Nepal. Galerie P. Hardt, Radevormwald, bought 1993 (translation by the authors)

No further provenance details or measurements were documented. The Shiva Linga *kosh* is not the only acquisition by the museum from Galerie Peter Hardt. Since 1984 the gallery seems to have assumed significance for the collecting institution regarding its specialization in art from the Himalaya region.[8] Consequently, the research team embarked on a search for further documentation on the 1993 acquisition within the archives in hope of gaining a deeper understanding of the circumstances and motivation behind the acquisition, as well as the history of the Shiva Linga *kosh* as part of the museum collections. Not only the archives within the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, but also the Zentralarchiv of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin became starting points for the research.

At the time of writing this text in 2025, no additional documentation regarding the moment of the acquisition and the provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh* had been found, such as export licenses. This leaves a few questions unanswered at present, such

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6 Protokoll zur Direktorenkonferenz 8/93 am 15.09.1993 [Minutes of the Directors' Conference 8/93 on 15th September 1993], SMB-ZA, II/VA 14717.

7 Furthermore, within the Erwerbungsbuch the acquisition is documented under the number IKA 8 as follows: "Metal: 1 vierköpfiges Lingam. Kupferarbeit, vergoldet. Himalaya, 17 Jh." / „Metal: 1 four-faced Linga, gilded copper work. Himalaya, 17th century" (translation by authors); The inventory and collection documentation of the Museum für Indische Kunst is available online on the website of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, see e.g. (1) Museum für Indische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ostasiatische Kunstabteilung et al (ed.): Erwerbungsbücher des Museums für Asiatische Kunst, 9: Erwerbungsbuch der Indischen Kunstabteilung, https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.69047, accessed December 12, 2024; (2) Museum für Indische Kunst (ed.): Erwerbungsbücher des Museums für Asiatische Kunst, 10 (1): I 1-5000, https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.69061, accessed December 12, 2024.

8 See for example 'The History of Hardt Auctions' at www.2bhardt.de/history/, accessed September 25, 2025.

Fig. 4 Edited collage of *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877). The four faces, from left: Aghor (south), Sadyojata (west), Vamdev (north), and Tatpurush (east). Photos: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Iris Papadopoulos, 1994

as whether the museum exchanged information on the subject of exports with the gallery itself at the time, or if it sought contact with the authorities in Nepal in order to obtain information on exports.[9] The reasons may be manifold. From the perspective of the current research, considering additional storage locations for information such as, for instance, digital archives due to the rapid technological developments in the 1990s appears to be among the relevant next steps in the in-depth examination of earlier museum practices.

9 According to a published statement by Marianne Yaldiz, former director of the Museum für Indische Kunst, like other collecting institutions of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, the museum attempted to contact the respective institutions and authorities in view of a planned purchase in order to obtain more detailed information, particularly regarding the export of the cultural property (Hausler and Selter 2025:45). Whether this was done in the case of the Shiva Linga *kosh* could not be verified at this time.

A Closer Look at the Shiva Linga *kosh*: Inscription and Iconography

On 19 October 2022, close-up photographs of the Shiva Linga *kosh* (inventory number: I 4877) were taken in Berlin. The images were digitally processed to enhance their legibility. The *kosh* has four cast heads representing different manifestations of Shiva fixed around its circumference: Aghor (South), Sadyojata (West), Vamadev (North) and Tatpurush (East). Aghor is ferocious with three wide-open eyes, snake earrings on both ears, a crescent moon and a crown of skulls. Sadyojata is calm, wearing floral earrings. Vamadev is an androgynous form (Shiva-Parvati) with asymmetric hairstyles and earrings: floral and snake. Tatpurush is adorned with floral earrings. Each cast head has two hands. The left hand holds the *kamandalu* in *vara mudra* (gesture of blessing), the right hand, when carrying a *rudraksha mala* (rosary beads), forms the *abhaya mudra* signifying fearlessness, protection and divine reassurance.

In Kathmandu, Deepak and Prof. Dr. Ram Chandra Poudel examined the inscription and iconography, identifying its basic meaning in 2022. Subsequently, Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels, Dr. Rajan Khatiwoda, and Dr. Manik Bajracharya transcribed, translated and interpreted the text into English in Heidelberg in February 2023 and in presence of the camera with Deepak in Patan, Nepal, 2024.

Some cracks and repair joints can be seen to the *kosh*, which measures 104 cm in diameter and 35.5 cm in height. In total, five inscriptions in Nepali with some Sanskrit words written in Devanagari script are engraved on the *kosh*. A two-line inscription reads:

स्वस्ति श्री संवत् १८८८ साल वैशाख शुदि द्वादशी रोज २ यस महाप्रव
दिनमहा श्री ३ सु इष्टदेवता ज्ञानेश्वर प्रीति गरि सुनाको मूर्ति नाग
समेतको छत्र चाँदीको वेलपत्र माला श्री ३ राजगुरु विद्याकर भट्टज्यू टट्
पत्नी श्री विशालाक्षी देवीले सोपुत्र श्री रजनीक भट्टज्यू सहित गरि चढायौँ :
जो लोभानी पापानी गरला पञ्चमहापातक लागला॥ शुभम् : ॥

Here, the text is transcribed in Romanised Nepali/Sanskrit, using the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST-style):

Svasti. śrī samvat 1888 sāla vaiśākha śudi dvādaśī roja 2 yas mahāprava dinamahā śrī 3 su [read: *sva*] *iṣṭadevatā gyānesvara prī[ti] gari sunāko murti nāgasmetko chatra cā̃diko velapatra mālā śrī 3 rājaguru vidyākara bhaṭṭajyū ṭaṭ paṭnī śrī viśālākṣī devīle soputra* [read: *svaputra*] *śrī rajanīka bhaṭṭajyū sahita gari cahrāñuṃḥ. jo lobhānī pāpānī garlā paṃcamahāpātaka lāgalā. Śubham* :॥

The text can be translated as follows:

Hail. In 1888 Vikram Samvat [1831 CE], on Monday, the 12th of the bright fortnight of Vaisakha, the threefold venerable Rajguru Vidhyakara Bhatta, his vener-

Fig. 5 (f.l.t.r.) Dr. Manik Bajracharya, Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels, and Dr. Rajan Khatiwoda discuss and interpret the inscriptions on the Shiva Linga *kosh* on March 25, 2024, in Lalitpur, Nepal. Film still: 'Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest' by Deepak Tolange, 2024

> able wife Vishalakshmi Devi, together with their venerable son Rajanik Bhatta, in love with their own tutelary deity Gyaneshwor [i. e. Shiva], donated a golden statue together with serpents, a silver parasol, and a garland out of *bel* [bilva] leaves. Whoever, out of greed and evilness, acts towards those offered items, will suffer punishment for the five gravest sins. Auspiciousness :॥ [closed with sacred marks]

The other four short inscriptions are on the neck of the two figures: Aghor and Sadyojata, and on the left wrist of Aghor, which reads '*shree* Sundar Prasad Shah B. [BS] 2037 [1980 CE]'.

The inscription tells how the Shiva Linga *kosh* and associated items were donated to the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in 1831 CE by the Bhatta family residing in Naradevi Chowk, Kathmandu. Located in Kathmandu, Gyaneshwor Mahadev is also known as Parasnath Mahadev; locals consider it the source of knowledge. The temple is taken care of by the Bhatta family. Madan Bhatta serves as the head priest. According to Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, his ancestor, Vidhyakara Bhatta, his wife Vishalakshmi Devi and their son Rajanik Bhatta, who donated the Shiva Linga *kosh* together with other items, were descendants of Lambakarna Bhatta, *Raj Guru* (royal priest). He

Fig. 6 Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu. Photo: Deepak Tolange, 2024

was invited to the royal court by Pratap Malla, the ninth king of the Malla dynasty.[10] In a family lineage chart compiled by Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta that traces ancestry back to Lambarkarna Bhatta, both Vidhyakara and his son Rajanik are recorded, anchoring the family's presence in Nepalese history.

The differences in metal work and carving, the lack of gilding on two figures and the inscription with a name and date, 'Sundar Prasad Shah B. 2037' on two faces Aghor, Sadyojata, and wrist suggest that these parts were replaced and repaired after a theft and recovery of the *kosh* in 1980 CE, possibly with generous support from Sundar Prasad Shah.[11] Local accounts from Shyam Thapa, priest Kamala Shrestha and priest Madan Bhatta confirm the theft and return of the *kosh* to the Gyaneshwor temple. They further state that the *kosh* was never returned after it was stolen for the second time, in the 1980s. After decades of the loss of the original *kosh*, a silver *kosh* has been

10 The Malla dynasty ruled Kathmandu Valley approximately from 1200 to 1769 CE. Pratap Malla was one of the prominent rulers who reigned in Kantipur (Kathmandu) from 1641 to 1674 CE.

11 Sundar Prasad Shah (1933–2015) was the son of Rajendra Prasad Shah, who was a resident of the Gyaneshwor area. Sundar Prasad served in various capacities in important positions, including Chief Election Commissioner, Secretary at the Ministry of Information and Communications, and the Home Ministry. Conversation with Sanjiv Shah (son of Sundar Prasad Shah) in Kathmandu on July 29, 2024.

offered to the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple. Its base has approximately the same circumference as the copper-gilded *chaturmukha kosh* housed in Berlin.

Based on the inscription on the Shiva Linga *kosh* and conversations with Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta and his lineage records, as well as insights from priest Madan Bhatta and residents of the Gyaneshwor area, it is suggested that the Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877) originally belonged to the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu.

From Records to Relations: Archival Memories of International Relations and Museum Practices

In the course of the team's journey examining the museum archives, further insights into the Museum für Indische Kunst's earlier relations with Nepal became apparent. In the following, two examples are considered.

First, the archival files of the former Museum für Indische Kunst indicate that, since the late 1980s, efforts had been made in collaboration with various institutions and museums in Berlin and Kathmandu to organize a joint exhibition project at both locations under the working title 'Treasures from Nepal'.[12] This cooperative exhibition was initially envisioned for 1993 and not realized. However, correspondence with Nepalese cultural institutions and stakeholders indicates former relationships, with processes of defining mutual interests and common museum practices regarding the representation of sacred and cultural belongings and artefacts. Against this background, the team at the Museum für Indische Kunst intensively analysed the art, artefacts and cultural belongings housed by the institution. The team also researched known and published collections with references to Nepal and the Himalayas in both public and private collections in order to sharpen the ideas on representation. This raises the question of what interest and motivation there were for purchasing cultural belongings from the Himalaya region such as the Shiva Linga *kosh*.

Second, the restitution of a limestone relief of Uma Maheshwor (MIK I 5942) from the Museum für Indische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz to Nepal in 2000 proved to be relevant to the collaboration. This case, also described as 'the first ever bilaterally negotiated restitution case in which a public institution returned a stolen object to Nepal' (Hausler and Selter 2025:47; also Selter 2022:121), provides a deeper insight not only into German–Nepalese relations and co-operation at the institutional level, but also into museum practices, as well as restitution frameworks and ongoing debates on returning cultural heritage to the respective

12 'Schätze aus Nepal', see SMB-ZA, II/VA 14771; SMB-ZA, II/VA 14772; SMB-ZA, II/VA 14773. The project was not realized for various reasons, including structural and personnel changes and unsecured financial resources.

Fig. 7 Sophia Bokop and Deepak Tolange researching in the archival files of the former Museum für Indische Kunst in Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz on November 14, 2024. Film still: 'Shiva Linga: A Visual Quest' by Deepak Tolange, 2024

communities.[13] The rapid support and approval of the return of the limestone relief following its identification as stolen highlights the impact of early initiatives to seek out and document Nepal's cultural heritage. The connection between the increasing disappearance of art and cultural assets and an established international art trade is becoming salient, encouraging critical reflections on the role of (Euro-Atlantic) museums.[14]

These selected examples have shown what gaps, open questions and further impulses arise from archival research on the provenance of the Shiva Linga *kosh*. While archival research has shed light on the history of the *kosh* at the museum in Berlin, as well as on the relations between the former Museum für Indische Kunst and Nepalese

13 A more in-depth analysis of the return of the relief and its subsequent whereabouts, as well as the current discourse in Nepal dealing with absent and/or returned cultural property, is provided by Elke Selter and her current (field) research (see Selter 2022; Hausler and Selter 2025).

14 See, for instance, the following newspaper articles from August 2000: Berliner Mitteilungen (2000-08-10, Sebastian Pfotenhauer), Berliner Zeitung (2000-08-11, Ingeborg Ruthe), Die Welt (2000-08-11, Corinna Daniels), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2000-08-10, U.C.), Frankfurter Allgemeine (2000-08-11, C.B.), Herald International Tribune (2000-08-12/13, Camilla Blechen), Nepali Times (2000-08-16/22, Sujata Tuladhar), Süddeutsche Zeitung (2000-08-10, Andrea Exler), Tagesspiegel (2000-08-09, Peter Herbstreuth), The Kathmandu Post (2000-08-12); see also Spice 2000.

institutes, no further knowledge regarding the circumstances surrounding its removal from its context of origin or its acquisition have been found to date.

Absence and Loss: Nepal's Missing of Cultural Heritage

Following the opening of Nepal's borders, the Kathmandu Valley's heritage sites especially attracted European and North American travellers and tourists. The Himalayan region quickly became 'the focus of Western projections of otherness, orientalism, and counter culturalism' (Smith and Thompson 2023:22). Around the same time Tibetan refugees were settling in the region,[15] many of whom brought cultural artefacts with them, which they were ultimately compelled to sell for sustenance. As a result, Kathmandu Valley evolved into 'a regional hotspot for trade in cultural objects during the 1960s' (Smith and Thompson 2023:22). The 1970s and 1980s are often declared to be a significant peak regarding the 'outpour[ing] of Nepali cultural objects to satisfy market demand' (Smith 2022:266). 'Western awareness of the country as a site of mountaineering and "hippie trail" counter-culture lifestyle' and the 'spread of interest in the West in Eastern "spirituality", culture and aesthetics' (Sijapati and Thompson 2024:80) are identified among the factors shaping this phenomenon.

Since 1956, the 'Ancient Monuments Protection Act' has governed the protection of ancient monuments, site excavations and cultural heritage in Nepal.[16] In 1970, UNESCO finalized the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which was ratified in Nepal in 1976.[17] Although the date of 1970 is not considered legally binding on institutions, associations or organizations, it often marks 'a proxy for legality' (Gerstenblith 2013:365), resulting in, for example, museum policies on the acquisition of looted antiquities and cultural heritage.[18] Since then, the question of the provenance of cultural belongings, artefacts and sacred objects offered for sale and the corresponding

15 In the 1950s, Tibetan refugees fleeing the persecution during the annexation and the subsequent suppression of its cultural heritage by the People's Republic of China arrived in Kathmandu (see, e.g., Smith 2022:265).

16 See the Ancient Monuments Protection Act, 1956, available https://www.unesco.org/en/cultnat-laws/ancient-monuments-protection-act-consolidated-text, accessed October 23, 2025.

17 According to Gerstenblith (2013), the 1970 Convention 'was created in response to the escalating looting of archeological sites and the dismemberment of historical structures to provide objects for sale on the international art market'; it also 'creates a framework for the regulation of the trade in cultural objects by calling on nations to establish a licensing system for the export of cultural objects' (Gerstenblith 2013:364). The 1970 Convention, online available via https://www.unesco.org/en/node/66148?hub=416, accessed October 23, 2025, was ratified by Germany in November 2007.

18 For instance, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted in 1970 the 'Ethics of Acquisition' and later the ICOM Code of Ethics beginning in 1986 (see e.g. Gerstenblith 2013:366).

documentation is increasingly characterizing museum collection practices. The case of Uma Maheshwor mentioned above, which was returned to Nepal in 2000, shows the extent to which there is still a need to raise awareness among collecting institutions as participants in an international art market and to continue critically examining the provenances and histories of collections.

In fact, the systematic documentation of Nepal's cultural artefacts, especially those from the Kathmandu Valley, has largely been undertaken by individuals rather than institutions. Two landmark publications, *Stolen Images of Nepal* by Lain Singh Bangdel and *The Gods Are Leaving the Country* by German author Jürgen Schick, serve as the primary references in this regard.[19] Schick estimates that nearly 50 to 60 percent of the Valley's sacred artefacts have been looted, with many of these losses recorded in their works.

However, conspicuously absent from both registries is any mention of a missing copper-gilded *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* in the mid-1980s from the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu.

Among the younger generation in Gyaneshwor, there is little to no awareness of the artefact's disappearance. A few older residents vaguely recall the *kosh* being stolen, later recovered, and then stolen again. Unfortunately, those elders who may have had clearer memories of the events have since passed away. Madan Bhatta, the temple's head priest, remembers the artefact only faintly and is unsure whether a formal complaint was ever filed.

Mrs. Sarita Subedi, officer at the Department of Archaeology, reviewed over 400 complaint records, yet found no mention of the Gyaneshwor case. This lack of institutional memory is not surprising: for decades, the documentation of stolen heritage from Nepal has depended almost entirely on the efforts of Bangdel and Schick. If an object was not recorded in their books, it often went unnoticed and left unaccounted for. Subedi reports that a total of 198 objects have so far been repatriated to Nepal from other countries. Most are housed in the National Museum in Kathmandu, some in the Patan Museum, and a few have been returned to their respective communities (conversation with Sarita Subedi, 2025).

For Subedi, one crucial piece of evidence remains: an inscription found on the *kosh* itself (I 4877). Inscriptions are rare among such sacred artefacts, and many pieces, like the similar copper-gilded *chaturmukha* Shiva Linga *kosh* at the National Museum, bear none. Stone reliefs, too, seldom contain identifying inscriptions. The National Archives of Nepal hold no information on the loss of the Gyaneshwor Shiva Linga *kosh*.

Regarding the Shiva Linga *kosh* in Berlin, no written record has been found to indicate its removal from its original context apart from the inscription on the *kosh* itself.

19 Nepalese scholar Laing Singh Bangdel and German lawyer Jürgen Schick both started photographing statues of deities and evidence of their theft independently of each other because '[t]he outpour [sic] of Nepali cultural objects to satisfy market demand became so alarming in the 1970s and 1980s' (Smith 2022:266).

This raises a genuine question: what will happen to the *kosh* after this research? In such an ambiguous and complex situation, former Director Lars-Christian Koch [until the end of 2025]" emphasised the importance of collaboration in identifying gaps, thus making it transparent so that everyone understands the reality. He explained further that once the results are available, the museum will contact the authorities in Nepal. If it is proved that an object was traded illegally according to international legal frameworks, the item will be returned to its country of origin following legal procedures (conversation with Lars-Christian Koch, 2024).

The absence of official documentation and institutional knowledge underscores a broader issue: the fragility of Nepal's cultural memory and the urgent need to record comprehensive heritage beyond individual efforts. In cases like Gyaneshwor, the traces of lost artefacts now survive only in the oral memory – and those, too, are fading.

Polyphonic Perspectives: Concluding the Shared Experiences and Envisioning Future Paths

Tracing the Shiva Linga *kosh* (I 4877) through collaborative and transdisciplinary approaches makes it possible to re-connect a sacred artefact of Shiva as one of the principal deities in Hinduism. The Shiva Linga represents both tangible and intangible forms of Shiva, while the Shiva Linga *kosh* is a metal covering placed over the upper part of the Linga, which, after specific rituals, becomes an integral part of the deity himself. Within its original context, this sacred artefact holds deep spiritual and religious significance, yet in public or private collections, it is often reduced to a mere *objet d'art*.

Through a detailed look at the Shiva Linga *kosh* in its unique form and an in-depth examination of its inscriptions, its connections to specific individuals, temples and their histories became visible. Moreover, selected examples from archival and qualitative research revealed multiple insights and narratives, offering new understandings of museum practices and institutional and international relations, then and now. These findings also resonate with Nepal's ongoing struggle against the loss and looting of its living cultural heritage, as well as current debates surrounding repatriation and restitution frameworks and the rightful belonging of the Shiva Linga *kosh* in Berlin, among others. By acknowledging diverse frameworks of knowledge and interweaving research questions with findings, this layered process has opened up new pathways of understanding, creating a space in which to contest established interpretations and to weave multi-vocal stories around cultural belongings and their complex, entangled lives.

The researchers encountered several challenges throughout this process. Embedded within structural and institutional frameworks, conversation and knowledge-sharing unfolded in digital spaces and physical encounters in Berlin, supported by online tools or audiovisual media. Both researchers navigated multiple roles, responsibilities and

Fig. 8 Anna Szöke, Sophia Bokop, and Deepak Tolange in public conversation at the Mechanical Arena in the Humboldt Forum on December 11, 2024. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Pierre Adenis, 2024

institutional expectations. In particular, the role of the filmmaker was challenged by the idea of developing a film during an ongoing research process, causing the ongoing reworking of the documentary storyline. Some answers are still being sought and are awaited.

To conclude, the project highlights the relevance of reimagining and reshaping museum practices by moving beyond the mere collection and preservation of static objects towards an active dialogue with living traditions and cultural continuities. Through cooperative, international research and the interweaving of diverse findings and perspectives, new knowledge emerges, gradually filling the gaps in provenance histories and illuminating the trajectories of sacred cultural artefacts. Such collaborative approaches foster mutual understanding of the future of collections and the shared responsibilities for bringing their stories to light. This holds out the promise of deepening awareness of past and future museum practices, of the continuing loss of Nepal's cultural heritage, and of the profound strength in collaborative practices and processes in seeking answers and new pathways.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Dr. Lilla Russell-Smith, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, and Henriette Lavaulx-Vrécourt, Ethnologisches Museum. Our sincere thanks go to the Ethnologisches Museum, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, as well as the joint initiative 'the Collaborative Museum'. We are grateful for the wonderful collaboration and support within the museums' teams mentioning by proxy here Tina Brüderlin, Raffael Dedo Gadebusch, Prof. Lars-Christian Koch, Anna Szöke, Ruti Ungar, Prof. Alexis von Poser, Constanze Wicke and Katharina Wischer. We cordially thank Zentralarchiv of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and Stiftung Humboldt Forum. In Nepal, we are thankful to the Department of Archaeology, the Patan Museum, the National Museum, and the National Art Museum. We would also like to acknowledge Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels, Dr. Rajan Khatiwoda, Dr. Manik Bajracharya, Prof. Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sandhya Khanal Parajuli, Prof. Dr. Ram Chandra Poudel, Mrs. Sarita Subedi, and Dr. Rohit K Ranjitkar, Christoph Siegel and Jiten Kapali. We are grateful to priests Madan Bhatta, Kamala Shrestha, Rajan Tiwari, and Shiva Jangam. Our sincere thanks go to the residents of the Gyaneshwor area: Shyam Thapa, Ashok Thapa, and Sanjiv Shah. Last but not least, we would like to express our gratitude to all the individuals and institutions who have contributed to this research project in one way or another, whether directly or indirectly. This includes those who have supported the project and its communication through various formats, such as the film, podcast, exhibition and this article. We take full responsibility for this contribution and welcome constructive feedback or corrections from readers.

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*Conversations and Field Notes**

Conversation with Prof. Dr. Ram Chandra Poudel at Kathmandu University, on December 5, 2022.

Conversation with Shiva Jangam, priest at the Indreshwor Mahadev Temple in Panauti on September 11, 2024.

Conversation with Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels, Dr. Manik Bajracharya, and Dr. Rajan Khatiwoda in Lalitpur on March 25, 2024.

Conversation with Prof. Vidhyanath Upadhyay Bhatta in Kathmandu in 2024 and 2025.

Conversation with Associate Prof. Dr. Sandhya Khanal Parajuli at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu on May 6, 2025.

Conversation with Mrs. Sarita Subedi, Officer at Department of Archeology (DoA) in Kathmandu on April 8, 2025, and May 6, 2025.

Conversation with Madan Bhatta, priest at the Gyaneshwor Mahadev Temple in Kathmandu on August 16, 2024.

Conversation with Prof. Dr. Lars-Christian Koch, Director of Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst - Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz on December 13, 2024

Conversation with Sanjiv Shah (son of Sundar Prasad Shah) in Kathmandu on July 29, 2024.

Conversation with Kamala Shrestha, priest at Ananda Bhairav in Gyaneshwor, Kathmandu on September 16, 2024.

Conversation with Shyam Thapa (Magar) and Ashok Thapa, locals in Gyaneshwor Kathmandu, on September 16, 2024.

*Not all conversations are directly quoted within the text. The authors acknowledge the respective contributions as significant for the project.

Material Culture, Loss and Resilience: Findings in the Uyghur Diaspora

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Abstract: Based on the Uyghur collection from the late 19th century that is housed within the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, the project asks what objects, both those held at the museum and contemporary objects, mean for Uyghurs living in the diaspora today. The research focused on Uyghur traders, makers and consumers of Uyghur objects in Istanbul and Kazakhstan. It revealed different ways of coping with biographical ruptures and the loss and (re-)forming of Uyghur identity in the diaspora. For this purpose, the concepts of nostalgia and resilience are discussed, especially in the context of working with museum collections and exhibitions.
[Material culture, diaspora, Uyghur, resilience, nostalgia, collaborative exhibiting]

Background

The Ethnologisches Museum Berlin houses a collection of more than a thousand objects from Xinjiang province, China. Around 900 of them were acquired before 1914 and can be dated back to the mid-late 19th century when the region was mostly known as 'East Turkestan'. In the current exhibition in the Humboldt Forum, the region is included within the section on 'Material Culture, Identity and Statehood in Central Asia'. This exhibition takes the collections from Central Asia, most of which came to the museum between 1880 and 1914, as a starting point to examine the role crafts and motifs played in the constitution of national identities during the 20th century and the early 21st century. The Uyghur part differs from the rest of the exhibition as it also deals with an emerging national consciousness in the second part of the 20th century and especially the first decades of the 21st century. In this case this did not lead to an independent state, as in West Turkestan, but to the increasing repression of Uyghur culture within Xinjiang and, connected with this oppression, a growing Uyghur diaspora worldwide.

The first object to be displayed that represented Uyghur culture was the so-called Yarkand Carpet with a pomegranate vase pattern, which is strongly connected to East Turkestan's colonial history. Made in the 18th century, the carpet was part of the house-

 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8864

hold of a senior Chinese official who resided in Yarkand[1] until 1927. The carpet was acquired by the diplomat and collector Hans Bidder from a trader in Beijing in 1948. Even though Bidder claimed that the carpets of East Turkestan should be regarded separately from Chinese and West Turkestan traditions and took the Yarkand Carpet as an example of this (Bidder 1964:49–53), when it was acquired by the museum, it was registered within the East Asian department and entered the permanent exhibition in Dahlem as part of a diorama-like installation of a 'Chinese house', bringing together various objects collected in China and dating from roughly the same time period without further explanation. While (the few) Uyghur visitors coming to Dahlem complained about the presentation of the carpet in this environment, the presentation of an 18th-century masterpiece in the Central Asian exhibition in the Humboldt Forum was generally seen positively, despite the obvious colonial context in which it was acquired.

Nevertheless, for conservation reasons the carpet had to be replaced by other objects after some time, though there was no adequate replacement available from the museum collections. Therefore, the idea of this project was to place the material culture of the contemporary Uyghur diaspora in focus, addressing the fact that questions about being Uyghur outside Xinjiang have become more and more important for Uyghur identity.

Fieldwork and its Challenges

The project included two field trips, one to Istanbul (in February 2024) and one to Kazakhstan (Jarkand[2]/Uyghur district and Almaty in November 2024), planned and carried out by a team consisting of the author and the Uyghur Turkologist Dr Ablet Semet. The focus of both trips was interviews and focus-group discussions with artisans, dealers in and buyers of Uygur crafts. One central question was what the people themselves would select to present contemporary Uyghur identity and why. This opened up a conversation about Uyghur culture in general and specifically about material culture, what it used to be, and what its creators expect from the future, both of their own and Uyghur culture.

The two communities were selected as they represent different groups within the Uyghur diaspora. The Uyghurs in Kazakhstan are the biggest group of Uyghurs outside Xinjiang. Most of them have been living for generations in the border region to China or in Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan and the cosmopolitan centre of

1 Bidder uses the term 'former governor general of East Turkestan' for the Chinese official he acquired the carpet from, but given the unstable political situation in Xinjiang in the 1920s, even if there was still a Qing official with the title of 'governor general' in Yarkand, the picture it evokes of a colonial ruler collecting art in a peaceful setting is highly unlikely (Bidder 1965).

2 Not to be confused with Yarkand, the presumable city of origin of the Yarkand carpet, which is in China.

Central Asia.[3] Despite the fact that the border between China and the Soviet Union was officially closed from the 1960s to the 1980s, many Uyghurs in Kazakhstan have a family history of living on both sides of the border and mention hardly any problems when crossing borders. It was so normal that I only met one person, a woman in her late 60s, who claimed to have never had the time or money to go to Xinjiang. Everyone I told this to assumed that the woman might be lying because she wanted to hide some suspicious business or special connections to the Chinese authorities, as it seemed more likely she was involved in something illicit than not having family to visit on the other side of the border.

Regardless of these strong contacts with the 'big homeland' – as Kazakh Uyghurs often refer to Xinjiang, in contrast to the 'small homeland' of Kazakhstan – Xinjiang does not have the significance for them it had for the Uyghurs we met in Istanbul, where all our interview partners had left Xinjiang after 2016 as a direct response to the crackdown on Uyghur businessmen, artists and intellectuals.[4]

Working in Istanbul was especially difficult as the mistrust towards foreigners among Uyghurs was extremely high. Interviews and visits to shops and workshops were only possible where Dr Semet had been in contact with the owner before and had gained trust through mutual long-term contacts. The planned focus-group discussions were also cancelled because of the mistrust within the community, while in this case economic mistrust among traders about their supply chains probably played a role. Even with these precautions, we were informed on the fourth day of our stay that there were rumours in the Uyghur community about foreigners asking questions, and already planned visits at workshops were being called off.

Compared with Istanbul, the situation in Kazakhstan was much more relaxed. One reason was probably that China's state-sponsored repression seemed to have lifted a bit in the second half of 2024, and the border was open again. Moreover, Kazakh Uyghurs generally felt safer in their 'little homeland' than the Istanbul community, who often had not yet received Turkish citizenship and still had close family members like parents, siblings or children living in China.

Nevertheless, the experience in Istanbul made us cautious, so most of our interviewees in Kazakhstan still came through personal friendships Dr Semet had created over past decades. What was a good decision in terms of creating a safe environment for open conversations also led to a predominance of middle-aged and elderly men

3 The Kazakh Census from 2024 gives a figure of 121,063 Uyghurs in Almaty and 41,460 in Panfilov district (often called 'Uyghur district', even though Kazakhs are not the majority with 86.188) near the Chinese Border. Quoted after: http://pop-stat.mashke.org/kazakhstan-ethnic2024.htm, accessed October 16, 2025. based on: Qazstat 2024: Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by selected ethnic groups.

4 The number of Uyghurs living in Turkey is hard to determine, as it constantly changes. There has been a Uyghur community in Istanbul since at least the 19th century. The Uyghur Human Rights Project mentions 50,000 in 2023. https://uhrp.org/report/diaspora/, accessed March 17, 2025.

speaking for the Uyghur community. Women and younger people in general were under-represented in this setting. The imbalance will hopefully be at least partially levelled out through the inclusion of a younger female artist who will be contracted to develop exhibition designs based on the leading questions of the project from the collected material.

From the beginning, the plan was that the exhibition would connect objects from the museum collections and contemporary objects collected during fieldwork, as well as objects collected by Dr Semet in Xinjiang before 2017. With the decision to complement objects from his private collection with stories about what they meant for him into the exhibition, Dr Semet officially entered into the double role of researcher and resource person.

The Role of Material Culture in the Uyghur Diaspora: Fieldwork Findings

In Istanbul, interviews were conducted with shopkeepers, mainly one specializing in silk, and two with a portfolio of numerous 'Uyghur products' which consisted mostly of dresses and *doppa* (Uyghur hats), but also carpets, musical instruments and souvenirs playing with patterns and forms associated with Uyghur material culture. This included miniature *doppa* as earrings or car décor, atlas patterns on mobile phone cases, and one workshop run by Uyghur women specializing mostly in colourful cushions and blankets for export to Europe and the USA. As we spent several hours in each shop, the interviews were interrupted as well as complemented by conversations with customers and incoming traders. For this group, our approach of asking about the things they sell, buy, or make and what these objects mean for them worked well, as Uyghur material culture provided an important connection to their widespread community and their homeland, both emotionally and practically. Through their trade, the sellers and artisans build and maintain multiple networks within the Uyghur diaspora worldwide, including back in China. Even in the most difficult times in Xinjiang, it was possible for Uyghur craft traders to buy silk from eastern China, where the silk always used to be better than in Xinjiang, as one trader emphasized. As all of them also design their own products, they gain recognition within their community through their designs, as well as making a living from selling them, and therefore have a strong interest in keeping Uyghur material culture and traditions alive. If this means adapting and modernizing traditional crafts, they do not see a problem with that. When it comes to clothes or silk, they all have a product line for 'our people', meaning Uyghurs, but also including a wider Central Asian market, mostly in Uzbekistan, and a 'European' line intended for the Turkish and tourist market in Istanbul. The 'for us' line usually has brighter colours and bolder

colour combinations in the *abr* printing[5] than the 'European' one, which in general combines no more than three colours. 'For us' can also mean the combination of traditional patterns and modern designs: baseball caps or mobile-phone cases with *abr* printing, embroidery on T-Shirts or earrings in the form of the traditional Uyghur hat, the *doppa*. These designs are often made by traders in response to customers' wishes and sold internationally among Uyghur traders: 'People will not wear a *doppa* in Istanbul, even less in Europe. But they don't want to give up the *doppa* completely. That's why we have earrings and hairbands and other souvenirs with *doppa*. Same with *abr*. Not for clothes anymore, but for mobile phones,' as one interview partner explained, describing the new products and their importance. For the feeling of connection in a shared identity, it is not necessary to wear a *doppa* in public, especially if this opens one up to harassment. It is enough to show your Uyghur identity through a mobile-phone case or a *doppa* hanging from your car's rear-view mirror.

In Istanbul as in Kazakhstan, the 'traditional' colourful dresses with gold lace and sequins came mostly from Chinese factories and were sold (or sometimes rented out) to Uyghurs for events like circumcisions, birthday parties and weddings, or for cultural performances which play an important role in keeping the Uyghur community together, whether by children's dances in cultural centres, or as part of craft fairs and festivals. These events were recorded and shared in social media, and posts like this are often found in Instagram feeds of craftspeople and traders, strengthening the connection and the importance of their goods within the community.

In Kazakhstan, the group of interview partners was much wider than in Istanbul. Besides traders and artisans, it also contained local Uyghur politicians, researchers and artists. It might be partly because of this that our interview partners were genuinely astonished by our questions. More than once we heard that we were the first ones to ask for handicrafts and craftsmen: 'Everyone wants to talk about our identity, about our problems, but nobody ever asked about our belongings' was a common comment, even from artisans and traders. Material culture did not seem to play the crucial role it did for the Uyghurs in Istanbul. Even for craftspeople like the carpenters' family we met in the Uyghur district who trace their business back at least four generations and have been connected with the famous wooden Uyghur mosque and Yarkand for more than a hundred years, other aspects of Uyghur identity seemed more important than the carvings they make. Being connected with the Ili region on the other side of the border, speaking Uyghur or being one of the imams of the Uyghur mosque in Yarkand seemed to be equally or even more important in order to distinguish them from their Kazakh neighbours.

It became even more obvious in other interviews that the loss of knowledge about belongings and how they were produced is not considered to be connected with the

5 *Abr*, in Western literature often known as *Ikat*, is originally a weaving technique producing colourful silk cloth for male and female fashion. Today *abr* patterns are mostly printed on silk, but also on cotton or synthetic fabrics.

loss of identity as much as the loss of language is. This can be linked to the fact that, for the Kazakh population, especially in Almaty, Kazakh material culture and crafts are also of less importance: in general, traditional crafts, their patterns and their techniques did not experience a revival in the economy or the national consciousness as in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, the feeling of being a neglected minority and secondary to Kazakhs is less when it comes to material culture than when it comes to questions of language, schools and media. Seeing the Kazakh language being on the rise and schools teaching in Uyghur under pressure is considered a great threat to cultural identity, but having the same interiors and everyday clothing as one's Kazakh neighbours does not involve the same feeling of loss and forced assimilation. Interestingly, the one person who was most concerned with the vanishing of Uyghur crafts was an art teacher in a local primary school in the Uyghur district, who told us he is not allowed to teach 'Uyghur crafts' in his Uyghur school anymore, but only neutral objects with Kazakh patterns.

Dealing with Loss: Nostalgia and Resilience

The overwhelming topic of all interviews was the experience of loss. All our interview partners in Istanbul had lost family members and close friends over the last ten years through detention and death in Xinjiang. Many still worry about close ones from whom they have not heard in some years. They had lost places they called home and belongings, and those who had left Xinjiang for Europe or the USA earlier than 2016 lost the feeling of a home they could go back to. This experience usually came up in the first minutes of the conversation. For them, material culture was not lost, but on the contrary was one of the few things that was still there and part of their lives, though maybe in a new form.

In the interviews with Kazakh Uyghurs, the loss of close ones in Xinjiang was not as prominent as it was for the community in Istanbul and Europe or the USA, which was remarkable, as they nearly all claimed to have family on the other side of the border. Their feeling of loss was twofold: the more abstract loss of the 'big homeland' and its great history, and the personal loss of their Soviet homeland with the political security it provided for minorities. The time remembered by the interview partners were not the difficult period of the early decades of the Soviet Union, when Uyghur families fled to China to avoid hunger and oppression (Hess 2019:43–48), but rather the later years when Uyghur schools, media and theatres existed.

To describe the approach of the Uyghurs we met towards material culture and Uyghur identity, the concepts of 'nostalgia' and 'resilience' are helpful, as both concepts describe ways of dealing with loss on an individual as well as a community level.

Nostalgia, in its original meaning of a painful longing to go back home, is what all our interview partners deal with. For a long time, nostalgia was regarded negatively

as a psychological condition that distracts people from reality and prevents them from creating the future (Novack 2017:3). Today there is an acceptance that nostalgia is not just a matter of looking back to the past: it can also make claims for the future (on former Soviet citizens Boym 2001; on Trump voters, Novack 2017). When an elderly professor in Kazakhstan fondly remembers the time when the state-owned carpet factory in Almaty had its own department producing Uyghur carpets and demands that the current Kazakh state should do the same, and taking China's funding of carpet factories in Kashgar as a positive example, he is not just looking back but also formulating his vision of a future, even if this vision is strongly influenced by apparently idealized concepts of the past.

But this example also shows that creating visions out of nostalgia is only possible for an individual living on a certain level of political and economic security. If the demands for more support for Uyghur culture are not heard by the Kazakh state, and no other ways of preservation are to be found, certain aspects of Uyghur culture might vanish, but the immediate existence of the people will not be in danger. For the Uyghurs traders in Istanbul, making claims based only on nostalgia is hardly an option. Refusing to adapt to new patterns and styles in order to keep an imagined homeland alive would put them out of the businesses with which they sustain their families in a foreign and not always friendly country. So, to describe their approach to material culture, memory and the lost past, the concept of resilience fits better than nostalgia, even though they can be linked. For resilience, I use the definition Magis gives in her article on community resilience as 'development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise' (Magis 2010:410).

The fact that questions of how to 'stay Uyghur' in a rapidly changing world were also controversial among the Uyghur project partners and were widely discussed led to two designs for presentations by the Uyghur artist Mukaddas Mijit focusing on contemporary designs and developments while taking the importance of 19th-century objects for Uyghurs today into account. In this context, the private collection of Ablet Semet – collected mainly in the early 2000s, but with few exceptions explicitly focusing on 'traditional', 'real' objects – became important as the bridge between the museum collection and contemporary designs. The collection is nostalgic, as it shows the attempt to preserve the last 'museum-like' objects from Xinjiang, but it also became a source of resilience, first for the collector who deals with his own loss by saving what can be saved, and second as an inspiration for contemporary (museum) design.

Fig. 1 Project display in Humboldt Forum: T-Shirts made by contemporary Uyghur designers in the US installed on a traditional blanket collected by Ablet Semet in Qomul, 2013, brought together by Mukaddas Mijit.
Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Melanie Krebs

Conclusion

Collections like the East Turkestan collection of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin have the power to evoke nostalgia, as they mainly consist of exceptionally beautiful textile objects, demonstrating the high skills of craftspeople in the late 19th century. For many people from Central Asia today – not only Uyghurs – a museum is a place for nostalgia, a place where they find 'the homeland' as it exists in their imagination rather than in their memories, an imagination that was in many cases already at least partly built on (museum) collections and books more than their own memories. There is also the belief that a museum as an academic institution is and should present a univocal truth instead of many-voiced narratives. The idea that museum collections and collecting can do more than simply preserve a time in history, and that exhibitions can be more than a re-staging of this time, was as new to our interview partners as it was to many researchers and museum practitioners even a decade ago and still is. Coming from this background, for some interview partners the idea of replacing the Yarkand Carpet with contemporary Uyghur crafts was irritating at first, and not only because they consider contemporary crafts mediocre: at a time when the ongoing destruction of

the Uyghur heritage in China is being met with silence in Europe, and when Uyghur culture was considered important enough to be brought to Europe, the exhibition of these objects is being met with pride and the hope that there is still a part of Uyghur history that is being preserved.

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Shifting Focus: Collaborative Approaches in the Kribi Archives Project

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Abstract: The Kribi Archives project is a collaborative project aimed at revitalizing a neglected local archive in Kribi, Cameroon, and transforming it into a sustainable, community-driven space for historical engagement, research and artistic exchange. Rather than presenting a theoretical framework, this article offers a reflection on the project's early stages and its collaborative approach. We try to unwrap the multiple layers which connect the coastal town of Kribi and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, and we question how these entanglements shape our work. We approach the archive not merely as a repository of knowledge or a tool for preservation, but also as a catalyst for dialogue, creativity and inclusive knowledge production.
[collaboration, archive, practise, reflection]

The Kribi Archives project is still in its early phase. As we move forward, we would like to take this opportunity to reflect on some of our experiences so far and to share our thoughts on archives, collaboration and the principles that guide our work. Rather than presenting a theoretical framework, this text is mainly informed by our practical work. We aim to reflect honestly on both the opportunities and the challenges and frustrations that come with collaborative work. We also seek to situate our efforts within the connected histories of Kribi and Berlin, as well as within the history, present and future of the archive we are working with. In July 2023, artist Elsa M'Bala contacted the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin with an idea. She had recently been appointed director of a small archive in Kribi, a coastal town in Cameroon's South region. At that point a single room with knee-high stacks of documents lining all four walls and a window overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, the archive belongs to the Ministère du Tourisme et des Loisirs, which is located next door. Yet, despite its institutional affiliation, the archive had been left untouched for years, and no one could recall what it contained. Kribi's history is marked by colonial legacies, yet there have been few opportunities for local engagement with this past. The archive, Elsa believed, had the potential to become a productive and enduring resource for the community. Having previously lived in Kribi with her daughter, she envisioned a space where residents could explore region-

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al history, arts and culture. This initiative is also part of a broader effort to decentralize cultural activities, as museums, archives, libraries and concert halls in Cameroon are largely concentrated in the capital, Yaoundé, and the largest city, Douala. However, similar initiatives in the area had previously failed due to short-term investments that lacked sustainable funding. The archive's connection to the Ministry provides it with a degree of security, and with promising collaborations already in motion – beginning with the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, and followed by a collaboration with the Museum der Kulturen Basel – the project already has a strong foundation.

The project's first major goal is to digitize the archive and make its contents accessible. Institutional support comes from regional Délégué Gabriel Barka and national Minister of Arts and Culture Bidoung Mkpatt, along with collaborations with the Musée National and the Archives Nationales. The digital materials generated will be shared with these institutions and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. Additionally, Kribi Archives will serve as a centre for information on material cultural belongings, as well as music and photographs from the region that are currently held in Berlin. We hope to grow this repertoire continuously with every new collaboration.

As part of this initiative, the team, in collaboration with the Ministère du Tourisme et des Loisirs, is also producing a booklet about Kribi, shedding light on the region's history and its connection to German colonialism in particular. This too is an effort to enhance access to historical resources. In the long term, the space will host events and small exhibitions, while also serving as a versatile hub for various projects, particularly those focused on research and the arts.

Elsa has been the archive's director since 2022. As a sound artist, she has developed projects in Germany, Canada, Jamaica and elsewhere. Since 2021, she has worked on multiple initiatives with the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, including a collaboration with the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv on historical and contemporary sound recordings from Cameroon, which will soon be accessible at the Kribi Archive too.

The team also includes Maria Ellendorff, who is deputy curator of West and Southern African 'collections' at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, with a focus on partnerships with Cameroonian researchers, artists and policy-makers.

Joining more recently is Augustine Moukodi, a video artist from Douala, who accompanied us during our first project phase in Kribi, supported our endeavour in her calm and experienced way and introduced us to several political and other stakeholders. She is also involved in the CoMuse Project Mwano, which explores Cameroonian photographs in the Ethnologisches Museum's archives. Together, the team is planning a pop-up presentation of her research at the Kribi Archives in the near future.

Reassessing the Archive: Reflections on the First Visit

Colonial archives served as instruments of governance, designed for control rather than providing access. They functioned as bureaucratic tools to impose colonial rule, shaping how knowledge was collected, classified and withheld (Basu and de Jong 2016:5). Before our recent visit to the Kribi archive, we could not yet tell how old this particular archive was, nor could the Délégué in charge. Although many colonial archives were neglected upon independence by the newly formed nation states that succeeded colonial regimes and might still be widely untouched to this day (Basu and de Jong 2016), we doubted whether this particular one could be an archive from the German or French colonial period. Given the high temperatures, humidity and lack of ventilation or air-conditioning, we could not have imagined documents surviving this long. Based on the random samples we examined during our visit, we now estimate that the archive is not more than some forty years old. It therefore offers a glimpse into the region's more recent past, especially the vision of Kribi as a tourist destination with hotels (some of them very luxurious) and all sorts of leisure activities. Neglect appears to have set in only about fifteen years ago, perhaps coinciding with the rise of digitization. Yet no one had ever discarded the old documents since then. Though officials must have come and gone, the documents remained untouched, suggesting that they had a certain significance beyond their immediate utility. Their presence speaks to a recognition of their value, one that even outweighed the chance of repurposing what is arguably the best room in the building for office space.

Archives such as the one in Kribi are repositories of the past, whether long gone or relatively recent. They contain traces of specific places and past times, but they also inspire new questions, as they are necessarily incomplete, evolving and open to new readings (Hall 2001). However, to activate their imaginative and aspirational potential, they need to be accessible. By revitalizing the Kribi archive, we hope to create an accessible, community-driven resource that fosters dialogue, creativity and new ways of engaging with history. We want to think 'the archive' beyond its preservation as a space which brings people together.

And that is what it has done so far – bring people together and build a network. It started with Elsa meeting Délégué Barka in 2022, followed by her connecting with Maria at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin in 2023, where she had existing contacts from previous projects. Together, we reached out to the Ministry of Culture in Cameroon, the Musée National and the Archives Nationales. When Elsa's daughter's visa didn't come through in time for our first joint trip to Kribi in 2025 – delaying Elsa's arrival – we reached out to Augustine Moukodi, a colleague and friend we knew from another project. Tina in turn contacted key stakeholders in Douala, such as a local media designer, who now helps us produce the booklet about Kribi's history and a website. She later accompanied us to Kribi as well.

In Kribi, we discovered that the state of the archive was worse than we had anticipated. When Elsa first visited in 2023, she had only a brief chance to see the space,

Fig. 1 Documents in Kribi Archive 2025 © Maria Ellendorff

without the opportunity to examine its contents or structural condition at all closely. This time, in March 2025, we were confronted with the full extent of its challenges – mouldy walls, no running water and a lack of air-conditioning or proper ventilation. Apart from being uncomfortable, these conditions posed a serious threat to the already fragile documents. Instead of diving straight into digitization, we first focused on making the space functional. We brought in painters, technicians, plumbers and carpenters to improve the archive's basic infrastructure. By the end of the week, we had running water, electricity, freshly painted (and hopefully mould-resistant) walls and new shelves to begin organizing the materials. While we had yet to digitize a single page, we had laid the groundwork for a space where archival work could truly begin. It wasn't the start we had planned, but it was the foundation we needed. Now the space is not just more practical, it is also fit for future projects, like workshops and small exhibitions.

At the end of this first phase of establishing contacts and laying the groundwork, Elsa and Tina organized a small opening event, screening one of Tina's films outside the archive and offering the first chance for people to come together and engage with the archive.

What Does Kribi Have to Do With Berlin? Historical Entanglements

The Ethnologisches Museum Berlin currently holds at least 5,500 cultural belongings from Cameroon. Not least because of the war-related relocation and partial destruction during the Second World War, and the subsequent division of the 'collection' during the inner-German division, we are still in the process of recording the holdings in the database. As part of a cataloguing project, we are currently trying to determine the exact historical total of the Cameroon 'collection', the majority of which was appropriated and brought to the museum during the German colonial period of what is now Cameroon between 1884 and 1919. It is undeniable that the museum benefited from the violent seizure and exploitation of the country and its people. Although not all the belongings were appropriated by force, the unequal power relations of colonialism cannot be ignored, even in the case of supposed gifts or sales. It would also be wrong to assume that the local people were only passive victims in this difficult political situation. Many developed creative strategies of resilience or even outright resistance, while others took advantage of the situation to the best of their ability, forming alliances, concluding treaties, or establishing trade relations.

Although the 'collection' includes cultural belongings from all regions of Cameroon, the regions most prominently represented are those that were most intensively frequented by Germans during Germany's colonial occupation. The largest part of the 'collection' comes from the Western Grassfields, a region particularly known for its royal art and culture. The current exhibition at the Humboldt Forum also focuses on these artistic traditions and the cultural heritage of this region.

The physical belongings are complemented by 17,500 photographs, 150 audio and video recordings and thousands of pages of written documents.

At first glance, the entanglements between the museum's 'collection' and Kribi might not seem obvious. The database lists 43 cultural belongings as originating from Kribi, a comparably small number.[1] Yet, walking through the streets of Kribi, you still see how deeply inscribed the German presence is in the face of the town.

The depth of the connection between Berlin's 'collection' and Kribi's own archive became clear during our first official meeting with Délégué Barka in March 2025. As a present, we brought two copies of photographs from the Berlin archive that had been taken in Kribi. One depicted a wooden boat in shallow waters, crowded with at least thirty people. At either end of the boat, flags with three horizontal stripes – two dark, one white – were visible. The foreground showed a strip of beach and the background some large trees. For anyone unfamiliar with the area, this photo could have been taken anywhere along the coast.

However, the Délégué recognized the location immediately when we gave him the copy of the photo and pointed out of the window of his office, where we were sitting.

1 In comparison, the Bamum 'collection' – one of the largest – comprises more than 1,000 cultural belongings.

Fig. 2 Photo from the archive of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, taken by Robert Lohmeyer in Kribi 1908 (VIII A 4287) © Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz

He took us on to the veranda, which is located at the back of the ministerial building, overlooking the ocean. It became instantly clear that the photograph had been taken just a few metres from where we were standing. What appeared in the image as trees in the background was, in reality, a small island marking the entrance to the lagoon and the harbour behind it. It was the very harbour that had long served as a gateway for locals returning from fishing at sea and that had attracted Germans to settle here. It was also the very harbour that inspired the French and Chinese to build one of the largest deep-sea ports of the area in Kribi.

Kribi is a coastal town of approximately 60,000 people. It is best known for its pristine white beaches, swaying palm trees and outstanding seafood. Unlike the bustling streets of nearby Douala, the town is quieter, with lighter traffic, and while the weather is warm, a refreshing ocean breeze often provides relief.

Its location by the ocean has made it a key site of economic and geopolitical interests. While Kribi has long served external powers by exporting resources, it has rarely benefited equally from the wealth generated by these industries. It remains without a space where local people can engage critically with the history of their town. This absence is partly a legacy of Cameroon's centralized political system, introduced during the French colonial period, which concentrated resources and institutions in the capital Yaoundé and, to some extent, the former capital of Douala.

Before the colonial intervention, Kribi was home primarily to the Mabi and Batanga people, who lived in villages scattered in and around the area of the present-day town. Its natural lagoon served as a protected harbour where fishermen could load and

unload their boats shielded from the rough Atlantic waters. This natural advantage made Kribi an important site for trade and transportation.

When Germany declared Cameroon a protectorate in 1884, Kribi's strategic position became a key asset for the occupiers. They took advantage of its coastal location and its connection to the interior via the Kineke River, using it as a hub for exporting raw materials extracted from the so-called *Hinterland*. During this period, Kribi was transformed into an economic centre for German interests, while local communities bore the brunt of colonial exploitation and violence.

The German administration met frequent resistance from the local population. The first documented armed confrontation between Germans and the Batanga occurred in 1889. One German report states: 'Es wurden im Ganzen in 8 Ortschaften 106 Hütten und 21 Kanoes zerstört, sowie 3 Gefangene gemacht.' ('A total of 106 huts and 21 canoes were destroyed in 8 villages, and 3 prisoners were taken.') (Bundesarchiv R1001/3356:11).

In 1899, the Bulu, living further inland, launched an attack on German positions in Kribi, temporarily pushing them back. The Germans answered with a military campaign, a so-called *Strafexpedition* (punitive expedition), for which they recruited local fighters to fight alongside German soldiers. Locals who fought for the Germans (often dying in large numbers) were called 'collabos' by fellow Cameroonians and often faced repercussions for years to come.

In 1914 the Batanga, led by their leader Madola, joined plans for an uprising against the German occupiers. Their efforts aligned with those of the well-known anti-colonial resistance fighters Rudolf Douala Manga Bell and Martin-Paul Samba, who sought to overthrow the Germans with British and French support. However, their plans were betrayed, leading to the execution of Madola, Manga Bell and Samba, among others. Many Batanga then fled Kribi and only returned after the First World War, an event that is still commemorated every April with a major celebration in the town.

Kribi's economy today is still shaped by large-scale industrial projects that primarily serve external interests. Just outside the town, a gas-fired power plant that is 56% owned by an independent power producer supplies electricity to seven of Cameroon's ten regions. From September 2024 to February 2025 the power plant was switched off due to unpaid debts the Cameroonian government owes to the independent power producer, causing significant power outages.

Meanwhile, the Port of Kribi has been rapidly expanding, driving people from their homes. It is set to become Cameroon's largest port. The first phase of its development cost approximately $568 million, with 85% of the finance provided by China's Eximbank. The remaining 15 % was covered by the Cameroonian government, binding the country to long-term debt repayments to China.[2]

2 Additionally, the finance was tied to the state-owned China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), which handled major construction contracts, ensuring that a large portion of the investment remained within China's economy. It is assumed that, should Cameroon fail to meet the repayment terms, Chi-

These developments are not coincidental but direct consequences of colonial interference. Additionally, the absence of institutions for historical reflection reinforces a cycle in which Kribi's past and present remain largely dictated by outside forces. Addressing this imbalance requires not only recognizing Kribi's historical significance but also creating spaces where local people can engage critically with their histories and shape their own narratives for the future.

Laying the Groundwork: Collaborative Beginnings in the Kribi Archives Project

Extractivist practices are still prevalent in the area, particularly within large-scale industries. Museums, which have themselves profited significantly from extractivist forms of colonial governance, are now attempting to reposition themselves as postcolonial by including Indigenous stakeholders and members of the source communities, and framing these initiatives as collaborative. 'Collaboration', although lacking a universal definition and therefore without standardized aims and approaches, has undoubtedly fostered critical self-reflection and, in many ways, even transformed the museum landscape. Still, museums have often benefited disproportionately from these kinds of partnerships (Boast 2011:66), which tend to produce exhibitions or publications targeting their own audiences.

In this project, we aim to create a dynamic space that in the long run serves multiple actors in Cameroon and beyond, functioning as a space for research, exhibition and experimenting with different formats. One initiative is to bring the 'Gästezimmer' or guestroom, a discursive format of the Collaborative Museum at the Humboldt Forum, to Kribi. This format allows guest researchers and artists to present their work at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst and to engage with an interested public. We want to adapt this format either digitally or in-person. By doing so, we leave the 'echo chamber' of the Museum and encourage a dialogue with a broader and more diverse audience face to face. Our aim is to foster exchange, while also addressing the tendency to prioritize museum interests over local needs. If that means we must fix a mouldy wall before we can start digitizing, then that is what we shall do.

As we continue working on this project, we recognize the responsibility that comes with unlocking the potential of a local archive, and we strive to embrace the unexpected challenges that will undoubtedly come our way. Our collaborative approach aims

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nese stakeholders might negotiate long-term concessions or increased control over port operations. The terminals are run by private companies, which pay fees to the Port Authority of Kribi (PAK). The Container Terminal, for instance, is operated by a consortium led by CMA CGM (a French multi-billion dollar company), Bolloré (another French multi-billion dollar company) and CHEC.

not only to revitalize the archive as a repository of historical and local knowledge but also to foster an inclusive environment for knowledge production. By bringing together residents, artists, researchers and institutions, we seek to create a space that reflects the rich tapestry of Kribi's past, present and future.

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The Global Culture Assembly. Experimenting with New Forms of Governance in Museums (2022–2024)

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Abstract: The Global Culture Assembly (GCA) is a collaborative initiative that seeks to redefine museum governance through inclusive, horizontal and cross-cultural participation. Emerging from the 2022 Humboldt Forum's opening symposium, the GCA has evolved through workshops and ongoing dialogue between international partners, museum professionals and community representatives. Its central aim is to establish permanent structures, such as an embassy, that enable shared decision-making over cultural heritage. Despite internal tensions, representational challenges and inequalities of power between the Humboldt Forum complex and the GCA, the latter offers a promising path toward decolonial transformation in museum practices. By prioritizing fair collaboration, transparency and long-term engagement, it represents an exceptional experiment in 21st-century museology. This article reviews the unfolding of the GCA over the past three years. We shed light on how external partners are willing (and allowed) to collaborate and participate in museums' decision-making processes, as well as addressing the challenges that arise when experimenting with new forms of governance. Finally, we briefly engage with decolonial perspectives and describe how the GCA can offer hope in the context of 21st-century museums.
[Collaborative governance, critical museology, institutional transformation]

Introduction

Since the emergence of the New Museology in the 1980s, museums have undergone a transformation, becoming sites where social and political rights are demanded as communities struggle to speak for themselves (Brulon 2023). This has been a lengthy process, greatly influenced by inclusive, participatory and collaborative endeavours, which enable Indigenous peoples and diverse communities to be part of curatorial practice. Collaboration as a museological methodology mainly became an answer to postcolonial challenges after James Clifford's publication *Routes* in 1997. However, over the years, this methodology has been criticized for its alleged extractivist or neoliberal collaboration between museum professionals and source communities (see the critique by Robin Boast, 2011). Many times, collaborations repeat colonial violence when collaborators are retraumatized by superficial and ignorant museum practices.

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Over the past two decades, anthropological museums have expanded their approach to collaborative practices by developing ethical guidelines (see Kreps 2012), adopting relationship-centred methodological approaches (see Christen 2018; Dilger et al. 2024) and learning to listen sensitively to how collaborators wish to engage with them (Scholz 2021). However, collaboration cannot serve as a stand-alone approach to decolonizing museums, given the inherent asymmetries of power between museum professionals and external collaborators. Institutional structures often perpetuate power imbalances, contradictions and limitations that prevent collaborative efforts from changing the coloniality embedded in museums' foundational frameworks. This and more was aptly stated by Labischinski et al. (2023) in their critical collaborative reflections, concluding from their experience in the Humboldt Forum in Berlin that the museum will never be decolonized.

But what if the museum allows itself to experiment in support of initiatives that denounce these power imbalances, aiming to break institutionally established decision-making processes and to share curatorial, political and financial power with its collaborators? Would this be possible even in cross-stakeholder institutions like the Humboldt Forum, with all its contradictions and turbulent origins? What if experimenting with collaboration and governance in museums could come to constitute a fruitful path for the future of museums in the 21st century?

That is the case with the Global Cultural Assembly (GCA), an ongoing collective first formed by international partners of the Ethnologisches Museum, the Museum für Asiatische Kunst and the Humboldt Forum.[1] Their aim is to acquire decision-making authority over exhibitions, museum policies, education, programme and the cultural belongings held in the Ethnologisches Museum by creating a new governance structure. Its foundations were laid during the Humboldt Forum's opening week in September 2022, when the final permanent exhibition was inaugurated, born out of a poetic form of encounter. Towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an opportunity to invite international partners, including individuals from Indigenous groups, to contribute to the creation of the exhibitions and to visit the exhibits in person a few days before their official opening to the public.[2] In this context, dozens of people gathered to participate in a conference discussing topics related to the collections and their collaborative work.

This initiative was continued in a smaller constellation during two workshops in 2023 and 2024, and it reached a new peak in June 2025 at a large gathering of Indigenous, international and Berlin-based partners held to set up the Assembly. The goal of the GCA 2025 was to ensure the permanent participation of these stakeholders in the

1 The Museum für Asiatische Kunst has always been involved in the development of the GCA. However, from the outset, it has been relatively distant from the project, which catered more to the thematic spectrum and interests of colleagues at the Ethnologisches Museum.

2 All potential guests were contacted in advance by their respective contact persons, mostly curators (see Scholz 2023).

decision-making processes, educational practices and programmes of the Humboldt Forum complex by establishing a Global Cultural Embassy. However, the 2025 gathering itself is not part of this text.

What initially sounds obvious and plausible is anything but easy to implement when examined more closely, because even cross-stakeholder cooperation in the Humboldt Forum can be characterized by tensions and dysfunctional communication. This can be an even greater challenge in the case of the GCA, which aims for institutional transformation by bundling internal and external forces.

In this article, we will review the past three years by explaining how the GCA unfolded. We shed light on how external partners are willing (and allowed) to participate in the museums' decision-making processes, as well as addressing the challenges that arise when experimenting with new forms of governance. Finally, we briefly engage with decolonial perspectives and address how the GCA can offer hope in the context of 21st-century museums.

As authors, we bring different approaches to this endeavour. Andrea Scholz has been directly involved as a curator at the Ethnologisches Museum since the project began in 2022. Anna Sara Dias conducted intensive research for her master's thesis on the subject during her internship from September 2023 to January 2024 (see Dias 2025). This article draws primarily on Dias's critical museum ethnography, in which her participant observation was affected by, and affected, the field (Favret-Saada 1990). It also draws on Dias' research of documents and video footage. This positions her as the primary author, leaving Andrea Scholz to offer complementary insider perspectives as a museum professional and ethnologist. Therefore, we acknowledge that our critical approach is interwoven with our own experiences and particular positionalities.

The text itself is a subjective account of experiences based on personal observations, most of which are not systematic, primarily because the GCA is an ongoing project and therefore cannot be subject to a final analysis. However, the experiences gained so far can provide insights for the field of museology.

Seeding the Ground: Opening Symposium 2022

In the current context of demands for the restitution of artefacts stolen from former colonies, accountability for crimes against humanity and historical reparations for colonization, the call for the decolonization of museums is relevant to constructing non-Eurocentric perspectives on reality (Brulon 2020). The Humboldt Forum in Berlin, inaugurated in part in July 2021, has been criticized for seeming to oppose these tendencies (see Bejeng Ndikung 2018; El-Tayeb 2020; Appadurai 2021). As one of the most expensive cultural policy projects of all time in Germany, the Forum has a history of controversy and criticism, the most significant of which lies at the heart of its founding in two spheres: hosting cultural belongings mostly of colonial origin, and

now being housed in the reconstructed *Berliner Schloss*, a Prussian-era palace that represents the celebration of an imperial past. As a consequence, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz's non-European collections and the Humboldt Forum came to be at the centre of heritage discussions in the context of the legacy of Germany's colonial past.

In this context, both institutions invested in an opening symposium where their guests discussed how their collaborative work could create an institutional impact. In an open space and experimental format, the guests reflected collectively on possible new forms of collaboration. They highlighted the need to bring communities with a relationship to the collections and cultural belongings to the centre of museum practice, rather than reducing their roles to displaying items alone. The guests called for communities to have a voice, enabling them to decide whether or not each artefact should be displayed and to tell their own history on their own terms. That is, they demanded curators ensure that they are in unison with the communities of origin by consulting appropriately.[3] Therefore, the collaboration between museum workers and international partners must be intentional, genuine, equal, recognized as a process and must consider people's humanity, as stated by Ndapewoshali Nadahafa Ashipala (Museums Association Namibia).[4] To promote collaboration in these terms, the participants requested a policy and a collaboration framework be drawn up, with the understanding that future initiatives would be guided by these discussions, emphasizing the need for transparency and sustainable continuity.

Besides that, education in museums (and beyond) played a significant role in the symposium discussions. The participants called for education to be approached from a dialogical and pluriversal rather than a universal perspective.[5] Education should include a greater integration of Indigenous actors[6] with museum audiences and a decentralized educational approach that challenges established authority and normativity.[7] They envisioned museums as interdisciplinary educational spaces regardless of specialization, emphasizing the need to unlearn conventional practices while incorporating cultural presence and spiritual learning through experimentation.[8] This effort should not be limited to the museum space, but should extend to other locations, such as the

3 Ethnologisches Museum, Audio Visual Archive from the 2022 Opening Symposium. Clip #88, 13.09.22.

4 See her speech in the short film 'Rückblick auf Eröffnung des Ostflügels 2022 Humboldt Forum' by Carlos da Silva Pinto. Available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mQJEKMR3-o>, accessed November 7, 2024.

5 Clip #102, 13.09.22, Ethnologisches Museum Visual Archive. Audio-visual archive from the Opening Week in 2022.

6 Clip #143, 13.09.22, Ibid.

7 The hiring of Indigenous community members as guides was encouraged, recognizing them as embodiments of the culture with innate storytelling skills, and preserving their knowledge to ensure the continuity of the collaboration (Clip #163, 13.09.22, Ethnologisches Museum).

8 Clip #152, 13.09.22, Ethnologisches Museum Visual Archive. Audio-visual archive from the Opening Week in 2022.

territories of the communities of origin.[9] Central to their educational demands was the cyclical process of learning, unlearning and relearning, drawing on Indigenous knowledge to shape future practices.[10] This understanding later became the GCA's experimental foundational approach.

As a result of the Opening Symposium consultation, participants proposed that museums, in collaboration with source communities, should hire representatives who can serve as bridges between them. These individuals would have a dual role: maintaining a presence within the institution while facilitating communication between the museum and the communities. They would also be responsible for creating political spaces within the museum where international partners can voice their perspectives and actively participate in decision-making about their cultural heritage.

To ensure that the discussion does not remain at the theoretical level but continues into practice, the participants strategically urged the institutions' boards to take concrete steps to address their demands by summarizing them in a declaration titled 'Dignity – Continuity – Transparency',[11] which was presented to all guests for signature, like a petition. Although primarily focused on presenting thematic content, the document outlined specific action areas and expectations, including the creation of an Indigenous Embassy. This Embassy would be the next concrete step towards experimenting with a new governance model in museums, moving from content discussions to implementing structural frameworks for collaborative work.

Rooting the Path: Consolidating the Global Cultural Assembly's Preparatory Group

To maintain the continuity of the collaborative work outlined in 2022, a small group of international partners was invited[12] to participate in a workshop from 16 to 20 October 2023 to provide input on what would become the Indigenous Embassy. Among them were artists, museum professionals, educators, film-makers, performers, cultural activists and researchers. The event was driven by specific museum staff who had organized the 2022 opening across various stakeholder institutions (museums and the

9 Clip #98, 13.09.22, Ibid.

10 Clip #153, 13.09.22, Ibid.

11 The 'DIGNITY – CONTINUITY – TRANSPARENCY' declaration is available at: https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/dignity-continuity-transparency/, accessed March 10, 2025.

12 The selection was not based on systematic criteria; instead, individuals who had been particularly active during the assembly or who had a long-standing relationship of trust with contributors from EM or SHF were approached. The priority at that moment was to put together a group of international contributors, not to establish particularly sophisticated selection criteria, as the group was considered transitional in any case.

Humboldt Forum Foundation) and who were interested in implementing the demands of the Dignity Declaration. Unlike the Opening Symposium, the 2023 Workshop was focused on developing a structure for the continuation of the collaboration, rather than openly addressing content.

Since not all participants identified themselves as Indigenous, nor did they see their interests aligned with those of a nation state, such as an embassy, naming the governance model an 'Indigenous Embassy' could not proceed for some time, and it remains under negotiation among the collective. The term was considered controversial and was questioned by the participants and museum professionals from the outset. Consequently, the group, provisionally called the Global Community Centre (GCC) by the museum professionals, collectively launched a commission (the Preparatory Group or PG) to create an initial structure for a future expanded assembly with many possible international partners and people from so-called Berlin 'urban' society[13]. It was this commission that named this arrangement the Global Cultural Assembly (GCA).

Up to the moment of writing this paper (March 2025), the GCA has comprised both a larger and a smaller group. The first consists of all those who signed the Dignity Declaration. The latter is selective and consists of the 2023 nine-person commission who called themselves the Preparatory Group (PG). The PG operates under two guiding principles: maintaining horizontal relationships among themselves – that is, being non-hierarchical – and making decisions through consensus. They are responsible for structuring, creating an agenda, researching, building relationships and collaborating with the museum workers of both the SPK and SHF, collectively referred to as the Berlin Team (BT). The latter consolidated itself with five active members who have been curating these meetings since 2022 (one of them is Andrea Scholz, co-author of this article). While the PG does not assert broad representational authority, it justifies its affiliation by directly connecting to the SPK and SHF collections.[14] As a collective, the PG promised to disband at the Assembly in 2025,[15] when a Reference Group would be elected from among the delegates.

In the spirit of the Dignity Declaration, both the GCA's Preparatory Group and the Berlin Team worked on a declaration of ethics and discussed the relationship that the yet to be founded 'Embassy' should have with the Humboldt Forum complex. From this experience, it already became apparent that the priorities and interests of the museum workers, as well as those of the guests themselves, were as heterogeneous as their respective backgrounds. While some were very much focused on representation in the vertical structure and called for a director's post to be given to an Indigenous

13 This is in reference to a broadened understanding of the Berlin population, which includes not only German citizens but also migrants. It is also an invitation for migrants and diaspora communities to participate in the GCA endeavor.

14 Letter from the PG to the directors of SHF, SPK and EM, dated 20.12.23.

15 Ibid.

person, others were more concerned with generating content through research groups and creating a stronger link between communities and museums.

In October 2024, a second in-person workshop was held between the Preparatory Group and the Berlin Team. In this week's workshop, the GCA Room[16] was inaugurated. This event relied on the presence of an interested public, the museum staff and the SPK and SHF foundations' executives, who expressed their willingness to proceed with the endeavour.

To ensure the foundation of the Embassy in the Humboldt Forum complex, the Preparatory Group developed two strategies. The first was to obtain the formal agreement of the German government to establish decision-making positions within the current and future boards and authorities responsible for the museums' collections.[17] They see this formal commitment as essential to ensure the participation of Indigenous and tribal scholars informed by postcolonial knowledge, who would serve as committed representatives in forming a Global Cultural Assembly.[18] The second step focuses on implementing the first strategy by bringing together from forty to eighty people to form a Council.[19] These 'delegates' were to discuss and propose practical solutions for museum practices at the Humboldt Forum, Museum Island and the Dahlem collections, including the nomination of individuals to assist in the transition of governance structures.[20] The latter would be called the Reference Group.

At the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, the GCA is a project within the framework of the Collaborative Museum and can draw on its infrastructure. However, its position between these two institutions is problematic. Here, the GCA is struggling with inherent problems in cross-stakeholder projects that are typical of the Humboldt Forum. Nevertheless, over the years it has been possible to create a consensus within the institutions that the GCA, due to its political importance, is worth the effort, even if its benefit to the public and its publicity initially appear to be small. Even in this scenario, both the SPK and SHF were supportive by declaring their interests to lie in establishing thematic collaboration and in being willing to facilitate direct meetings between decision-makers and the Preparatory Group, thereby allowing members to communicate their interests directly.[21]

With it, the Preparatory Group of the Global Cultural Assembly consolidated itself as a prominent ongoing collective with the potential to influence the museum complex and shape innovative governance directly.

16 The design of the space was mainly implemented in-house with limited resources, and the opening took place during the workshop in October 2024.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.

Facing Challenges: Learning, Unlearning and Relearning as a Methodological Approach to Museal Experimentation

While pursuing new forms of collaboration and organizing the necessary funds, the museum workers themselves became involved in many contradictions, as did their partners.

The GCA's Preparatory Group was invited to participate in ongoing programmes and projects, such as the upcoming annual topic at the Humboldt Forum titled 'Family Matters'. However, they suffered from a lack of protocol and of the resources needed to develop their own priorities or those that had been outlined in the Dignity Declaration.

To date, the work of museums like those described here has been designed so as to allow external partners to participate selectively and on a project by project basis. Structures for permanent co-determination and thus a certain relinquishing of control do not yet exist. The Global Cultural Assembly's ambiguous institutional framework, whether operating in the Ethnologisches Museum, within the Humboldt Forum complex or in the Collaborative Museum, creates structural tensions. Cross-stakeholder projects face additional complexities of coordination across the organizational structure.

Furthermore, it is clear that several major internal challenges must be acknowledged and addressed when experimenting with new forms of governance. It is a fact that the interests of participants on both sides are heterogeneous, which complicates the choice of priorities and lines of action under a non-hierarchical dynamic and a hundred percent consensus. The result is a lack of trust, in addition to the existing historical distrust between communities and museums. Furthermore, inequalities of power across gender roles, race, class, language, academic status and symbolic capital ended up delimiting the relationships, challenging the principle of horizontality. Indeed, due to internal conflicts over political and identity representations, the diverse interests within them and the expectations of legitimacy for specific groups that intersect in this space, it is a challenge for the GCA to define itself as a cohesive group.

Some communication problems were difficult to solve, such as language difficulties and barriers, not to mention the challenge of organizing digital meetings between people in completely different time zones and working environments. Moreover, the Berlin Team also had certain insecurities when trying to share the decision-making process regarding their power-related possibilities. They couldn't promise or guarantee certain structural changes, nor did they want to 'dictate' the creative process of the Global Cultural Assembly, which would have made it difficult for international partners to continue curating its work with full autonomy.

Any initiative that confronts consolidated powers at any level must address the contradictions and challenges that arise from this confrontation. This is also true in the museum context.

Fig. 1 The Tree of Hope. Copyrights: Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss, Frank Sperling, 2024

Discussion: Decolonial (Im)possibilities at the Humboldt Forum

Drawing on Dias's (2024) research on collaboration between museum workers and the Global Cultural Assembly, which brings the museological debate over decolonizing museums into dialogue with Afro-Brazilian philosophies of crossroads (*encruzilhadas*), decoloniality potentially occurs in the gaps between – or in other words in the uncertainty – of encounters (see Rufino 2019). That is, the poetic result of these encounters can be seen as a crossroads, a potential site where decolonial practices reside (ibid.). The museum's openness to new models in 2022 and 2023 created a space of doubt and therefore of the potential for the emergence of countless possibilities, since no one could predict what would come out of those encounters.

Many interlocutors interpret the birth of the GCA as an 'accident' resulting from the lack of certainty about what the museum staff wanted from those meetings. If understanding this 'accident' as a crossroads where the unpredictability, intersections, the said and the unsaid, multiple presences, wisdoms and languages converged at these events, the participants practised decoloniality, transgressing the countless (im)possibilities posed by proposing the creation of a new form of governance as an Indigenous Embassy.

In other words, the pressure to implement demands from international partners, combined with criticism from the Humboldt Forum and the engagement of staff members, created the perfect environment for experimenting with new forms of governance in museums. Due to the negotiations for establishing an Indigenous Embassy, the Global Cultural Assembly emerged as a unique and potentially transformative action in the complex landscape of cultural institutions in Berlin, resulting from the shared needs of source communities and the commitment of specific museum workers engaged in collaborative efforts as part of their museological practice.

Inspired by the ideas of Brulon (2020), Rufino (2019) and Scholz (2017) regarding their conception of 'decolonial practice', Dias (2024) understood that the collaborative work between the Global Cultural Assembly, the museums and the Humboldt Forum is potentially decolonial when there are open spaces in which: 1) to denounce the coloniality that persists in the relationship between museums and their stakeholders; 2) to transfer authorised power to the unauthorised; and 3) to transgress and affect logics of coloniality, offering new grammars and new paths for the invention of new possibilities, as well as transforming what already exists. When following this approach, the ongoing governance experimentation led by the GCA can significantly change the practices and structures of traditional museums, even though it may lead to the extinction of these institutions as we know them today.

Final Considerations

In sum, what we have learned from experimenting with new forms of governance in museums with the Global Cultural Assembly is that decolonial practice in museums is about creating new paths where the denunciation of coloniality, the transfer of power and transgressions come together and new possibilities emerge. Besides that, similar to facing crossroads, building a path cannot be achieved by strictly subverting the power structure and acting within the dichotomies of binarity, as they will again risk reproducing coloniality each time a challenge crosses the path (see Quijano 1992; Rufino 2019). Every experiment in spaces of power, such as a museum, may manifest and reproduce coloniality. However, learning, unlearning and relearning how to collaborate under the terms described here has emphasized that decolonial practices occur between possibilities and impossibilities.

Finally, in our view, the Global Cultural Assembly has managed to promote significant advances towards shared governance and decision-making never before seen in the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and Stiftung Humboldt Forum. Besides its contradictions, the participants in this encounter do justice to their demands for learning, unlearning and relearning in order to shape future practices and overcome their challenges. Also, the allowance for experimenting with this project so far can already be recognized as one step further toward new museum practices. What came out of

the Assembly in June 2025 and the next steps to create governance structures represent great hope for the landscape of traditional German museums.

As described, the SPK's and SHF's international partners not only aspire to collaborate but also seek a space for active participation in decision-making within those institutions under a transparent and sustainable framework. The GCA is a practical exercise of potential governance models in museums, which, as an ongoing process, expands its scope of influence by establishing political and institutional dialogues. It aims to establish an 'Embassy' that ensures equal and genuine collaborative relationships. It marks a turning point in museology, shifting from including communities' demands to actively advocating a museum as a space for social, historical and heritage justice. From this, it represents a hope for museums in the 21st century.

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The Mapuche Collections in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: (Re)Interpretations of the Collections in the Present

A Cooperation Project between the Ethnologisches Museum and Mapuche Representatives

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Abstract: The Ethnologisches Museum houses collections from the Indigenous Mapuche people, acquired since the mid-nineteenth century, primarily from what is now Chile. In a collaborative project with representatives of the Mapuche, we aim to analyze the significance of the collections at the present day and the stories, knowledge and practices associated with the cultural artefacts. This article describes the sensitive historical and cultural contexts of the collection and the resulting cooperation project. The significance and relevance of these artefacts for the Mapuche today, and their integration into cultural and social processes in relation to historical events and provenances, have a particularly important place. The planning, process, objectives and initial reflections on the project are also outlined.
[Mapuche, ethnological collections, transcultural collaboration]

Introduction

The collection's department of American Anthropology *(Amerikanische Ethnologie)* in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin contains cultural artefacts collected from the Mapuche, an Indigenous people in present-day Chile and Argentina. The collection comprises around 600 pieces that were acquired and brought to Berlin from the mid-nineteenth century until the 2000s. For the Mapuche, these pieces are still significant today, as they reveal cultural and historical processes and a resistant and vibrant culture existing right up to the present day. Their centuries-long resistance to coloniza-

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tion by the Spanish colonial power from the sixteenth century and subsequently by the states of Chile and Argentina up to the present day, is reflected in Mapuche identity politics and cultural processes (e.g. Nahuelpan et al. 2012).

In a cooperation project as part of the Collaborative Museum,[1] representatives of the Mapuche have been working with the collection in Berlin on (re)interpretations of the objects in the present and the stories, knowledge and practices associated with them. During a Mapuche residency in Berlin in May 2025, the focus was on encounters with the pieces, their perspectives on their own (im)material culture and knowledge exchange. On the one hand, the cooperation project is driven by the sensitive provenances and collection contexts of part of the Mapuche collection, which are also linked to the settlement history of German migrants in Chile. On the other hand, the provenances and significance of the collection have hardly been analyzed to date. The size of the collections, the large time span they cover and spiritually significant pieces make the Berlin collections particularly valuable for the Mapuche people.

Historical Context of the Mapuche Collections

The territory of the Mapuche *(Wallmapu)* originally stretched from Santiago to the south of present-day Chile. In the fifteenth century the northern part of the area was conquered by the Inca Empire, leading the Mapuche to colonize areas to the south. Due to Spanish colonization from the middle of the sixteenth century the Mapuche lost large parts of their territory, but they were able to defend other parts successfully, so that the Spanish colonial rulers finally recognized the Mapuche's autonomy. As a result, the Mapuche also colonized parts of what is now Argentina, where they maintained trading relations with neighbouring communities and settlers. At its largest, the *Wallmapu* extended from the Pacific to the Atlantic, an area that is now governed by the Chilean and Argentinian states (Nahuelpan 2013:124–125; Bengoa 1996:14). After independence from Spain in 1818 and 1816 respectively, the nation states of Chile and Argentina aimed to assert control over their entire national territories, including those occupied by the Mapuche. In both countries, this meant a brutal military conquest between 1851 and 1885, during which half the Mapuche were killed and more than 90% of their land was stolen. This colonization was carried out by both Chile and Argentina to strengthen their national identity and for purposes of economic development, industrialization and the exploitation of natural resources in accordance with a colonial-capitalist logic (Nahuelpan 2013:126–129).

1 The project 'The Collaborative Museum' (2023–2025) of the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst promotes multi-perspective approaches to working with the collections with international partners and communities of origin.

Even before the conquest of Mapuche territory in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Chilean state was recruiting European settlers. German immigrants in particular were to build up the infrastructure and industry in the south of the country in the interests of the Chilean nation state. They were provided with supposedly uninhabited land *(terra nullius)*, but in fact they displaced the Mapuche from their territory with state support (Bernedo and Bilet 2022:18). They thus became part of the Chilean state's policy of displacement and extermination, settling in Mapuche territory as entrepreneurs and manufacturers and becoming active in the military, politics and science. During the occupation, many cultural artefacts were appropriated by the state's military, as well as by Chilean and foreign settlers. Many Mapuche objects, such as silverware, looms, pottery, wood carvings and stones, among others, and even the human bodies of the enslaved *peñi* (brothers) and *lamuen* (sisters), were killed or looted from the tombs of *toki* (warrior chiefs) and *weichafe* (warriors) (Huinca 2013; Coña 2002; Joseph 1928). Due to the precarious conditions, impoverishment and the reductionist model imposed on the Mapuche, which forced them to sell their material culture, there was a rise in the acquisition of Mapuche 'traditional objects', such as silverware. The diverse contexts in which the objects were acquired reflect complex historical dynamics. Through raids and looting, as well as bartering and buying, the military and settlers appropriated material cultural assets that were then often incorporated into museum or private collections in accordance with museum and Western categories. To this day, this represents a profound loss of cultural heritage for the Mapuche (Flores Chávez 2013:839; Nahuelpan 2013:126–130; Vargas 2019).

Today, the Mapuche live in the central and southern regions of Chile and Argentina. In Chile, they make up around 80% of the Indigenous population and 10% of the total population of 19 million. The phrase 'the Mapuche' refers to a range of heterogeneous actors in urban and rural areas with diverse histories, territories and perspectives. Their demands and struggles for autonomy, cultural and political self-determination and land restitution remain strong to this day. Knowledge about the meaning, practices and production of their material culture also plays a major role in the positioning and visibility of their cultural identity.

The Mapuche Collections in the Ethnologisches Museum and their Provenances

The cultural artefacts of the Mapuche in the Ethnologisches Museum were brought to Berlin between 1829 and 2015, with the majority coming to Berlin in the decades following the colonization of Mapuche territory and the arrival of German settlers in Chile. This period also saw the founding of the Ethnologisches Museum (then the

Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Royal Museum of Ethnology) in 1873,[2] whose collections grew massively in the years that followed. The founding director of the Museum, Adolf Bastian, wanted to create an extensive 'archive of humanity'. He also pursued the idea of the Rescue Paradigm, according to which the cultural heritage of societies supposedly threatened with extinction had to be collected and preserved for future generations (Fischer 2022:1–2). The collections from the Americas originated on the one hand from research expeditions and specific collecting activities. On the other hand, Bastian motivated Germans around the world to participate in the mission of an 'archive of humanity' and created global networks of collectors, especially in German communities abroad (Penny 2019:13, 19, 52). Bastian also cultivated networks of scholars and members of the German community in Chile. These included Rudolf Philippi, director of the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Chile (1853–1897). His brother Bernhard Philippi played an important role in the recruitment of German settlers, working as a 'colonization representative' for the Chilean state (Bastian 1878:27; Bernedo and Bilot 2022:21–22).

The Mapuche collections in the Ethnologisches Museum include silverwork, riding equipment and accessories, clothing and textiles, everyday objects and sensitive ritual pieces. There are also around 1,200 media (photographs, sound and film recordings). The circumstances of their acquisition are diverse and often undocumented. Current work with the database and the acquisition files of the Ethnologisches Museum show that the pieces in Berlin were largely acquired or transferred by German settlers, military personnel, travellers and German scientists. Due to this settlement history, most of the Mapuche items in the Ethnologisches Museum today, according to the museum database, come from present-day Chile, with only a few from Argentina. In the period during and after the invasion of Wallmapu, cultural artefacts were acquired by purchase and exchange, which must be seen against the background of the extreme impoverishment of the Mapuche, as well as by robbery and grave robbery (Flores Chávez 2013:838–839). In the Chilean national context, the material culture of the Mapuche became the spoils of war and dispossession, where museums and the discourses of claiming Mapuche material culture as heritage transformed them into the instruments of a national narrative (Rufer 1984). Chilean settlement politics contributed to this. As a result, many of the collections of Mapuche materialities have ended up in European museums, as is the case in Berlin. Overall, the early Mapuche collections from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries must be viewed in the context of the interweaving of Chilean colonization and extermination policies, German settlers, the territorial and cultural dispossession of the Mapuche, and political and scientific networks.

2 Earlier objects taken from the Mapuche were kept in the Ethnographic Collection of the Brandenburgisch-Preußische Kunstkammer, which was founded in the sixteenth century and later divided up among the various royal museums.

Fig. 1 Mapuche silverwork at Ethnologisches Museum

Paradigmatically, the appropriation of a Mapuche funerary statue *(chemamüll),* which was donated to the Ethnologisches Museum by the German consul in Concepción, Wolrad Schumacher, in 1888, can be pointed out here. The Mapuche erected *chemamüll* next to the graves of their deceased; for the Mapuche, they are therefore more than objects – they represent their ancestors. According to a letter from Consul Schumacher to the museum in the acquisition file, the *chemamüll* now in Berlin, a 'figure representing a man', 'stood on the grave of an Araucanian[3] Cacique in the province of Cautin, from where it was abducted not without danger, as the Indians hold the graves of their chiefs sacred and guard them closely' (Acta 1076/1888). The consul's letter and the historical context indicates that the *chemamüll* was stolen from a Mapuche burial site in a context of injustice, despite realizing its importance for the Mapuche.

On the other hand, pieces that entered the collections in the second half of the twentieth century originate, for example, from specific purchases. A collection mainly of silverwork purchased by Günther Hartmann[4] for the museum in 1988 for 50,000

3 Foreign designation of the Mapuche since Spanish colonization.

4 Günther Hartmann has been head of the Department of American Anthropology (*Amerikanische Naturvölker*) at the Ethnologisches Museum, then the Museum für Völkerkunde, since 1985. He has also published on the museum's extensive collection of Mapuche silverware (1974: *Silberschmuck der Araukaner, Chile,* 1988: *Gold und Silber: Gold der Puna, Panama, Silberschmuck der Mapuche, Chile*).

German marks can be mentioned here (Acta 1982–1995). Also in this case, information on the manufacturer, origin, functions, etc. is not further documented, making it subject to an ongoing investigation as part of the provenance research for the project.

Mapuche *kimvn* (Knowledge) in the Collections

Mapuche material culture is kept, selected and classified in museums in the form of petrified artefacts and as a witness to a historical past (Alvarado 2020). Therefore, from a Mapuche perspective, and in a counter-hegemonic and decolonizing exercise, it is necessary to focus on the need to rethink one's own existence beyond the classical anthropological and historical categories and general Western sciences (Antileo et al. 2015; Nahuelpan 2013). By taking these objects out of their original context and presenting them as something exotic and folkloric worthy of study, as seen in various exhibitions and in research on traditional objects, an abstracted view is created, which makes invisible the origins, territorial significance and meanings of the Mapuche's *rakizuam* (thought) and *kimvn* (knowledge) of the *gvrekafe* (weavers), *ruxafe* (silversmith) and *kimche* (wise people) (Alvarado 2020; Paillalef 2017; Stüdemann 2018). Ultimately, the problem does not lie in the museums and exhibitions but in the powers inscribed in these practices. This means that the recognition and distribution of material and power must be inextricably linked. This permits a dialogue between Mapuche knowledge and new museological practices, emphasizing how the people themselves can discuss and speak about the vitality of their material culture, as well as a review of museum collections through the lens of the Mapuche *kimvn* (Paillalef 2017).

From the Mapuche point of view, and based on Mapuche philosophy and spirituality, nature is inhabited by different energies. Each space, such as rivers, sea, lakes, forests, mountains, hills, stones, trees, animals, insects, plants, flowers, stars, etc., all have a *gen* (owner), spiritual energies that inhabit and live in all of nature (Becerra and Llanquinao 2015). Therefore, the different pieces are created by the different Mapuche arts, such as silverware, textiles, clay, stones and basketry. Each object has a Mapuche *kimvn*, that is, knowledge of the techniques, symbols, colours, shapes and qualities associated with each material. Mapuche *kimvn* is understood as a set of epistemological coordinates that allow the emergence of Mapuzugun (the Mapuche language) as an active and consensual body of knowledge accumulated by the transgenerational experiences of the Mapuche people. It is based on the notion of *kim*, which derives from an ontological order of reality construction. It is an ordered and consensual body of knowledge that constitutes the epistemological foundations of Mapuche ontology and action (Teillier et al. 2015).

Each piece has aspects to consider: the first is related to the territory of origin, which is anchored in a physical-geographical space and linked to the person who was its creator and/or bearer (Ñanculef 2016). Therefore, the second factor is related to the

socio-political roles and positions of the people who were the bearers of these objects. This is related to the Mapuche *kimvn*, which, as a source of culture and cosmovision, is based on the thought of the ancient people. It links the people with the land, with an *ixofillmogen* (understood as all forms of life existing in the *mapu*), where there are life, nature and spiritual entities (Valenzuela Quintupil 2019).

An Ongoing Process: Preparation and Implementation of the Cooperation Project

Regarding the infrastructural and practical elements of the cooperation project, the Mapuche's stay in Berlin in May 2025, during which we worked intensively with the objects on site, had to be planned and prepared in advance. From the perspective of the museum and its employees, an important part of the project and its preparation is the ongoing documenting, conserving and preserving of the Mapuche collections, as they are the source of knowledge for the development of this project and the starting point for dialogues and collaborations in the present and future. The ongoing collaboration around these collections aims to foster a deeper understanding of the pieces within it, enhancing their documentation and conservation, and ensuring their relevance in ongoing dialogues about cultural heritage. From the Museum's perspective, and in line with the aims of the Collaborative Museum, the Museum seeks not only to improve preservation of the collections in its depositories, but also, through collaborations and partnerships, to learn and increase knowledge about this collection. In this sense, we understand the importance of working towards better documenting the collection to make it more available and accessible for future studies and research.

In the documentation phase of the Mapuche collection, it was necessary to follow strict safety protocols during the handling of the items to ensure the preservation of their physical integrity and their protection against pesticide contamination for those handling the collection. For several decades, chemical pesticides were applied in museum storage areas to prevent damage caused by insects, rodents and other pests. As a result, many cultural artefacts in the museum, including those in the Mapuche collection, became contaminated with these pesticides. Today, handling these items requires the use of protective equipment, such as masks, gloves and lab coats. This was one of the first precautions to be taken when working with the Mapuche collections. Furthermore, the collections contain large and sometimes heavy items, such as ponchos. Therefore, to ensure the preservation and safety of the cultural artefacts, it became necessary for these items to be handled by two individuals simultaneously. Another important issue in the conservation process concerns the packaging in which the Mapuche collections are stored. Many of the pieces are packed in old cardboard boxes dating from the 1980s and 1990s, which contain acidic components harmful to

Fig. 2 Documenting the Mapuche collection in the depository of the Ethnologisches Museum

the preservation of the objects. As a result, staff from the collection management and conservation departments are working to transfer the items into acid-free packaging and other materials that do not pose a threat to their preservation. With the safety measures in place regarding handling and contamination, it was possible to proceed with the documentation phase of the Mapuche collection. As a large proportion of the collections was not digitally documented, there were few or imprecise data in the database regarding items' locations in storage, nor were there any photos, measurements or records of weight. This posed the main challenge during documentation, as initially it was sometimes necessary to search for the items in the museum's cabinet, cross-referencing them with physical identification records. However, later work revolves around the question of how to document the information produced during the project and integrate it into the museum's records. This collaboration allows a more thorough documentation of the materials used in the objects, enabling us to gain deeper insights into their techniques and meanings.

The methodology of the collaborative part of the project has multiple stages. Nicolás Valenzuela Quintupil, a Mapuche anthropologist and historian based in Santiago de Chile, has been in contact with the Ethnologisches Museum since 2023. Together, the idea of the cooperation project was launched and finally made possible as part of the Collaborative Museum. The contacts and selections have been made by Valenzuela Quintupil since, working with material culture and being himself a Mapuche, he has

the necessary expertise and a broad network throughout Mapuche territory in present-day Chile.

Firstly, a participant selection process was carried out. This was based on Mapuche knowledge, which centres around the Mapuche concept of *rakizuam* (thinking), which 'represents one of the cognitive processes characteristic of Mapuche rationality, whose orientation is related to a style of reflection (close to the notion of analysis)' (Melin et al. 2016:18). This Mapuche knowledge is still present in the people among the *kimche* (the wise), elders, *lonko* (chief), *machi* (spiritual authorities), silversmiths and weavers, who all preserve and safeguard their memories, experiences and wisdom. Therefore, the criteria were the expertise they have in their trade, their knowledge of Mapuche spirituality and cosmovision, experience in working on other projects and the ability to work in a team.

The first person to be selected was Elena Huentuleo, a *gvrekafe* (weaver) from the commune of La Pintana in the Santiago Metropolitan Region, who is knowledgeable about the Mapuche cosmovision. Her mother is Luisa Quechupan, a well-known weaver and a speaker at Mapuche ceremonies. The second person is Antonio Chihuaicura, a renowned *rvxafe* (silversmith) from the Tirúa commune, Biobío Region (in south–central Chile), who has worked on exhibitions in the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolumbino in Santiago. He has also held his own exhibition in cultural activities in the Tirúa commune and has worked with several museums in Chile. The third person is the *machi* Patricia Huinca, a spiritual authority and an expert in several weaving techniques, who lives in her community of Ankapulli, commune of Cholchol, Araucanía region (southern Chile). She is considered to have a connection with the spiritual world through dreams, and it was through this dream channel that her ancestors had told her that she would be travelling to Germany, as she explained. As the days went by, she again dreamt that she was travelling by plane, which according to her meant that the spirits were giving her permission to travel. The last person is Gladys Huinca. She is a *zugumachife*, someone who interprets the *machi*, being the spiritual support and helping her in the whole process. She is Patricia's sister and also lives in the commune of Cholchol. In the first instance, then, only four Mapuche were participating in the project, but during the process, the *machi* Patricia requested including a fifth person, her sister, to help her in case she goes into *keimi* (trance). This is a crucial element and an important part of the protocol, as the *machi* are always accompanied by their *zugumachife* or companions.

Once the committee had been formed, virtual meetings were held. The first meeting focused on introducing the Collaborative Museum project, the historical context of the Mapuche collections in the Museum and outlining the objectives of the project as well as the methodology to be used. The following process consisted of eight meetings to pre-select the pieces, where we would only choose the most significant ones to work with in Berlin. This process lasted about one month and was carried out through virtual meetings between the committee and Lena Steffens as the accompanying researcher from Germany.

Fig. 3 Working with the collection during the Mapuche's stay in Berlin in May 2025

As a method, the *nutramkam* (conversation) is employed, a Mapuche practice in which a gathering of people is convened, while respecting cultural protocols. The *nutramkam*

> refers to a type of discourse carried out in Mapuzugun, whose structure is abstracted from Mapuche knowledge and involves initial greeting and handshake, followed by a *petukuwün* (reciprocal greeting to account for the emotional, family and community status of the person), then the reason for the visit is explained, and the interview is conducted in Mapuzugun. (Ñanculef and Cayupán 2016:11)

These meetings followed a *nutramkawum* logic for talking about the pieces, but it was also a way of getting to know each other and to know each other's state of health. Two languages are spoken, one Mapuzugun, the other Spanish, alternating according to the subject matter that is being discussed in each of the sessions. After the selection of 193 pieces came a process to filter the most representative pieces in the collection, whereby only a hundred were selected to be seen during the stay in Berlin. Unpublished pieces of silverware, mostly *llankatu* (personal adornments for Mapuche women), textiles, stone and wooden objects, were selected. As a last process, a selection of 21 pieces was made which can be touched with the hands, without the use of gloves, which is an important part of having contact with the materialities and their *newen* (energy).

Additionally, meetings were held with the project staff of the Ethnologisches Museum to discuss various aspects of the stay in Berlin. One key topic was how the Mapuche protocol would be implemented in the process. The first step upon arrival in the museum involved performing a *llellipun* (a rogative), a prayer ritual conducted in front of the Mapuche objects, some of which may carry both positive and negative energies. It is therefore essential to seek permission and offer prayers for everything to proceed smoothly, ensuring that all the participants remain in good health.

Reflections on the Ongoing Process and Outlook

The Mapuche collections at the Ethnologisches Museum bear witness to the cultural identity of the Mapuche and their self-perception as a people that have resisted colonial expansion and exploitation for centuries. A positioning and (re)evaluation of the collection holdings in historical cultural processes, including their interpretations in the present, can only succeed through the perspective of the Mapuche themselves. The aim of the cooperation project is to open up the collections and understand the associated stories, knowledge and practices in the present. The musealized material culture is linked to people and communities living in the present, their knowledge, practices and social worlds. They are intertwined in many ways with social and cultural processes beyond a local and historical context.

Throughout the project, it has become evident how complex preparing and carrying out the cooperation process is. On the one hand, this is reflected in the still incomplete provenance research on the collection's contexts, a challenge due to the lack of available data. Provenance information is in turn essential for the Mapuche, as the territorial origin and history of the objects play an important role in how they are viewed today. The often violent historical processes behind the objects are still deeply intertwined with issues of identity, as well as social and cultural dynamics. Finally, the infrastructural and institutional conditions and guidelines within the Ethnologisches Museum are crucial parameters for the project. Navigating these in alignment with the needs, perspectives and expectations of the Mapuche is an ongoing process of negotiation that requires mutual patience, openness and a willingness to engage in dialogue. The extent to which colonial structures within the institution of the Ethnologisches Museum influence the project's process and outcomes – whether a sustainable and possibly new approach to the Mapuche collections can be implemented, whether the needs and expectations of the cooperation partners are met, and what resonance the project has for the Mapuche in their territories and communities – must all be part of a critical reflection process which may require some time.

Reflecting on the Mapuche's stay in Berlin, it is apparent that the face-to-face encounter with the pieces and staff in the museum was a valuable and meaningful opportunity for knowledge exchange, conversation and direct contact with the pieces. How-

Fig. 4 Working with the collection during the Mapuche's stay in Berlin in May 2025

ever, it also meant confronting the painful history of the dispossession and colonization of Wallmapu. A fundamental point that emerged was the need to understand the meanings of the pieces. They cannot be fully understood without the participation and involvement of the Mapuche themselves, as these objects contain essential information about their relevance, provenance, use, techniques, materiality and spiritual dimension, elements that are largely absent from the museum's documentation. Mapuche material culture remains alive and present in the memory and practices of the participants, who recognize the Berlin collections as a source that allows the reconstruction and revitalization of the Mapuche *kimvn* of different trades such as silversmiths, weavers and transmitters of knowledge. As next steps, the need to correct and supplement the museum's data with all the knowledge discussed was emphasized, as well as generating a transmission of everything learned and observed in the different territories, within a process of dialogue that is just beginning.

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Credits

Figure 1 Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Pierre Adenis, 2024
Figure 2 Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Pierre Adenis, 2024
Figure 3 Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, 2025
Figure 4 Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, 2025

Reveal and Conceal: Poetic and Sensory Dimensions in Collaborative Knowledge Production in the Project 'Talking Mats: Interwoven Histories – Connecting Peoples' (2023–2025)

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Abstract: A collection of late 19th-century mats originating from the Lamu Archipelago in northern Kenya – globally unique, as they bear interwoven poems – is today kept in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. The project 'Talking Mats: Interwoven Histories – Connecting Peoples' is a joint research project and cooperation between the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, and the National Museums of Kenya, in particular the Lamu Museums and World Heritage Site. This article reflects on the ongoing process of knowledge and exhibition co-production. As a specific kind of collaboration, co-production is often considered an innovative approach in that it integrates multiple perspectives in museum practices. Seven members of the 'Talking Mats' team reflect from the artistic, practical and scientific perspectives on their activities, roles and the outcomes of their joint endeavour in co-producing a multi-media and multi-sited exhibition project across boundaries of language, nation states and resources. The aim is to highlight the

 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8868

experiences, challenges and opportunities of a joint project in relation to postcolonial working methods in ethnological collections and museums, as well as in international museum cooperation.
[Anthropological Museum Cooperation, Knowledge Co-Production, Community Engagement, Colonial Collections, Swahili Coast, Heritage Research]

Introduction

In the rhythmic movement of skilled hands, an ancient craft unfolds, one that bridges past and present, revealing stories through woven patterns while concealing deeper meanings within their intricate designs. Lamu's diverse weaving traditions embody the community's ingenuity in harnessing the available local materials to meet functional needs creatively. Each weave, each fibre, serves a purpose, showcasing the ingenuity and resourcefulness of its artisans. Primarily crafted by women, woven mats known locally as *mikeka* are far more than household items: they are symbols of identity, tradition and social connections, passed down through generations. Whether laid out in homes, used as *mswala* prayer mats, or used on special occasions, these mats embody a heritage of artistry and communal ties in which every frond carries whispers of the past into the present.

The Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin houses a small collection of aesthetically elaborate *mikeka* from the East African Swahili coast dating from the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries. The mats, which come from the Lamu Archipelago in northern Kenya, are unique in the world, not least because written poems are woven into most of them. Twelve mats have inspired this collaborative project, which aims to 'reanimate' these belongings and to re-evaluate the intertwined histories between Germany and the East African coast.

'Mikeka Inayosema na Kutuunganisha' or 'Talking Mats: Interwoven Histories - Connecting Peoples' is a transregional, transdisciplinary cooperation and joint project of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the National Museums of Kenya, Lamu Museums and World Heritage Site. It is funded by 'the Collaborative Museum'. The 'Talking Mats' project aims to advance a deeper understanding of shared histories, integrating both international and local perspectives into heritage research and curation. In this jointly written text, we as an international project team recount and reflect on our experiences in the simultaneous process of co-producing knowledge and co-curating an exhibition at the Lamu Museums. The co-developed narrative on methodological approaches and experiences in an international museum cooperation is guided by the poems woven into the mats; they provide us with orientation and introduce the respective thematic sections. We treat Swahili poetic practice as the epistemological basis for this co-curational work. In this article, from multiple perspectives, a team of seven authors writes and rewrites a moment and process of knowledge exchange in honouring the knowledge and support of more than fifty individuals for this project. We are grateful to all their contributions

and appreciate the collaboration and support from all the colleagues, partners, participants and networks involved.

1. Muted Mats: Interwoven Poetry Whispering in Storage Rooms

Fig. 1 Mat 5 (III E 5087). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

Kwanda takupa dalili, uzitowe (uzito wake) ni thakili, kipendi au jabali	First, I give you a sign, whose weight is heavy, you may love it or be against it
La pili nikukhubiri, tangu uliposafiri, sifumbi zangu nadhari	Second, let me tell you, since the day you have travelled, I can't close my eyes

Fig. 2 First two verses of the poem *Kwanda takupa dalili* as interwoven in Mat 5. Listen to the poem via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_5087_poem.m4a

These are the first two verses of a mat (Mat 5) with a poem of eight verses that talks about the hardships of spatial separation, obviously of two lovers, as can be seen in the mat's following six verses. Metaphorically, these verses allude to the theme of the spatial separation of all these historical mats from their place of origin, not only from where they were produced, but also from a place where they possessed a function and meaning within society.

Originating from the Lamu Archipelago, the twelve *mikeka* currently kept at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin have diverse stories to tell, stories about their creation as much as about their removal from a context of origin and meaning. Most of them were sold or given to the former Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (today: Ethnologisches Museum) between 1896 and 1907 by Clemens Denhardt (1852–1929) or Joseph Friedrich (ca. 1861–1910).[1] Mat 8, for example, features four Swahili verses written in Ajami (Arabic Script), forming a woven praise poem in honour of Bwana Kisitavu, who was identified as Gustav Denhardt (1856–1917), younger brother of Clemens Denhardt.[2] Clemens and Gustav Denhardt, as well as Joseph Friedrich, are known to have resided in Lamu and Witu in the second half of the 1880s. The Denhardt brothers, for instance, played a significant role in international affairs between local, German and European actors in the late 19th-century. Being linked to these actors, the respective trajectories of the *mikeka* bear witness to a strongly interwoven history of German colonial pasts in Witu on the mainland opposite Lamu.

Since becoming part of the museum collections, the *mikeka* have been kept in storage, rather than being on display where they could at least be talked about, even if they were no longer able to speak for themselves. Questions regarding their provenance are shaping the project's discussion about these mats' historical meaning, the extraction

1 According to the museum's documentation, three *mikeka* (Mat 6, Mat 7, and Mat 9) were shipped from Lamu via Hamburg to the former Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (today: Ethnologisches Museum) in the late 1890s on behalf of two brothers, Clemens and Gustav Denhardt. In 1902 Clemens Denhardt (1852–1929) sold them to the museum (see: SPK-EM, I/MV 0707, E 24a/1888; SPK-EM, I/MV 0718, E 1412/1897; SPK-EM, I/MV 0723, E 360/1900; SPK-EM, I/MV 0725, E 780/1901). In June 1896, Joseph Friedrich (ca. 1861-1910) visited the museum in Berlin bringing with him ten *mikeka* that he lent for study purposes. Five of these (Mat 2, Mat 4, Mat 5, Mat 10, Mat 11) were added to the collections in 1907 as a donation from Friedrich (see: SPK- EM, I/MV 0716, E 1326/1896; SPK-EM, I/MV 0097, E 1337/1896; SPK-EM, I/MV 0176, E 705/1896; SPK-EM, I/MV 0742, E 2096/1907). Mat 8 is documented as having been donated to the museum by the former Kolonialabteilung des Auswärtigen Amtes. In a handwritten note by Joseph Friedrich dated 12th June 1896 he refers to a poem published 1894 in Carl Gotthilf Büttner's 'Anthologie aus der Suaheli-Litteratur' which mentions Gustav Denhardt (1856-1917) and states: 'Diese Matte würde ich auch dem Museum belassen' ['I would let the museum have this mat' (own translation)] (SPK-EM, I/MV 0716, E 705/1896). To learn more about the inclusion of *mikeka* in the museum's collections, access the interactive PDF (introduced later in this contribution) via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/Talking_Mats_Mikekas-Berlin.pdf

2 See Ivanov 2006.

from their cultural and social contexts, and their insertion into the museum as 'objects' rather than as 'cultural belongings' (Ivanov et al. 2023).

In the 19th-century, such mats were crafted as special items that were often purposively commissioned, including by Europeans, purchased and most importantly exchanged as valuable gifts during rites of passage or to enhance friendly relations with others (see also Ivanov 2006). Like the proverbs on today's most popular exchange gift, the colourful *kanga*, mats with interwoven poems emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships in these message-bearing presents. These woven mats become meaningful only in practice, when being exchanged during rites of passage, for instance, when they are used in wedding ceremonies for *nikah* in both the mosque and at home, as wedding gifts, or when used during special functions like *Maulidi* to mark the *kinara* position of the recital leaders. Mats with inscriptions were commonly used in religious spaces as gifts for religious scholars and teachers of initiation rites, or as part of bridal dowries, embedding blessings and wishes into the fabric of daily life. Some were also displayed in elite homes as status symbols, paralleling the calligraphy found in carved Swahili door frames. In any case, the mats have to be enlivened in actual relational formations that are negotiated within (ritual) music and dance performances called *ngoma*. These *ngoma* occasions can be considered intergenerational institutions that offer a space to voice one's concerns and the community an arena to discuss and negotiate critical matters through oral art forms.

Since at least the early 20th-century, mats with interwoven poetry have no longer been produced along the Swahili coast, likely due to a decline in the demand for expensive, handmade luxury articles. Moreover, the last to be crafted have by now been eaten away by time, the tropical climate and termites. Conversely twelve mats have survived being stored in Berlin, and most of them still look new, as they were kept carefully away from pests and sunlight using a conservation-conscious approach.

Reflecting on the historical *mikeka* and their multi-layered stories, the Imam and poet *ustadh* Mahmoud A. Abdulkadir Mau composed the poem 'Tuzithamini Turathi' ['Let Us Value Cultural Heritage'] in 2024.

Lau hawakutukua	Let's say if they hadn't taken them away
Na kwetu zangalikuwa	Here with us they would have been
Mtwa wamemumunyuwa	Completely eaten up by the termites
Kutosaliya kimoya	And none would have been left

Fig. 3 Two verses from the poem *Tuzithamini Turathi* composed by Imam and poet *ustadh* Mahmoud Abdulkadir Mau for the 'Talking Mats' workshop in Lamu (Sept. 2024).

2. Talking Mats: Weaving and Interweaving Knowledge During a Workshop in Lamu 2024

Fig. 4 Mat 7 (III E 9509). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

Moyo wa muhibu nampina, sitaki	My lover's heart I test, I do not
swahibu asozema, kwa mwenye	want a friend who is not good,
nasibu taegema	I will cling to the lucky
Sioni aibu kumwandama, wala	I feel no shame following them,
simjibu akisema, kwa mwenye	nor do I contradict as they speak,
nasibu taegama	I cling to the lucky

Fig. 5 The poem *Moyo wa muhibu* as interwoven in Mat 7. Listen to the poem via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_9509_poem.m4a

The poem on Mat 7 talks about a person's choice to mingle only with good and lucky people. It alludes to the fact that our choice of coming together in a 'Talking Mats' workshop – bringing with us our multiple perspectives, world views and epistemologies – promises happiness, success and luck for our concerted endeavour.

The central aim of our project is to awaken these muted mats from their sleeping-beauty slumber by engaging in an inter-epistemic dialogue, i.e. through conversation, cooperation and co-curation based on Swahili oral and matricentred epistemologies.[3] From 24th to 26th September 2024, a three-day workshop was held in Lamu Town, Kenya, organized and conducted by the two cooperating institutions as the key element of the project. The workshop brought together about fifty international stakeholders, mostly from the Swahili-speaking regions of the East African Coast. Local commoners and knowledge-bearers, academic intellectuals and skilful plaiters and weavers from within the Lamu Archipelago and from the nearby mainland – among others Matondoni, Ozi and Kipini – as well as from neighbouring Zanzibar came together to get to know each other and to exchange their knowledge.

In many ways, the workshop acted as a significant moment in the acceleration of knowledge exchange and the pluralization of epistemologies. For those of us who could not follow word for word the unfolding of the contributions, which were mainly in Kiswahili, grasping the significance of that catalytic moment happened further through emotions. Attuning our senses to the energy of the place, we felt the effervescence through the exchanges, which began from the first day. Bringing and weaving together different forms and practices of knowledge challenged a typical academic lecture format. The workshop was designed to be structured in such a way that it allowed various forms of knowledge to coexist and be shared alongside one another. Kicking off the exchange by unpacking the reproductions of the historical mats on textiles and sharing the information available around the Berlin mat collection, the workshop unfolded with recitals of poems presented alongside academic presentations, weaving, singing, storytelling, vivid debating and performing. What we sensed emerging throughout the workshop was the materialization of a knowledge ecosystem with different types of episteme coming together, interweaving and enhancing each other while rallying around shared concerns over the sustainability of Swahili cultural heritage.

Thanks to the intensive exchange during the workshop and the willingness of the artists, essential knowledge about the process of making such mats and their meaning was exchanged, experienced and flourished.

As a historic coastal town shaped by centuries of maritime trade, Lamu has long been a hub of cultural exchange. Its weaving traditions embody this rich heritage,

3 Like several other Muslim Indian Ocean communities, coastal Swahili-speaking societies are structurally matricentric, meaning that the social organization is built around female-headed families, the 'spirit of shared motherhood' (Amadiume 1987:56) and intergenerational, egalitarian, mimetic and processual theories of knowledge.

blending Indigenous craftspersonship with influences from across the Indian Ocean. The intricate techniques and patterns reflect not only the ingenuity of Lamu's weavers, but also the broader Swahili aesthetic, one that values precision, artistry and the seamless fusion of beauty and function.

Using locally available materials sourced from doum palm, wild date palm, reeds and other natural fibres, artisans create a variety of woven items that serve everyday purposes while preserving ancestral knowledge. Weaving practices vary across the region, with different coastal towns and ethnic groups specializing in distinct techniques and materials. Kipini, for example, remains a key supplier of wild date palm fronds for weaving *mikeka*. Strips cut from doum palm fronds are split into *miyaa* (flexible fibres) for weaving *majambvi* mats or into *ng'ongo* (thicker ones) for utilitarian items like brooms. Straps are plaited, often by women or boys in Muslim schools, and sold by length; men typically sew the plaited straps into the finished *majambvi* mats.

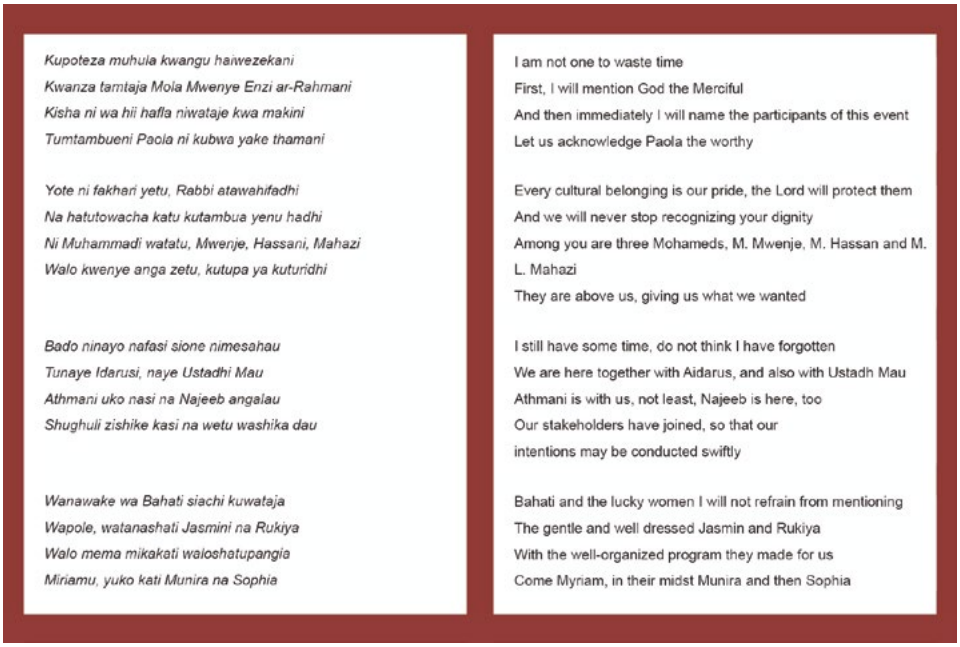
The integration of Islamic calligraphy into various art forms, including textiles and architectural embellishment, underscores its profound significance in both religious and artistic traditions. Regarding the *mikeka*, the script was often integrated into larger symmetrical designs, ensuring aesthetic harmony while maintaining legibility. The process required precision, as the letters had to be carefully woven in sequence without disrupting the mat's structure. Plant-based dyes in dark hues were used to weave the straps into which lighter patterns and inscriptions were interwoven to achieve highlighting.

Weaving itself became a significant part of the workshop, as well as within the collaborative curatorial practice and methods of knowledge-sharing and producing. For example, the workshop program included a women's *baraza* – a Swahili meeting format in which only female workshop participants gathered in a more informal setting to exchange knowledge, including weaving practices, through conversation and the composition of poetry. As non-weaving academic participants in this situation, many of us had the privilege to watch the weaving-making process at play closely while also having a chance to try it out ourselves. Watching the rapid movement of the hands as they criss-crossed the coloured fibres, gradually giving shape and generating complex patterns, felt unfathomable from the sole standpoint of observation. It was only when our weaving teachers placed their hands over ours and physically guided us through the process that we could begin to contemplate the possibility of 'getting the feel' for it.[4] Seeing the way these experts practised their weaving at such a rapid pace, generating mathematical, intricate compositions without following any written rules, reminded us of Ingold's eco-anthropological approach to design. This defends an embodied under-

4 According to Ingold, to make something has to do with 'getting the feel' (Ingold 2000:356) of a wider encompassing environment with which a dialogue of mutual affect is engaged. Taking the body as the primary locus of heuristic experience, he argues that it is 'groundedness' in the environment and its interconnectedness with the elements surrounding it that together allow knowledge of the world and skill to be gained through the channel of a sensorial experience.

standing of weaving practice, which he extends to a general understanding of 'making' as something that does not rely on the mechanical process of first learning the theory and then applying the rule. Rather, he argues that it is through a processual 'practical mimesis' that one acquires the skill of making string bags (Ingold 2000:358).

This understanding of knowledge transfer as corporeal embodiment can be extended to the collaborative working process in which our team has engaged. If starting our work together in the digital sphere might have felt at first like doing collaboration from a handbook, the possibility of coming together in one place and stepping into each other's shoes turned the collaborative work into a tangible, embodied experience. What the workshop achieved was the opportunity to share a presence and form relationships. The following is a poem that was recited by a participant in the 'Talking Mats' workshop and a locally renowned poetess as introductory words on the first day. Her words reflected on the moment of the encounter and the indescribable power of coming together, thus blurring the boundaries that are often created by nation states, language, hierarchies, or knowledge systems, among others.



Kupoteza muhula kwangu haiwezekani
Kwanza tamtaja Mola Mwenye Enzi ar-Rahmani
Kisha ni wa hii hafla niwataje kwa makini
Tumtambueni Paola ni kubwa yake thamani

Yote ni fakhari yetu, Rabbi atawahifadhi
Na hatutowacha katu kutambua yenu hadhi
Ni Muhammadi watatu, Mwenje, Hassani, Mahazi
Walo kwenye anga zetu, kutupa ya kuturidhi

Bado ninayo nafasi sione nimesahau
Tunaye Idarusi, naye Ustadhi Mau
Athmani uko nasi na Najeeb angalau
Shughuli zishike kasi na wetu washika dau

Wanawake wa Bahati siachi kuwataja
Wapole, watanashati Jasmini na Rukiya
Walo mema mikakati waloshatupangia
Miriamu, yuko kati Munira na Sophia

I am not one to waste time
First, I will mention God the Merciful
And then immediately I will name the participants of this event
Let us acknowledge Paola the worthy

Every cultural belonging is our pride, the Lord will protect them
And we will never stop recognizing your dignity
Among you are three Mohameds, M. Mwenje, M. Hassan and M. L. Mahazi
They are above us, giving us what we wanted

I still have some time, do not think I have forgotten
We are here together with Aidarus, and also with Ustadh Mau
Athmani is with us, not least, Najeeb is here, too
Our stakeholders have joined, so that our intentions may be conducted swiftly

Bahati and the lucky women I will not refrain from mentioning
The gentle and well dressed Jasmin and Rukiya
With the well-organized program they made for us
Come Myriam, in their midst Munira and then Sophia

Fig. 6 Verses from the poem *Kusifu wahusika* (Praising the Participants) that was composed as opening speech by poetess Zuwena Msellem for the 'Talking Mats' workshop in Lamu (Sept. 2024).

3. Co-curation: A Story Unfolds

Fig. 7 Mat 1 (III Nls 171). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

Tafadhali, tafadhali mara mia,	Please, please, a hundred times, watch from
keti mbali uwe mwenye kwangalia	a distance and be contemplative
Atambuwao fadhili ni alifu kwa mmoya	Among a thousand, it is only one who
	recognizes benevolence
Yambo hili sitende nimekwambiya	This, do not do, I have told you
Sikubali lenya tenge na udhiya	Do not incur trouble and hardship
Atambuwao fadhili ni alifu kwa mmoya	Among a thousand, it is only one who
	recognizes benevolence

Fig. 8 The poem *Tafadhali tafadhali* as interwoven in Mat 1. Listen to the poem via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_Nls_171_poem.m4a

Fig. 9 Mat 2 (III E 12790). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

Yambo hili sitendi, nimekwambia,	This, I do not do, I have told you
sikubali lenye tenge na udhiya,	I do not incur trouble and annoyance
atambuao fadhila hakuna hatta mmoya	There is not a single person who recognizes goodwill/benevolence
Tafadhali ushike wangu wasia,	Please hold on to my advice, watch from a
keti mbali uwe mwenye kwangalia,	distance and be contemplative
atambuao fadhila hakuna hatta mmoya	There is not a single person who recognizes goodwill/benevolence.

Fig. 10 The poem *Yambo hili* as interwoven in Mat 2. Listen to the poem via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_12790_poem.m4a

These are poems on two mats (Mat 1 and 2) which talk to each other. We are lucky to have found them both in the Ethnologisches Museum. While the 'Talking Mats' workshop in September 2024 made it possible to come together in one place, we then had to leave each other and continue our dialogue and co-curatorial work from a dis-

tance. Regular online meetings made it possible to slowly but surely negotiate, develop and co-curate our envisioned 'Talking Mats' exhibition in four venues of the National Museums of Kenya, Lamu Museums and World Heritage Site, in Lamu town.

In the Swahili practice of plaiting, strips of fibre are never interwoven as single strands, but are always woven in pairs. If one strip becomes too thin, it is reinforced by adding a second. This dimension of relationality and of things working in pairs is reflected throughout Swahili knowledge practices and is also enacted in poetry, as composing a poem is never done for one's own sake, but rather to communicate with others. We understand the collaborative practice we engaged in to resemble weaving or composing call-and-response poetry. Just as no single strand will weave itself very far, so the elaboration of our narrative can only take place through the interweaving of different strands of knowledge. Just as immersing oneself in a sensory environment is essential to learning a skill, we recognize that a shared presence is pivotal in the process of weaving our strings of knowledge together so that they can become a texture.

The co-curatorial process, which began with set meetings and spontaneous discussions while we were all on site in Lamu, continued as weekly online meetings thereafter. Finding a regular time slot that worked for all of us, despite different time zones and respective institutional agendas, felt like an early success. The designated weekly virtual meeting quickly became our safe space in which to gather and coexist, not only to continue the shared curatorial discussions, but also, and more importantly, to strengthen the relationships we had started to build in Lamu. The few months following the workshop thus became a phase of experimentation, of trial and error, so as to figure out shared tools and methods for our collaborative work. The results reflect the process of both becoming a team and co-producing knowledge in multi-layered partnerships. For instance, while imagining displays of the reproductions of the *mikeka* on textiles within the respective venues of the Lamu Museums, exhibition re-arrangements were considered, as was unfolding the storyline while building upon existing narratives. In doing so, a unique kaleidoscope of individually and jointly co-authored texts emerged from pluri-vocal conversations and shared learnings within the 'Talking Mats' trajectory.

The exhibition that opened on 7th August 2025 is dedicated to the *mikeka* and the interwoven histories of East Africa. Presented in the following four venues of the Lamu Museums, the exhibition explores divergent and related themes: the German Post Office Museum highlights the interwoven historical encounters; Lamu Fort focuses on the creation and meaning of *mikeka* today; the Swahili House Museum reveals the pervasive role of *mikeka* in ceremonial and everyday life; and the Lamu Museum addresses orality and poetry in social and trade relations.

As such, the exhibition deals in particular with German-East African relations from a local matricentred point of view that is characterized by inclusiveness, multilingualism, trans-culturalism, Indian Ocean aesthetics, competition and community commitment. The story is told around mats that were woven by Swahili-speaking peo-

ples, primarily women, in order to serve as meaningful artefacts in a mother-focused Muslim maritime society that is receptive to foreigners who show a readiness to adapt their ways. In this regard, the exhibition builds on emic perspectives and endogenous knowledge practices that focus on human relationships, gift-exchange and reciprocity – all that is embedded in these mats' role and use during rites of passage and according to life stages. Following the idea of creation by combining two things, the exhibition project challenges not only state borders, but also conceptions of time, history and ideas of communities as homogeneous. It works towards a concerted reappraisal of the colonial past as a shared history through collaboration, co-curation and inter-epistemic dialogue: 'Tuzithamini tarikhi na turathi zetu' [Let us Value our Historical Past and Heritage].[5]

The reality of working across countries and institutions according to various logics means that doubts along the way can punctuate the process. Listening to each other and hearing each other are the main aspects of building a relationship of trust. In the process of building a common understanding of the project and fostering a trusting exchange, the transnational team simultaneously worked towards a specific goal: a co-curated exhibition that should reach an audience in Lamu. So, while the moments of silence between meetings might have felt destabilizing, the regular meetings became even more moments of sheer connection, in which we felt we were in this together, active and contributing to the process; we had become a team, creating a space for learning with each other, and discovering new ways and forms of working together.

5 See poem by *ustadh* Mahmoud A. Abdulkadir Mau, 2024.

4. Challenges and Hopes for the Future

Fig. 11 Mat 10 (III E 12788). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

Sikutaharaki kwa mapaji, hini nda (henenda) riziki yote mja, baada ya dhiki ni faraji	I didn't rush for gifts (I didn't hasten towards a reward), everything that comes from God goes to the human being, after misfortune comes relief
Kuomba sitaki mahitaji, wala sikumbuki nataraji, baada ya dhiki ni faraji	I don't want to pray for any needs, neither do I remember that I needed to do so, after misfortune comes relief

Fig. 12 The poem *Sikutaharaki kwa mapaji* as interwoven in Mat 10. Listen to the poem via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_12788_poem.m4a

This poem (Mat 10) alludes to unequal relationships, endured hardships and the hope for a better future. Thus, in this section we address examples of challenging issues within our project and exchanges such as how to think about the issue of meaningful restitution and the future of historical collections.

The often emotive and controversial topic of restitution was directly addressed in a key presentation and subsequent discussions during the workshop, highlighting the negative effects of the acquisition and relocation of artefacts since the arrival of the Portuguese and other European powers from the late 15th-century onwards. While the motives for these acquisitions evolved over time, from spoils for treasure hunters and sources of wealth for European rulers to objects of curiosity for academics and amateur researchers, the artefacts increasingly became prized by collectors and were later acquired for scientific purposes towards the end of the 19th-century.

Despite this evolution, the evidence suggests that many artefacts continued to be obtained through unfair negotiations and, in some cases, by force, particularly given the power imbalance between colonists and local communities. Regarding the mats in question, the exact motives and contexts behind their removal and/or acquisition by the Denhardt brothers or Joseph Friedrich remain uncertain. However, given that one of these mats was obviously dedicated to Gustav Denhardt, it is believed that they might have been acquired through local contacts, particularly with the renowned craftsman Muhamadi Kijumwa.[6]

While the issue of restitution often provokes strong emotions, the workshop highlighted how many of these mats have been carefully preserved over time, gaining new meanings for both the people of Lamu and the German institutions that house them. Their historical journey has added layers of significance to these artefacts.

Our inter-epistemic collaborative project is an attempt to find new, meaningful understandings and ways of restitution. While only reproductions of the mats have returned to Lamu so far, we hope that this transdisciplinary project has sparked the enlivening of meaningful message-bearing woven mats and the knowledge of their production. This is more important to us than seeing what is left of the historical mats return physically to the tropics, as we understand restitution as more than 'just the geographic reorganization of collections' (Rassool 2022:60). The 'restitution' of cultural belongings embedded in relational performative contexts, such as the *mikeka*, cannot be limited to objectified things: it must re-actualize these epistemologies, relationships, and material, embodied and evocative meanings in order to restore their *hadhi*, their value, status and dignity. The 'translocal circuits of learning and exchange', like the sharing of knowledge, ontologies and caring practices as experienced in this museum cooperation, may strengthen and repair relations and guide us to 'more care-*full* global museum practices' (Warren 2025:7). The project with the components described here is

6 Muhammad bin Abubakar bin Omar al-Bakary (1855–1945), born in Lamu, was gifted with exceptional intellect, character and artistic ability. His remarkable talents earned him the nickname Kijumwa, meaning 'one born with innate genius'. He was a scribe, calligrapher, poet, musician and master woodcarver, whose legacy resonates across East Africa and beyond. Among his most enduring artistic achievements is the ornately carved entrance door of the German Post Office in Lamu, commissioned in 1892 by Gustav Denhardt, his close friend and patron (Abou Egl 1983).

a first attempt in this direction, which, in the sense of a 'restitution' based on reciprocity, must be further pursued.

Fig. 13 Mat 11 (III E 12789). Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

Bahati ni shada la pumbao,
dini nda sijida apawao, ~~*ivu kwanda yadarika kwao*~~ *(not yet identified)*

Siyo ibada afanyao,
humumpa Wahida apendao,
~~*ivu kwanda yadarika kwao*~~ *(not yet identified)*

Luck is the trademark of amusement, the believer's is the mark on one's forehead, (not yet identified)

It is not the worship one fulfills, God the One gives to those who He wants (not yet identified)

Fig. 14 The poem *Bahati ni shada la pumbao* as interwoven in Mat 11. Listen to the poem via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/mat_III_E_12789_poem.m4a

5. By Way of Conclusion, an Open End…

We chose the verses of Mat 11 to begin our open conclusion, as in this poem the last lines of each triplet have not yet been clearly identified nor interpreted. For us, this is an invitation to continue the collaborative research done with Swahili ethnographic items that are held in European museums.

The logic of institutional structures and project-funding are shaping the frameworks for collaborative endeavours. The expectation set by the institution to produce results whilst still finding ourselves in a process may feel like a contradictory movement. Thus, the central result we can present so far is that which alludes to our projects' credo, namely that our 'Talking Mats' story is our process, one of co-production, joint achievements and learning how to engage meaningfully with each other.

Openness and unresolvedness – the 'right to opacity' (Glissant 1997) – may be regarded as an aesthetics of decolonizing processes that counter Western epistemologies and museological practices of unambiguity. For the future we wish for more time: to continue weaving together the threads we have picked up, and to be playful and experimental in finding sustainable, equitable and consistent methods to incorporate the voices expressed in the workshop into the further development of this inclusive project.

Acknowledgements

Our heartfelt thanks go to the National Museums of Kenya, Lamu Museums and World Heritage Site, and the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, for their support and commitment to this cooperation. Our cooperation is carried out within the framework of 'the Collaborative Museum', a joint initiative of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. We gratefully acknowledge the institutional support, shared expertise and collegial engagement that have enabled the development and completion of this work. We cordially thank all partners and participants of the 'Talking Mats' workshop that took place in September 2024. Special thanks go to mat-weavers, poets and interpreters, scientists and researchers, community members and dignitaries for their support and enriching contributions to the project.

Glossary of Terms

baraza (semi-public meeting place and format for informal discussions)
hadhi (value, status and dignity)
kanga (also: *leso* is a colourful cloth worn by women and bearing a printed saying or proverb)
kinara (a mosque model stand, decorated with jasmine flowers and positioned in front of the recital leader)

majambvi (sg. *jambvi*, rectangular coarse mats made from doum palm fibres)
mkeka (*pl. mikeka,* wild date-palm fibre mats)
nikah (solemnizing a marriage in the mosque or at home)
miyaa (flexible doum palm fibres for weaving)
ng'ongo (thicker doum palm fibres)
ngoma (drum, music and dance performances)
Maulidi (celebration [month] of Prophet Mohammed's birthday)
mswala (prayer mat)
ustadh (title for a Muslim scholar)

To explore further the terminology related to the handicraft of plaiting in Lamu's diverse weaving traditions, access the 'Talking Mats' glossary via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/Talking_Mats_Glossary.pdf [Date of Release: August 2025]. We hope that this document will evolve further, and we welcome contributions in the form of visuals (photos, illustrations) or texts.

Mikeka Collection

For further exploration of the *mikeka* hosted at the Ethnologisches Museum – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz access the interactive pdf file via the following link: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/Talking_Mats_Mikekas-Berlin.pdf [Date of Release: July 2025]. The interactive pdf was conceptualized as a tool for the workshop in September 2024 and was further developed for the 2025 exhibition (see article by Cristina Navarro, this issue).

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Protective Beings: The Superpowers of Nature. An Artistic Research Laboratory

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Abstract: This article describes a collaborative educational and artistic project developed by the Instituto Colombiano de Anthropología e Historia (ICANH) and the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. Protective stone figures from the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín, some of which are also in the collections in Berlin, were the starting point and inspiration for the resulting workshop 'Protective Beings. The Superpowers of Nature'. This workshop promotes ecological awareness among children in Berlin and San Agustín Colombia. A central focus of this foundational artistic research is to develop methods to empower children not to feel powerless in the face of climate change and species extinction, but to build and strengthen their self-efficacy. Through the encounter with the stone guardians, the children are enabled to reflect on both the relationships between different species and their own position in the world.
[Colombia, San Agustín culture, collaboration, ecological diversity, education]

Fig. 1 Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photo: Valerie von Stillfried

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Collaborating for Ecological and Cultural Awareness

'Protective Beings: The Superpowers of Nature' is a case study in participatory museum education and artistic research that has emerged from a collaboration between Colombian and German museum curators and artists. Yorleny Cardozo Peña and Valerie von Stillfried set up the project together to explore new formats of collaboration that respect cultural belongings and foster multi-perspective approaches to museum education amid ecological crises and negotiations over restitution. It asks how children can be encouraged to think about nature not in an overburdened or anxious role, but in a positive, self-confident and cooperative one. Through artistic research based on shared experiences, translocal encounters and site-specific knowledge, the project seeks to create a participatory space where ecological, historical and emotional connections can emerge. The workshop promotes awareness of biodiversity and provides a space where children can engage creatively with respect and care for other living beings. In this article, we share our experiences and reflections on the project – how its concept evolved, how it has developed in practice, and what effects we can already observe in its current phase. By doing so, we hope to contribute our perspective to the ongoing museological debates from within our own practice.

Project Context and Aims

Initiated in 2024, the collaboration has brought together Colombian artist and educator Yorleny Cardozo Peña and Berlin-based curator for education and outreach Valerie von Stillfried. Together, they have been developing a bookable artistic workshop for primary school classes, to be launched in Berlin and San Agustín from September 2025 onwards. The project is supported by Stefanie Schien, curator of the South American collections, and Margarita Reyes, coordinator of museology at the Instituto Colombiano de Anthropología e Historia (ICANH). It is part of a long-term exchange in the fields of education and research within CoMuse, which stands for the Collaborative Museum at the Ethnologisches Museum und Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Ethnological Museum and Asian Art Museum) in Berlin.[1]

The workshop introduces children to archaeological sculptures and ceremonial sites in the San Agustín mountains, while also fostering ecological literacy and emotional resilience. A central pedagogical concern is to counter narratives of human exception-

1 We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the staff who contributed to the success of this project, including their comments, organizational efforts and logistic support. Special thanks go to Yannick Dreessen, Kai Patricia Engelhardt, Nadja Kabalan, Lars-Christian Koch, Ines Seibt, Anna Szöke, Ruti Ungar, the EM/CoMuse team, and Natalia Angarita, Alhena Caiceido, Fernando Montejo, Angel Galindez, Juan Pablo Ospina and Víctor Pizón, who worked at ICANH and the park.

alism by positioning all living beings – humans, animals and plants – as interconnected and interdependent. The workshop explicitly emphasizes the value of biodiversity and ecological balance, encouraging children to consider the functional roles of species in their habitats and to reflect on their own roles in protecting the natural world. Rather than presenting climate change and species extinction as overwhelming threats, the workshop invites children to reframe these issues through research, imagination and creativity. Through close observation, play and creation, participants learn to appreciate the 'superpowers' and complexity of nature and to recognize themselves as part of it: the creatures shape not only ecosystems, but also our cultural identity. The sculptures from San Agustín are no longer statues or museal objects, but stand for dialogue, empathy and deeper understanding.

The Statues of San Agustín

In the south of the province of Huila in the Colombian Massif Central, at an altitude of 1,730 metres above sea level, there are monumental tombs of the pre-Hispanic society known as the San Agustín culture, in front of which stand guardian figures made of volcanic stone. These impressive sculptures, which were created around two thousand years ago, bear animal features such as claws, teeth, or wings.

Some of these archaeological sculptures can be found today in the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. They came to the Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde (today's Ethnologisches Museum Berlin) through the agency of Konrad Theodor Preuss (1869–1938). Preuss began working at the Königliche Museum für Völkerkunde in 1895 after finishing his PhD and successively filled various positions and functions. By 1908 he had become the curator of the North American collections. In the course of his career at the museum, he twice travelled to Latin America to do ethnological and archaeological research. From 1913 to 1919 Preuss was in Colombia commissioned by the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde. From the outset, he planned to explore the statues of San Agustín. He had known about them from the descriptions of various travellers such as Agustín Codazzi (1857), Johann Jacob von Tschudi and Alphons Stübel (Preuss 1920/21:91ff).[2]

In the three months he spent in San Agustín from December 1913 to February 1914, Preuss probed various sites in and around San Agustín itself. As part of this,

2 After his stay in San Agustín, Preuss also undertook ethnographic fieldwork and collected audio and text recordings of the Uitoto, Tama and Coreguaje on the north-west fringe of the Amazon basin and with the Kágaba of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast, as well as smaller archaeological digs near Bogotá (Preuss 1920/21:105 ff.). His original plans to return after one and a half years were interrupted by World War I. Unexpectedly halted, he spent the time in the small town of La Esparanza, preparing publications on his research (ibid. 128).

supported by his assistant Telésforo Gutiérrez and locals, he uncovered twelve statues, photographed 120 and made 39 papier mâché copies (Fischer 2019). As this constituted the first concerted digging and attempt at documentation, Preuss' work significantly contributed to the recognition of the importance of San Agustín's archaeological sites as an emblematic part of Colombia's historical patrimony. In 1935, an archaeological park was founded, which in 1995 was accepted as a UNESCO world heritage site (Reyes 2017:261f.). As a result, Preuss is still considered an influential person in Colombian archaeology (Reyes 2017:308). Preuss also assembled a collection meant for the Museum. Along with ceramics and stone artefacts, it also consisted of stone statues.[3] Fifteen of these statues and their fragments have survived World War II and have since become a matter of public interest in San Agustín and later Colombia. Originally spurred by the initiative of the US American expatriate and long-term San Agustín resident David Dellenback (ibid.), an interest in the statues on the level of civil society in San Agustín and beyond has grown, and various stakeholders from around San Agustín have expressed a demand and desire for the return of the statues held in Berlin (cf. Fischer 2019; Clavijo et al. 2025). Apart from letters reclaiming the statues based on law 397 §11.3 of the Constitution from 1997, the Administrative Court of Cundinamarca ruled that the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and ICANH should take steps to facilitate the statues' restitution (Tribunal Administrativo de Cundinamarca, 14.09.2017). In the aftermath of the court decision, the ICANH invited the director of the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Lars-Christian Koch, to Colombia. He visited San Agustín in December 2023. During his visit, and in the course of becoming acquainted with the park with its surroundings and meeting residents of San Agustín, he gave the impetus to deepening the collaboration between ICANH and the Ethnologisches Museum beyond the undergoing negotiations about restitution. In particular, he suggested collaboration in the field of museum education. He also met Yorleny Cardazo Peña and got to know her artwork in the park's museum. After returning, Lars-Christian Koch initiated the museum education project as part of CoMuse, the Collaborative Museum on which we reflect in this article. The idea was well received by ICANH, and steps were taken among the partners to facilitate the project by involving Yorleny Cardozo Peña and Valerie von Stillfried.

The CoMuse Fellowhip

Yorleny Cardozo Peña grew up in the province of Huila, Colombia. She received her Master's degree in Fine Arts at the Universidad del Cauca in 2012 and in 2025 com-

3 See Fischer (2019:14) for a critical reflection on the context of appropriation and the public reaction to it in 1915.

pleted a second Master's degree in Cultural Management and Museology. She currently works as a mediator at ICANH and has been specifically involved in the redesign of the museum at the Parque Arqueològico de San Agustín. In her work, she traces the collective memory of the communities around Pitalito, a town in Huila, capturing people, cultures and their relationships with plants and animals through drawings and paintings both in nature and while travelling.

For Yorleny, the archaeological sites in the region of San Agustín are particularly close to her heart as vibrant research laboratories conveying artistic, archaeological and ecological knowledge:

> The statues made of volcanic rock in the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín bear the animal features of fish, birds, reptiles and cats of prey that live in the mountains, humid forests, rivers and streams of the Colombian massif, representing not only the characteristics of nature, but also reflecting its strength, protection and power. The realization of the magnificence in living beings has stayed with me, and I have started to collect insects, seeds and leaves from the forest where the statues live. In my way of working, science and artistic associations go hand in hand. The workshop raises awareness of environmental protection, the preservation of cultural heritage and the importance of protecting forests as a complex ecosystem.[4]

Valerie von Stillfried has been working as a curator for education and mediation in the CoMuse project at the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst since June 2022. She has worked as a freelance stage and costume designer for drama and musical theatre. In recent years, her focus has shifted towards creating participatory spaces and mediation formats in museum contexts.

Since April 2024, Valerie and Yorleny have been in close contact via messenger, email and video calls, sharing insights into each other's working worlds, everyday lives and experiences. In November 2024, Valerie travelled to Colombia for nine days to experience the significance of the sculptures and tombs for those living in the region around San Agustín and the complex interplay of flora and fauna with the stone guardian figures at first hand. The visit to the Parque Alto de los Ídolos near Isnos, together with Angel Galindez, was particularly impressive, as was a night walk with Yorleny through the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín to the Fuente Ceremonial, a riverbed made of carved stone that was used as a place for ceremonies. We (Yorleny and Valerie) listened to the nocturnal sounds and let the park work its magic on us in its deserted silence and nocturnal sculptures.

During these days, we spent every minute exchanging ideas, conceptualizing and sharing experiences. It was particularly important for us to discuss these sculptures, their origins and their significance, but not to place them at the centre of the workshop for children of primary school age. It was more important for us to address the cur-

4 https://comuse.org/en/fellowship/yorleny-cardozo-pena, accessed October 23, 2025.

Fig. 2 Workshop with Children in the Parque Arqueológico de San Agustín,
© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photo: Valerie von Stillfried

rent challenges facing the children, like species extinction. COP16, the world's largest biodiversity summit, took place in Cali, Columbia, at the same time as the trip, which encouraged us to integrate the topic of biological diversity into the workshop.

Yorleny was very interested in focusing on the small creatures of nature, especially insects and the connection between humans and animals, 'ser humano, ser animal',[5] initiated by Margarita Reyes, who had been working on this for some time. We researched animals and their special abilities, such as the special hearing of the male moth (night butterfly) and its incredible sensors that detect others of its kind over many kilometres or the special suction cup toes that geckos use to climb on ceilings or glass panes.

We planned the first components and prepared a workshop day with children from the local school, the Institución Educativa Yachaywasi runa Yanakuna. The children's reactions, questions and imaginative connections played a central role in refining our approach. We spent hours with the children in the archaeological park, where they im-

5 Margarita Reyes developed an unpublished concept paper for an exhibition on this topic.

provised scenes about superpowers, filmed animals and plants, and searched for leaves, bugs and seeds. Later they designed and collaged their own protective beings with the material they found, as well as with papery wings, paws, fangs and much more. Many children wrote down their wish for protection right next to their figures.

In February 2025, Yorleny travelled to Berlin for nearly six weeks as a CoMuse Fellow.[6] During this time, we intensified our collaboration and developed the school workshop further. Yorleny worked on the artistic intervention 'La Voz de la Montaña' (The Voice of the Mountains) to integrate the San Agustín cosmos as a panorama into the exhibition of the Ethnologisches Museum in the Humboldt Forum.

La Voz de la Montaña: Artistic Intervention in Berlin

Recognizing that children in Berlin cannot visit the park in San Agustín as their Colombian peers can, the idea emerged to bring the park into the museum in a sensory and immersive way. During her stay, Yorleny created and painted the approximately 2.5-metre wide and 1.3-metre high panorama 'La Voz de la Montaña' in the form of a multilayered theatre. She painted the wooden silhouettes with acrylic paints and created mountains, trees, plants, sculptures, animals, rivers and villages that form a harmonious whole and that are interweaved into a complex interplay. Yorleny passionately conveys a deep understanding of the power of the guardian figures in the context of their living, breathing landscape.

A sound installation complements the panorama, immersing visitors in the soundscape of the park, from the night-time chirping of crickets to the early-morning calls of the *guacharracas*,[7] the daytime birdsong and the afternoon rainfall. Through light and sound, the installation invites viewers – especially children – to slow down, look closely and experience the forest as an animate presence.

On 19 March 2025, we ceremoniously opened the panorama 'La Voz de la Montaña' with an event called Gästezimmer[8] (Guest Room) in the presence of the Ambassador of Colombia, H.E. Yadir SalazarMejía and the Director of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst Lars-Christian Koch. Despite the city-wide public transport strike, many visitors attended. Yorleny and Valerie introduced their project with the support of Julia von Siegsfeld, Restitution Coordinator, who translated their dialogue. From the Mechanical Arena in the foyer of the Humboldt Forum, the

6 Fellowship-Programm: Yorleny Cardozo Peña | Museum für Asiatische Kunst, accessed April 1, 2025.
7 The bird rufous-vented chachalaca (Ortalis ruficauda) is called *guacharraca* in Colombia and is particularly famous and noticeable for its call.
8 Die Stimme der Berge / La voz de la montaña | Gespräch im Humboldt Forum, accessed April 2, 2025.

Fig. 3 'La voz de la Montaña' with the colombian artist Yorleny Cardozo Peña, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Foto: Pierre Adenis

event guided visitors to the second-floor exhibition space, where the panorama is now on permanent display.

During her fellowship, Yorleny took part in various aspects of the museums' educational program in Berlin. This included a guided tour in Spanish or a round table on accessibility and inclusion with Friedrun Portele-Anyangbe. Together with Sarah Klemisch and Roksolana Ludyn, we organized a workshop for Ukrainian women and children as part of the Erasmus+ project 'Come Together'. Yorleny also visited multiple exhibitions at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and immersed herself in Berlin's vibrant cultural scene.

The Laboratory of Superpowers

The workshop 'Protective Beings. The Superpowers of Nature' is structured into three phases, designed to guide children through a process of discovery, reflection and artistic creation.

Part 1. Encountering San Agustín: Sculptures and Soundscapes

The first part introduces children to the San Agustín landscape through direct experience of the site (in Colombia) or via the immersive panorama of 'La Voz de la Montaña' (in Berlin). Children are encouraged to engage closely with the faces, forms and features of the stone guardians. They learn about the culture, its tombs and sculptures, and about the human, animal and vegetal forms embedded in the sculptures. Small stone replicas as hands-on objects, sound and light appeal to the children's various senses. Through guided observation and dialogue, they begin to draw connections and situate the sculptures in a living environment.

Part 2. Exploring Natural Superpowers: Animal Skills and Ecological Roles

The second part of the workshop invites children to explore the extraordinary abilities of animals and their ecological functions. The workshop room is transformed into a small research lab. Digital microscopes, test tubes, real plants, seeds, skins, insects, stones and soil invite children to experiment. Observing the compound eye of a fly or the structure of a fern leaf at high magnification sparks curiosity and joy. Thirty different illustrated playing cards introduce species from Colombia and Germany, such as the Andean condor, peregrine falcon, ant, jaguar, dog and opossum, and it highlights their 'superpowers' – flight, strength, speed, teamwork, camouflage, hearing, or radar. Each card links an animal's ability to its role in the ecosystem. These connections are crucial in showing that animals are not just symbols of strength, but active participants in our world.

Part 3. Creating one's own Protective Being and Action

In the last phase of the workshop, children create their own three-dimensional protective beings. Using a printed craft sheet, they paint, fold and assemble a figure. The artistic process is supported by a collection of modular body parts: claws, wings, antennae, fangs and tails, that can be added and rearranged.

The children are invited to think about their possibilities in creating safe spaces for wildlife (gardens, feeders, bug hotels), in joining activities like tree planting and clean-ups, and learning how to reduce, reuse and recycle. Connecting with the superpowers of animals encourages children to speak up for nature and be active. The children take their colourfully designed figures home with them so that they can share their experiences with their families and thus deepen them.

Fig. 4 Material for the workshop 'Protective Beings. The Superpowers of Nature', © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photo: Valerie von Stillfried

Reflections on the Pilot Phase and Evaluation

The first trials of the workshop were conducted in San Agustín in November 2024 with pupils from the Institución Educativa Yachaywasi runa Yanakuna and in March 2025 in Berlin with Ukrainian children and their mothers. The children's enthusiasm, attentiveness and willingness to engage with the theme of interspecies protection provided us with valuable feedback. Many chose insects or animals that they had encountered themselves or that had particularly impressed them. Their figures often combined different natural elements, such as a protective being with bat ears, the paws of a jaguar, or the wings of a colibri. They responded positively to the work with microscopes and a focus on details. These observations contributed to the refinement of the educational material and confirmed the need to adapt the format to different learning spaces. In the Berlin context, special efforts were made to translate the visual and sensory richness of the Colombian forest into an accessible indoor format. A suitable location within the exhibition was found in a staircase foyer between the exhibition floors, which offered a quiet and concentrated space for the installation.

We are currently working intensively on the realization and implementation of the workshop in the educational programme of the respective museums. Texts are being translated into German, Spanish and Quechua, print data are being created, and animal specimens and plant materials are being organized and brought to the museum's disinfestation chamber so that we can start with the school classes in Berlin and Colombia by the autumn of 2025 at the latest.

Evaluation is ongoing and remains qualitative, relying on feedback from teachers, mediators and the children themselves. Nevertheless, early findings suggest the workshop has succeeded in opening emotional and cognitive pathways for children to explore ecological complexities, vulnerability and their own creativity and strength. Although the educational project does not focus directly on the restitution of the San Agustín sculptures, it is shaped by the ethical and political landscape of these debates. The museum's collections are not neutral holdings but carry with them relational knowledge and histories of acquisition and translocation as well as identity. In this context, education becomes more than outreach – it becomes a form of responsibility.

Institutional Exchange and Future Visions

As Yorleny travelled to Berlin, Stefanie Schien undertook a visit to San Agustín. The purpose of coming to Colombia had been to explore the interests in and to expand the collaboration with ICANH by focusing on other fields of cooperation such as research, as well as to introduce herself as the new curator of the South America collections to various stakeholders in San Agustín. Within the week of her stay, she had the opportunity to visit various sites in the park and to talk to many individuals. As part of this, ICANH had organized a meeting with a school class in the community of Isnos and a discussion with the park's neighbours, that is, the families and individuals who own the land bordering the park area. Furthermore, she met up with members of the Veeduría de la Repatriación, a civil-society group that supports the return of the statues from Berlin, and participated at an event in the *maloca*, the communal house of the Yanakuna community. During all these meetings, members of various political, cultural and ecological organizations and associations of the municipalities of San Agustín and Isnos participated, sharing their opinions and emotions about the meaning of the statues in San Agustín and in Berlin, the latter's current absence and hopes for their return in the foreseeable future.

After Stefanie returned from Colombia, the three of us were able to meet for the first time in Berlin. Together, we reflected on the results and discussed future projects and close collaboration. We would like to develop further the artistic and ethical themes of the stone guardians and expand the focus to include young adults and issues of accessibility, hybrid cultures and global inequality. By involving young people in collaborative formats that deal with cultural heritage, environmental (in)justice and mu-

tual learning, our joint work contributes to the understanding of a younger generation. It confirms the museum as a place not only of exhibition, but also of negotiation and future-oriented dialogue. We believe that the collaboration has fostered a strong bond that has led to respect and understanding, as well as genuine friendship. Additionally, the relationship between our institutions (ICANH and the Ethnologisches Museum) has also deepened and strengthened. It was essential for us to create connections rooted in our shared history. We hope that we can reach many children and families with this work. The collaboration has left a lasting impression and will influence how we design future educational projects.

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Slice(s) of Life: Collaboration in Visual Anthropology between Bena and Berlin

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Abstract: This reflective report provides insights into a long-term collaborative research project in the field of visual anthropology. It deals with questions of collaboration in visual anthropological research, ethnographic film-making, and the archiving and usage of ethnographic footage in and outside museal contexts.
[visual anthropology, ethnographic film, Papua New Guinea, collaboration]

Introduction

The CoMuse project 'Slice(s) of Life' at the Berlin Ethnological Museum covers the topic of transcultural collaboration in visual anthropology in three fields: ethnographic film-making, the museum's film archive and public film screenings. More precisely, the project comprises the production of a reality-telenovela of an ethnographic community in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea, collaborative transcultural research in the film archive of the Ethnological Museum Berlin, and a biannual ethnographic film event at the Humboldt Forum Berlin.

The whole project is based on my long-term cooperation with the Bena-speaking community of Napamogona in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea as a visual anthropologist. It has evolved around the huge body of ethnographic film data built up during nearly thirty years of close cooperation. The material was produced with community members during various periods of research between 1997 and 2022. It covers a variety of different anthropological topics, among them culture change and exchange, material culture, cultural practices, religion and belief systems, and conceptualizations of time, person and gender. It also includes many personal stories, tribe's and clans' histories, stories of origin and myths. A small number of tapes contain short films that I edited at the request of community members on specific events or topics.

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Theoretical and Methodological Foundation

Theoretically and methodologically, I position myself within a framework set out by visual anthropologists and ethnographic film-makers such as David MacDougall (1975; 2005; 2020), Jean Rouch (1974; 1978) and Sarah Pink (2001; 2006). Inspired by MacDougall's observational cinema (1975), with its unintrusive calm and subtleness, and Jean Rouch's direct-cinema approach, which opens up a space for improvisation, self-reflection and the participation of the film's protagonists (1961; 2009), I started off by using the camera as an observational tool, including the flexibility to adjust to circumstances and to leave a space for the persons being filmed to participate actively in the research and filming process. The engagement of community members has indeed been crucial since the beginning of my work on/with film. I share MacDougall's acknowledgement that the film-maker is a participant in relationships with other active subjects, rather than a mere observer (1975). Ethnographic filming and film-making is a joint process. The foundation of any visual anthropological research and the quality of the data therefore lie in the relationship between the researcher-cum-film-maker and the protagonists. I began working with the community of Napamogona during my MA research in 1996 and have since continued the cooperation in various research projects.[1] Needless to say that close relationships have formed over the years and that the long-term and ongoing continuation of our collaboration builds on a strong level of mutual trust.

As MacDougall (1995) points out, ethnographic films are made with others, not about them. The production process can thus be seen as a dialogue between cultures, or rather, between persons with different cultural, social and individual realities. Obviously, the task is not to create an objective audiovisual documentation that represents a 'culture' but to be conscious about (and make transparent, and *work*) the relationships of those involved,[2] as well as the situational relationality, the multi-perspectivity and the biases, interests and agendas of one's self and of those being filmed. If this challenge is taken seriously, the latter become more than just protagonists or interlocutors – they are then collaborators in a common endeavour.

Like Sarah Pink (2001), I found that visual media are not only tools for documenting, but are themselves part of the research process that are actively involved in the production of knowledge. Ethnographic film-making can be a tool for keeping and possibly even revitalizing collective memories and cultural heritage, and even to reform identity (Ginsburg 1991; Knapp 2021). Moreover, as Faye Ginsburg points out, it is

1 2003–2006; 2012–2015; 2016,2018,2019;2020;2022;2023;2024 (one to six months per year): PhD research 'Culture Change and Exchange'; DoBes Project: Bena Bena language; CoMuse: Slice of Life.

2 This implies an understanding of cultural concepts of relationships, especially regarding principles of reciprocity – a topic too deep to dive into in this article. See, for example, Knapp (2017) for a further discussion.

also a means to fight against colonial representations of 'indigenous' persons, peoples and cultures (Ginsburg 1991).

In the following description of this empirical project, I show how this theoretical grounding is played out in practice and demonstrate its benefits for visual anthropological research, ethnographic film production and the further use of ethnographic footage stored in museal archives.

A Slice of Life: Collaboration in Ethnographic Film Production

The Background

The Napamogona are an alliance of five clans that took up joint residence on a huge tract of land near Goroka, the Eastern Highland's provincial capital, more than four generations ago. In Bena Bena, the local language, *napa* means 'group' and *mogona* is 'large'. Given that the Napamogona number about one thousand, the name 'Large Group' seems justified. Napamogona is the name for the tribal alliance, the community, the village site and the land that belongs to the village. This nominal identification captures the profound relationship that the Napamogona share with their land, which land belongs to the clans because of ancestral relationships expressed in stories of origin. Spiritual beings associated with the clans inhabit the land. Above all, as subsistence farmers, community members depend on their land for survival. Caring for and securing the land is therefore central to their lives. However, Napamogona land has never been officially registered, so there is no legal document proving traditional ownership.

The footage I took in Bena now runs to more than 120 hours. Such long-term documentation brings a specific historical and biographical dimension to the data: we see the same persons as children, as young adults, as parents, even as grandparents. We see and hear of elders or relatives who have died since it started. We witness the dawning of a conflict within the community that resulted in warfare and the destruction of the village in 2006. We witness the scattered survivors' returning to their land in 2012 and the subsequent revival of the Napamogona. The material documents a crucial part of the community's history. It is not only of ethnographic value but also of high emotional and, as I was told by the elders, educational and political value to the Napamogona. Clan stories, for example, imply rights to certain plots of land and may be used as evidence to justify land claims, even in court cases today. Land disputes are nothing new in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, but today population growth and the dependence on a cash economy are making questions about land-ownership more pressing. Conflicts over land have become more frequent, larger in scale and numbers, less structured and much more violent than in the past. Thus, the filmed material touches on a number of sensitive topics that have to be dealt with particularly careful.

Copies of the footage were handed over to the community elders regularly throughout the years of my research, first on DVDs, then digitized on a hard drive. In 2022 the Napamogona held copies of about a hundred hours of footage and agreed that the original tapes should be stored in the film archive of the Ethnological Museum Berlin as documentation of their (his)stories and their cultural heritage.

'A Slice of Life: Opena Gosalo'

When I arrived in Napamogona in 2018, I heard that an old local sorcerer, whom I had interviewed a few years before at his request, had died. The footage contained a message to his children and instructions that they were to observe after his death. The following evening, the community gathered to watch his last interview in one of the local *haus piksa*, a grasshouse with a generator-powered screen. Needless to say, that this was a very emotional evening, with many tears being shed. It was one of the many screening events in Napamogona that triggered discussions about the access, uses and purposes of the footage we had produced over the years.

We gathered a few days later on the village's central square to discuss the matter. David, one of the village elders and a spokesman, expressed the Napamogona' happiness about the ongoing documentation of their village and culture ('We are proud to be the best documented community in Papua New Guinea'). Then he proposed that a feature-length film should be compiled from the footage, a film 'that tells the story of Napamogona' from the time before its destruction to the re-founding of the community years later and its prosperous development since. This film, the elders suggested, should be used as a historical document of their village's history and culture, and as an educational tool for future generations to see. I agreed.

When looking through the data, however, we realized that this would be a difficult task. The footage was created primarily in research contexts with a focus on specific research topics. Film had been my main methodological ethnographic research and documentation tool. I had never aimed at creating one big coherent narrative about the village's history. David's wife Esi came up with a brilliant solution to the problem: she suggested combining the ethnographic footage with fiction to fill in the gaps in the narrative threads with scripted and acted scenes. Even more so, we could write a script for a fictionalized history of the village based on true stories, and the Napamogona themselves could become the authors of and actors in their own story. Esi's suggestion was enthusiastically received by the community. Inspired by Nigerian telenovelas that are intensively watched and enjoyed in the local *haus piksa* all over PNG, community members brought up the idea of creating a kind of 'village-reality-telenovela' that should take an entertaining but also educational approach. The Napamogona wanted to show their real history so that 'others could learn from it and not make the same mistakes', as David put it (2023). I was thrilled by the idea of developing a PNG Highlands community telenovela that shows the cultural, social, economic and political contexts of the Napamogona and that reveals personal strat-

egies to deal with the challenges of life in the community today. The idea for 'A Slice of Life' was born.

The Production Process

The subsequent discussions were intense and mirrored the complexity of relationships within the community. It was decided that each clan should be represented equally in the project so that all lineages would be involved in the film process in some way. The overall concern was not to create any feelings of jealousy, since this could affect the whole project.[3] Organizing this was obviously a challenging enterprise. A committee of elders distributed the numerous tasks. Some persons were recruited as actors, others to support the film crew, and yet others were in charge of preparative work, such as building bamboo steps on slippery slopes, cleaning the village, and building toilets for the team and a kitchen house for the cooks. Others took care of catering, security, laundry, collected firewood and so forth. The challenging aspect was to assign the right task to the right person given their family and clan positions, their statuses in the community and their personal skills and preferences. It was also important not to leave anyone out.

While some elders and their helpers were busy with preparation work, we – that is, primarily David, Esi, Daisy and myself – began working on the script for the pilot film. Writing the script was a collaborative challenge and a wonderful experience in itself. We sat on the lawn at the back of my grasshouse on David's 'Opena Gosalo' or 'Breadfruit mountain' and discussed the plot. People would come by and join in for some time, adding to or commenting on the narratives. No dialogues were scripted; only the contents of single scenes were discussed and noted down. Since most Napamogona are illiterate, we drew storyboards and attached them to the interwoven bamboo wall. The visitors rearranged them and triggered new ideas for the storyline. I often joked about having about 900 writers and directors working on the film. Actually, this is only a slight exaggeration. The process of collaborative script development was in a way like field research. I received new insights into Bena culture and was delighted to find that people explained the actions and thoughts of the film characters with more patience and in more detail than they had ever cared to do during my previous research projects. My partners competed in developing plausible characters and storylines and discussed them intensely based on their own real-life experiences. After six weeks that felt like a year of intense ethnographic research, the script was ready.

Producers for the pilot film were found in Verena Thomas (AUS) and Jackie Kauli (PNG), heads of the production company YUMI PIKSA. Verena and Jackie supported us throughout the script-writing process and the film production. They also organized a local film team that arrived in the village for the ten-day shoot. Some young men

3 Jealousy is a widely feared and despised concept in Papua New Guinean cultures. It can be related to magic (a jealous person may harm through magic) or witchcraft (jealousy is, in Bena, considered a trait of Sanguma witches, who may kill their victims to incorporate their strength/success, see Knapp 2011).

from Napamogona supported them with sound-recording or lighting. The motivation of the community members in participating in the film production was overwhelming. In fact, I have never seen the community members so highly engaged in any of my previous research projects. We started filming early and ended late at night, often sitting around the fire until dawn and discussing plot and production. The Napamogona actors were immensely impressive with their talent to improvise and enrich scenes ad hoc. After each day of filming, every participant received a small payment to compensate him or her for the time spent on the project. The money was handed over publicly and transparently. Collaboration in the project was enjoyed and appreciated highly by all the parties involved. Since written publications are not on the top list of my Bena collaborators, I would like to include their voices in this article by referring the reader to the project's podcast, in which David and Daisy, as representatives of the community, share their views.[4]

The post-production process was organized in Australia. In 2022, *A Slice of Life: Opena Gosa'lo* , the pilot film for the planned telenovela, was finalized and launched. The first screening took place in April 2022 in Papua New Guinea at the University of Goroka. In May it had its world premiere outside PNG at the film festival 'Slices of Life' in the Humboldt Forum. *A Slice of Life: Opena Gosa'lo* is now available to all to watch for free on YouTube.[5]

The Napamogona are very interested in continuing this project and producing new episodes. In fact, I have been asked numerous times when the filming would continue. Unfortunately, I had no immediate answer, as we are currently looking for funding.

Slice of Life: Transforming the Archive

In agreement with the community, the large body of audiovisual data from Napamogona is now stored in the film archive of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Above I mentioned the political relevance of this footage, for example, in relation to questions of land ownership. This was revealed in the concerns some elders expressed after they had watched the material. They argued that some of the information was not true or was incomplete. This referred to several myths of origin and clan histories and a number of biographical interviews I had recorded. Since these data include information about clan movements, past land disputes, fights and settlements, the elders' just concern was that a false narrative might have an impact on land rights for future generations. They stated that one of my main interlocutors had, in his story-telling, twisted the facts to his and his lineage's advantage to justify his claims to specific pieces

4 https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/gegen-die-gewohnheit/id1741971437?i=1000670913086, accessed September 10, 2025.

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkMORZBPpGs, accessed September 20, 2025.

of land. This is a very sensitive topic, especially in times of rapid population growth and increasing disputes over resources. The elders' fear was that the data could be misused to give the wrong people access to resources in the future.

Once more I was confronted with the responsibility that we – the Napamogona and I – share for the material. David told me that we would have to go through all the footage to uncover and add comments to 'wrong' information and then to record the 'true' version of the stories. The material in the museum's archive, I was told, must be complemented and must not contain (uncommented) false information. Obviously that makes sense, although the question over which are the 'true versions' is impossible to answer. It may not be the right question to ask in the first place. Rather, the material reveals different perspectives on relationships between groups, persons, spirits and land, and I take it as my task to add as many crucial perspectives as possible. In doing so, it is not possible to create a complete and true archive of the community's 'true' history, but through an interrelated ensemble of views on the same topic it may be possible to reveal an image as close to the community's collective truth as possible. It is therefore of crucial importance to go through the archival footage collaboratively to add comments and record additional narratives and perspectives on issues that were deemed wrong by most elders.

Working collaboratively on the Napamogona film collection has thus become the second 'column' of the CoMuse project 'A Slice of Life'. During their six weeks fellowship at the Ethnological Museum in 2022, David, Daisy and Karufe began to research the Napamogona material more thoroughly, defined questionable parts and starting work on their comments. In 2024 I started recording other versions of clan stories of origin in Napamogona and collected comments on what were identified as the critical scenes. This process is still ongoing, as is the collaboration with the community, who have been incredibly supportive and engaged, and are teaching me so much.

Slices of Life (SoL): Ethnographic Film Days in the Humboldt Forum

The third part of this CoMuse Project brings the aspect of transcultural collaboration with regard to working with audiovisual data to a broader level. Its name, 'Slices of Life' (SoL), refers to the film project described above, but in the plural it refers to a variety of ethnographic films – slices of different lives, so to speak.

SoL is a biannual public film event at the Humboldt Forum Berlin, with a focus on contemporary ethnographic films. It is grounded in cooperation between the Ethnological Museum Berlin, the Stiftung Humboldt Forum and the German Ethnographic Film Festival (GIEFF). SoL is a two-day event with the potential to grow. The first day consists of public film screenings and discussions. The second day is a closed workshop format that allows for more intimate exchanges between the film-makers.

SoL addresses the central topic of collaboration in ethnographic film-making all over the world. Many collaborative turns have been made since Jean Rouch's 'Moi,

un Noir' (1958); SoL provides a platform to discuss these turns and to raise questions about roles, rights, respect and reciprocity in ethnographic film-making. With a focus on Indigenous film-makers and community productions, SoL shows films that may not be widely known and that were often produced on a small budget; but they open windows into the lives and living conditions of others that delve into political, social, cultural and personal topics and provide insights into often unfamiliar contexts. The public film screenings are followed by Q&A sessions and panel discussions with international film-makers. The audience is encouraged to participate in the discussions. The workshop on the second day is reserved for the invited film-makers. It provides a safe space to present new work-in-progress, and to exchange and discuss ideas with colleagues. This day has proved particularly valuable, and great networks have evolved from this less formal gathering.

The first SoL Event took place in May 2022. It hosted the world premiere (outside Papua New Guinea) of the film 'A Slice of Life: Opena Gosalo' in the presence of Daisy Samuel and David Papua'e, two of the main actors from Napamogona, and Karufe Kotile, who was involved in the production process.

As 'Traveling GIEFF', SoL can access films from the vast GIEFF archive. At the two SoL events in 2022 and 2024, films from Nepal, Tanzania, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Cameroon and many other countries were shown, all collaborative productions that deal with topics like gender, exploitation, identity and culture change.[6]

Conclusion

The parts of this project – ethnographic film-production, archival work and film screenings – approach collaboration with a different emphasis. The collection of audiovisual data and the production of the film *A slice of life* stress the importance of the relationships. The key to collaboration lies here in reciprocity, transparency and continuity, and in the common endeavour to explore the world together with the participants (Pink 2001). The archival work, which includes the collecting of additional data in PNG to complement existing ones in the archive, as well as research on the material in the archive, focuses more on the shared interests. The purpose is to produce, keep and revitalize intangible cultural heritage. Here collaboration with the community becomes a social, even political enterprise, as well as a means to reform the group's identity (Ginsburg 1991). Central is here the shared responsibility for the data and their completion, archiving, storage and accessibility. The aim of establishing an ethnographic film festival that deals with questions of collaboration is to strengthen the academic and

6 https://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/slices-of-life-ethnographic-film-day-at-the-humboldt-forum-on-13-may-2024/, accessed September 20, 2025.

artistic discourse about transcultural and interdisciplinary collaboration. It has a focus on the productions of indigenous film-makers and has become a platform connecting academics, artists and communities, following MacDougall's (1975) understanding of ethnographic film as a dialogue with cultures rather than a representation of them.

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Working with Flutes and Whistling Bottles from pre-Hispanic Peru

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Abstract: This article examines a four-year collaboration between Peruvian music archaeologist Gonzalo Rodríguez and German ethnomusicologist Maurice Mengel at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, exploring how European museums can foster collaborative research into Peruvian musical heritage. We argue that recent decolonial perspectives in music archaeology challenge Eurocentric assumptions about musicking and necessitate experimental approaches using replicas of archaeological instruments to explore Andean musical aesthetics. These aesthetics include distinctive timbral qualities, interlocking performance practices and integrated physical movement, features that cannot be adequately studied through the observation of museum artefacts alone. Through Rodríguez's hands-on research, we demonstrate that existing museum documentation—including published catalogues and online portals—lacks sufficient detail for rigorous archaeomusicological study. His investigations have revealed approximately 260 previously unidentified whistling bottles in the Berlin collection and produced faithful replicas requiring detailed measurements, materials research, and technical expertise in instrument construction. We contend that, while online resources remain inadequate, intensive in-person study of collections is essential. Museums holding Peruvian archaeological instruments must facilitate access for South American scholars, publish more comprehensive digital documentation, including sound and video examples, and support experimental research methodologies. Such initiatives contribute to decolonization while advancing understanding of pre-Columbian musical practices and challenging longstanding assumptions.
[decolonial ethnomusicology, experimental music archaeology, Andean musical aesthetics, museum collections and repatriation, archaeological instrument reconstruction, Peruvian pre-Columbian music]

Introduction

In this article, we (Gonzalo Rodríguez and Maurice Mengel) reflect on our collaboration as respectively a Peruvian music archaeologist and a German ethnomusicologist and museum administrator. In addition to reporting some of our activities over the past four years, we focus on questions of how to create conditions which foster collaboration and what steps the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin in particular can take to encourage more collaborative research into the history of Peruvian music. While specific to this particular museum context, we believe this case study can also serve

 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8871

not only as material for further discussion, but also as an impetus to create or improve similar projects elsewhere.

Recent decolonial research in music archaeology questions aspects of music research and musical praxis that have long been taken for granted and that by and large privilege musicking as it is known in Europe. At the same time, newer research on Andean music has only recently found its way into archaeological research more generally and has seldom been tested with instruments in European museums. In this article, we argue that a good way to test these ideas is the experimental approach, wherein replicas of archaeological instruments are played and the sounding qualities of different instruments are experienced in practice (cf. Fang 2023). This approach will not magically tell us how exactly an instrument was played in the past, but it can keep speculations about both instruments and musical practices in check, as well as allowing us to explore and foreground modes of musicking that are considered Andean. Reflecting on our ongoing collaboration, we observe that many existing descriptions of archaeological instruments in European collections, such as in published catalogues or online portals, are not sufficient to carry out such research due to their lack of detail. Hence we argue for more hands-on research with instruments in European collections, not only by European scholars, but also by scholars from South America.

Meeting an Archaeomusicologist from Peru

When Gonzalo Rodríguez first came to the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin in 2021, he financed his own trip and requested to see the collections of ancient flutes from Peru. At the time, he was studying flute at the conservatory in Lima. About ten years before that he had begun teaching himself how to play and how to make flutes. He also became interested in Peruvian archaeology, and particularly flutes in ancient Peru.

It is difficult to study music archaeology anywhere in the world, except perhaps on the doctoral level. Instead, one studies archaeology or music and, with luck, finds a music archaeologist as a dissertation supervisor. It is therefore not surprising that music archaeology, or archaeomusicology as Gonzalo calls it, is such a small field. What is unusual about Gonzalo is that he not only plays the flute and knows archaeology, but also makes instruments himself. This research method corresponds with a current experimental trend in music archaeology of instruments being reconstructed and then played. For example, Gonzalo reconstructed a small pan-flute from a Peruvian grave (see Figure 2). For us in the museum, it was not clear if this flute was ever played or was playable at all. Perhaps it was added to the grave for symbolic reasons only, and/or it was a toy instrument. Gonzalo's reconstruction proved that it is in fact a playable musical instrument and that its sound is perhaps even more 'potent' than expected. In spite of its size, the instrument is quite loud and could well have been used to send signals over medium distances.

Fig. 1 Gonzalo Rodríguez demonstrating one of his replicas in Berlin
Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, M. Mengel

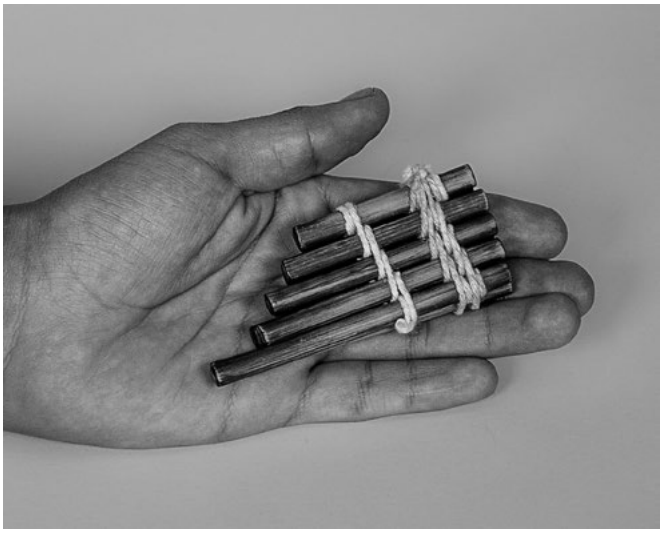

Fig. 2 Double row pan-flute, reconstruction of V A 40298
Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, M. Mengel

To conduct an experimental approach in music archaeology, teams consisting of different specialists are often needed, including instrument-makers, archaeologists and musicians. Gonzalo, however, combines the necessary skills in a single person, which simplifies his research considerably.

There are only a few regions in the world where a high number of archaeological finds, including musical instruments, are also accompanied by a relatively rich set of additional sources, such as iconography or texts. Peru is one such place, where thousands of instruments have been uncovered over a long period dating roughly from the third millennium BCE (bone flutes from Caral, sometimes considered the oldest city in the Americas) to the arrival of the Spanish. Also, a plethora of additional sources (iconography, codices etc.) provides contexts for the uses of sound and music in a variety of related cultures like the Moche, Wari, Nazca, Chimu and Inca. One reason for the richness of the available material is the dry climate in parts of Peru, such as the north, south and central coast, in which even organic materials such as flutes made from bamboo or wood can survive for long periods of time. The wider Mediterranean area (Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Greco-Roman world), China and Mexico are among the few other areas with a comparable situation of rich archaeological evidence of musical instruments.

Andean Musical Aesthetics

In recent decades, Andean musicology has developed a perspective that questions traditional aspects of musicking that are sometimes taken for granted (e.g. Rivera 2010, Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007). Reviewing this research, José Pérez de Arce (2023:23–28) sees much of this newer discourse as a reaction to an older period which was dominated by a European agenda:

> Since the colonization process in South, Central, and parts of North America consisted in erasing all remains of the pre-European past, we had been taught that all 'musical' traces from past centuries were definitely lost […]. Since the second half of the 20th century, however, this idea has been questioned, and in recent years Indigenous voices have become part of the process. Decolonization has become a new position in the debate […]. Through this process [debate], we have the opportunity to revise our concepts of 'music', 'sound object' and other concepts akin to these topics in the Andean region. (Pérez 2023:24)

As an example, Pérez outlines several musical concepts or aesthetic principles that have emerged from this debate and that can be seen in both contemporary musical practices and in archaeological instruments.

Firstly, Pérez points to a different aesthetic of tone, tone quality or timbre. Present-day examples include Andean panpipes with two rows that create a beating effect due to their being tuned slightly differently. Archaeological evidence shows a similar beating phenomenon in pre-Hispanic instruments, for example, in globular flutes. A related phenomenon is the 'blowing of flutes with a strong, energetic, intense breath in

search of a complex timbre response' (ibid. 2023:26), which locally is sometimes called the 'Andean way' (ibid. 2023:27) of playing flutes, different from the European way.

Pérez also brings up the question of what constitutes a single instrument (or a single sound-producing object). For example, we can observe the widespread pattern of using two or more instruments in an interlocking fashion, i.e. multiple instruments played by multiple players producing 'a sound that seems to be played by a single flutist who does not breathe between notes' (ibid. 2023:27). If this musical practice was applied to archaeological findings, the study of individual objects might be misleading, and the necessary object of study might have to be a pair: 'if we consider the possibility of interpreting a pre-Hispanic flute as part of a more complex multiple instrument, a single instrument may no longer emerge as simple and crude, but as part of a complex sound system' (ibid. 2023:29).

Pérez also argues that the physical movement of musician and listener might have to be conceived as an integral feature of the music and performance and that the notion of time in the pre-Columbian period might have been substantially different.

If we relate the qualities that Pérez explores to the sound quality of instruments, we note that they cannot be explored by simply observing and measuring museum objects. Yet archaeological objects often cannot be played due to the risk of damage. Here the experimental approach comes into play by using replicas of archaeological objects. For example, it is helpful to hear the Andean playing style mentioned above played on a two-row pan-flute in order to discuss and perhaps even measure the effects of any second row.

The Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin includes many sound-producing objects from Peru in its collections. Currently, the museum database lists 459 instruments, both ancient and contemporary. However, this number is not complete: as we show in the next section, it does not include many objects that Gonzalo has found also produce sound. Many more instruments are held in other German and European collections. These instruments are not unknown to researchers, as they have been partly discussed in older research. But the existing descriptions, as part of published research or catalogues or the museum's current online portals,[1] are nowhere near detailed enough to allow reconstructions of them to be made. Hence, for Gonzalo to make exact replicas of museum instruments, he must visit the collections, create detailed descriptions of individual instruments with exact measurements and produce drawings of the instruments, often from multiple perspectives. To then create the replicas, he must sometimes go to great lengths to obtain the materials that would have been used in ancient Peru, such as particular species of wood or bamboo. Occasionally, he consults with experts to learn how to create specific woven patterns, as in case of *antaras* pan-flutes, which include a textile part.

1 https://recherche.smb.museum, accessed October 24, 2025.

Fig. 3 Double-row pan-flute, Gonzalo's replica of V A 44744.
Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum – M.Mengel

Whistling Bottles

When Gonzalo came back to Berlin for the second time, now at the invitation of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, he brought with him reconstructions of flutes that he had made from his earlier observations of artefacts in the Berlin collections (as depicted above). At first he made reconstructions from wood, bamboo and bone exclusively. By his third trip to Berlin in 2024, however, he had also learned how to make instruments from clay.

During his third trip to Berlin, Gonzalo broadened his focus, looking not only at flutes, but also at the whistling bottles in the Berlin collections. Whistling bottles are sound-producing objects that typically contain multiple chambers filled with water. When moved just right, water flows from one chamber to another, displacing air so that a pipe mechanism is triggered to produce sound. Whistling bottles from Peru and Ecuador have been well known in archaeology as an important object group from the Andean region since the pioneering research by Toral Crespo (1966), but this does not mean that archaeologists understand the sounds made by whistling bottles well. In fact, these objects can produce a range of different sounds and patterns, which Gonzalo studied for some artefacts in the Berlin collection using his own replicas. The sounds produced include descending glissandi and motifs using two or three distinct pitches or tones.

By investigating broken whistling bottles, reconstructing some of them and conducting a test whereby Gonzalo inserts air from the outside to trigger the whistle, Gonzalo can determine if a vessel is indeed capable of producing sounds, and he can also gain a good idea of how it is constructed inside. Since the mechanism with the chamber and the internal whistle is typically invisible, this method produces results not unlike using X-rays to look inside vessels (Hickman 2007). In this way, Gonzalo was able to identify approximately 260 vessels in the Berlin collection as whistling bottles that up to that time had been considered simple vessels.

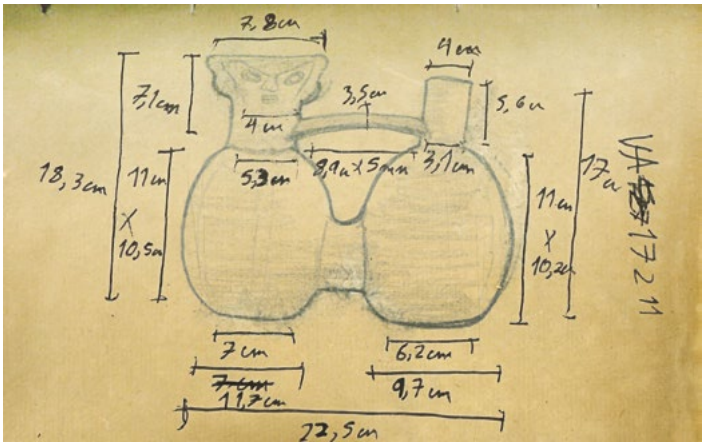

Fig. 4 Sketch of a whistling bottle
Drawing: G. Rodríguez

Outlook

Sometimes Gonzalo asks how it is that so many archaeological objects from Peru are in Germany. Generally speaking, the reason is that in the 19th century, when archaeology became an established academic discipline in Europe and other places, several Germans did pioneering work in Peru. Among them were researchers such as Max Uhde (1856–1944), then employed at what is now the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, and Hans Heinrich Brüning (1848–1928), who in Peru is remembered as a pioneer of archaeology in the region of Lambayeque. Through their activities, large collections of Peruvian artefacts were assembled in Germany.

As Gonzalo's story shows, it is still necessary to travel to Berlin and to other collections to study these objects intensively. Online databases are still not good enough as a sole source, since the information they provide is relatively shallow and incomplete. As mentioned above, some of the whistling bottles were only identified as such once Gonzalo was able to investigate them in person in Berlin. Likewise, with the information available in today's online catalogues, it is typically not possible to create faithful reconstructions of these instruments. Constructing faithful replicas requires an intensive investigation and more than a single photo. Traditional tools such as research papers obviously do not include examples of sound. Perhaps surprisingly, newer resources on the Internet, such as museum portals, often do not take full advantage of the medium either. Sound and video examples too are often lacking. In addition, many objects are not yet available online at all. Gonzalo emphasizes the importance of publishing collections online more comprehensively and with more detailed information, which will also help to make the collections better known in South America.

By encouraging further projects like that described here, museums can contribute to the decolonization process while also gaining valuable information about their collections. Gonzalo's visits to the Berlin collection have already given him a new perspec-

tive, especially in relation to Inca flutes. Using the experimental approach, this collection can provide new insights into the musical practices of the Inca period. While the earlier assumption that nothing of the pre-Columbian musical era remains or can be accessed today has clearly been proved wrong, much work remains before the available collections can be said to have been properly reevaluated.

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Collaborating on the Berlin Mazatec Collection

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Abstract: In 2024, the Mazatec writer and librarian Gabriela García came to Berlin to study the Mazatec collection in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Acquired by the museum from Wilhelm Bauer in 1903 and 1908, this ethnographic collection is a testimony to the past life of the Mazatec people, which has changed profoundly since then. In a joint project between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, and the Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova, Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca, Mexico, a travelling photographic exhibition has made this account of the past accessible to Mazatec communities. In addition, the collector's historical photos and language recordings are also subject to the ongoing collaboration. This article provides an overview of the projects' work in process and closes with an interview with Gabriela García, in which she describes her experiences with the collaboration.
[Mazatec people; collaborative research; travelling exhibition; language studies; ethnographic and archaeological collecting in Mexico; Wilhelm Bauer]

Introduction

It is the necessary resources and support from programmes such as the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse) that enable ethnological museums to take up new approaches in museum work. These approaches are no longer addressed only to scholars and museum visitors. Rather, the ethnographic objects and information collected since the nineteenth century at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (EM) are being shared on a larger scale through exchanges with interested partners from the societies of origin. One example is the CoMuse project on the Mazatec collection, which has so far been neither sufficiently documented nor analysed in terms of its holdings at the EM. Cooperation

 10.60827/zfe/jsca.v150i2.8872

on its documentation and analysis, including data on the Mazatec language (Mazateco), with partners from the region enriches knowledge and experiences for all sides.

The storage facility of the Department of American Archaeology at the EM houses around 470 ethnographic objects collected by Wilhelm Bauer in the Mazateca region, which is located in the north of Oaxaca and the south of the states of Puebla and Veracruz, Mexico. The collection was sent to Berlin in 1903 and 1908. It includes several ritual and everyday objects made of various materials such as wickerwork, clay, calabash, wood and especially cotton textiles. Indeed, above all, this rich collection documents Mazatec craftsmanship and art at around 1900. Particularly noteworthy are the *huipiles*, blouses worn by women and girls, which are usually embroidered with decorations made of blue and red cotton (Fig. 1). The cotton and silk textiles alone are remarkable examples of the art of weaving. However, there are also objects used in rituals that continue to play a role in people's religious lives today.

Bauer compiled and recorded a considerable amount of information on many objects, their uses, Mazateco terms and oral traditions, and he took several dozen photos of the region and its inhabitants. Most of them are now held at the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Berlin (IAI), Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Museum of Ethnography (Néprajzi Múzeum) in Budapest, Hungary. Given the wealth of information on language, cultural practices and history, which have changed fundamentally since Bauer's visits, this historical ethnographic collection is of great interest to the present-day Mazatec population. Collaborating on the Mazatec collection in Berlin means engaging with the history and present of the Mazateca region by jointly reworking the collection and, in the process, practising new formats of knowledge-production in and outside the museum.

The team consists, among others, of the Mazatec writer Gabriela García García, who is also a librarian at the Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova (BIJC), Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca. Ms García is a native speaker of Mazateco and an expert on the culture of the Mazatec people, with whom she has a close personal connection and for whom she works as a disseminator and mediator. She writes poems and stories about cultural life and is the winner of a CaSA prize for literary work in the Indigenous languages of Oaxaca. Together with other speakers, she is engaged in promoting literary and linguistic work in Mazateco and to foster its appreciation among younger generations.

As part of the CoMuse project, the materials in the Mazatec collection have now been processed and the objects extensively documented. The team created a travelling exhibition, which opened in Oaxaca City in May 2025. This exhibition will travel from town to town in the Mazateca region over a period of time. The first stop was Huautla de Jiménez, in the district of Teotitlán, Oaxaca, in October 2025. The exhibition aims to provide information about the Berlin collection, as well as the context of collecting around 1900. Thanks to Ms García's involvement, the exhibition goes beyond this documentation, as the historical objects are interpreted against the background of the present-day Mazatec culture. It is essential to highlight that Mazateco is by no means

Fig. 1 Photo of a *huipil* (*tsó/tsú*, IV Ca 25105) and a wraparound skirt (*jchó/jcháó*, IV Ca 25099).

uniform. In order to avoid making one dialect appear dominant, the team has decided to design the exhibition in Spanish. A brochure and educational materials accompany it. The work process in Berlin was recorded in a documentary video that is being shown alongside the exhibition. Another video documents the reception of the project among the Mazatec people. We hope that the exhibition will inspire people to pass on their culture, language and history to future generations.

In the following, we describe the genesis of this particular CoMuse project. We then discuss the various steps in documenting and collaboratively processing the collection. Next, we provide a brief summary of the archival research on the collector Wilhelm Bauer. In the final section, Gabriela García shares her thoughts in the form of a written interview about her experiences as a CoMuse fellow in Berlin in June 2024, the significance of the collection for contemporary Mazatec communities, and possible future collaborations.

Genesis of the Mazateca Project

During the opening of the east wing of the Humboldt Forum, Sebastián van Doesburg, researcher and member of the managing board of the BIJC, was an invited guest in Berlin. Previously, he had conducted extensive field research in the Mazateca region himself and was familiar with the Berlin collection, on which only János Gyarmati from the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest had previously worked (Gyarmati 2006, 2008). On her trip to Mexico, Ute Schüren, the curator of the collection, visited the Mazateca region from 28 February to 3 March 2023, accompanied by Gabriela García and Sebastián van Doesburg, among others. The journey took them over difficult roads to the highlands (Mazateca *alta*), to Gabriela García's home village and to numerous other villages and larger settlements, such as the district (*municipio*) of Huautla de Jiménez. The group then travelled back to Oaxaca City via San Juan Bautista Cuicatlan (outside the Mazateca region).

In advance of the trip, the collection manager of the Department of American Archaeology, Ines Seibt, had photographed a large part of the collection for the first time and entered it into the museum database. Based on this preliminary documentation, a catalogue with printouts of the objects and the index cards with information from Bauer, including the naming of many objects in the Mazatec language, could be shared with local inhabitants, including some artisans, during the trip.

All the people in the villages who were asked about the collection expressed a great interest in it. The differences between the material culture in Bauer's time and in the present were discussed. For example, the kitchen utensils varied greatly, and traditional costumes, which were widespread in Bauer's time, were the exception in the present. However, many people still had a vague knowledge of the meaning and function of the objects Bauer collected. In view of the great interest in the collection, the Maza-

teca project was realised. Below, Carolina Bayer, who joined the project as a CoMuse collection manager in November 2023, describes the collaborative work in the EM's storage facility.

Preparation of the Mazatec Collection for Collaborative Work

Before we started the project, many of the Mazatec objects kept in storage in the museum in Berlin-Dahlem were only recorded in the museum database by an identification number, the collector's information and a general indication of their respective origins. They therefore had to be located, photographed and measured. The digitization of the index cards, which had already been carried out in spring 2023, helped to locate the objects in storage, as many of them contained drawings that allowed for clear identification. This enabled the location of each object to be determined and the database updated accordingly. The next step, between winter 2023 and spring 2024, was to document the objects in the Mazatec collection better and to store them in a professional and contemporary manner. Handling the objects, which were often fragile, required teamwork in close collaboration with the conservators. Good storage and digital documentation were important prerequisites for the collaboration in the following months.

The joint work on the collection in the depot in Berlin-Dahlem with Gabriela García in June 2024 was enriching for the museum staff in many respects (Fig. 2). We compiled and shared information about each object, particularly its manufacturing technique, material composition and potential use, in both the Mazatec and Spanish languages. This exchange of knowledge and ideas was partly accompanied by Sebastián van Doesburg and the Mexican textile specialist Alejandro de Ávila from the Museo Textil de Oaxaca, Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca (Fig. 3).[1] On the first few days, we analysed numerous objects together from different perspectives and audio-recorded most of our conversations.

Bauer's Documentation of Mazatec Terms

Working on the Mazatec terms that Bauer had written down with reference to the different objects was another highlight of the collaboration with Gabriela García. While the Mazatec terms written on the numerous index cards were not always understandable (Fig. 4), the German terms that were already in the database were relatively easy to read and translate into Spanish and from there into Mazateco. With the support of

1 Gabriela García, Sebastián van Doesburg and Alejandro de Ávila have previously published on their experiences in Berlin (García, van Doesburg and de Ávila 2024).

Fig. 2 Gabriela García working in the depot, June 2024. © Photo: Carolina Bayer

Fig. 3 Joint work in the depot, June 2024. From left to right: Ute Schüren, Sebastián van Doesburg, Gabriela García, Alejandro de Ávila. © Photo: Carolina Bayer

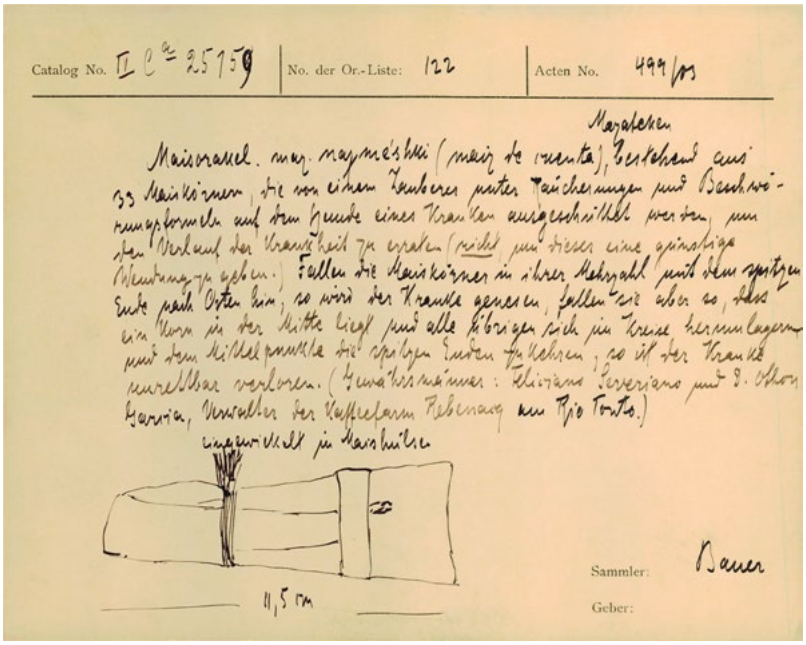

Fig. 4 Index card of a maize oracle, IV Ca 25159, collected by Bauer in 1903.
© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum, Digitisation: Ines Seibt, 2023

Gabriela García and Sebastián van Doesburg, contemporary equivalents for the Mazatec terms Bauer had recorded were found. An interesting finding that emerged during this work was that many of the objects of everyday use that Bauer had labelled are apparently no longer in use. The transformation of the objects in the material inventory of the Mazateca in the twentieth century has led to many of them being unknown in the vocabulary of the younger generations. Even for Gabriela García, who consulted older family members and other Mazateco speakers, it was a challenge to identify some of the terms. Those that were identified were read by Gabriela Garcia in Mazateco, and her comments on the meaning of the terms and/or objects were audio-visually recorded. Some of this work also involved rewriting the specific term for each object in the variant of Mazateco spoken by Gabriela García. For example, Bauer noted *shiáo* for a wrap-around skirt and *tsŭ* for a *huipil*, while Gabriela uses the terms *jchó* or *jcháó* and *tsó* or *tsú* respectively. This work was important to us and later facilitated the description of the individual objects from different perspectives when preparing the exhibition.

All recordings and documentation were later shared among the project partners. The intention is to incorporate the language documentation for the objects into the database, along with the transcriptions, and to make them available for future work with the collection. This work is not yet complete, but it is hoped that it will contribute

to the long-term preservation of the cultural heritage and language of the Mazateca region.

Research on Wilhelm Bauer

It was also important to understand the collector Wilhelm Bauer, his collecting practices and his relationship with the former Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (Royal Museum of Ethnology, KMV). Research on Bauer was undertaken by Yannick Dreessen beginning in August 2024.[2] A key source for the reconstruction of Bauer's connection to the Mazateca region was his correspondence with the museum, particularly with Eduard Seler (1849–1922). Seler had himself undertaken extensive collecting trips in Mexico together with the researcher and photographer Caecilie Seler-Sachs (1855–1935), who was also his wife. He was a professor of American languages, ethnology and archaeology at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin (now Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) and had taken over the direction of the America Department of the KMV in 1903. As stated above, other documentation on Wilhelm Bauer's time in Berlin is now housed in the IAI, including most of his photos of the Mazateca region and language recordings in Mazateco, transcribed by Walter Lehmann (1878–1939), along with translations. Based on these and further traces, a brief characterization of Bauer and his connection to the Mazateca region can be presented here.

The ethnologist and archaeologist Wilhelm Bauer[3] made a name for himself as a collector of and dealer in ethnographic and archaeological objects, mainly from Mexico, while pursuing scholarly ambitions at the same time.[4] With respect to the Mazateca region, Bauer established early ethnographic collections in Berlin (1903, 1908), Budapest (1903) and Stockholm (1910). The beginnings of his interest in the Indigenous past and present of Mexico seem to have been sparked during his time as a teacher in the German school in Mexico City and were probably fostered later while working and studying with Eduard Seler.

Born in 1871 in Hoechst am Main, close to Frankfurt, Bauer studied philosophy at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin (1892–1894) and graduated in 1896 with

2 This contribution focuses on the extensive documentary research in the museum's archive. Demián Ortiz Maciel, curator of exhibitions of the BIJC, has made key contributions to the historical understanding of the traces of Bauer in Oaxaca and Mexico and reconstructed the paths taken by Bauer in the Mazateca region.

3 In his marriage certificates, Bauer is called an ethnologist (1904) and archaeologist (1906). Bauer also used the Spanish version Guillermo and occasionally added the maternal surname Thoma.

4 It is important to note that the KMV preserved not only the Mazatec collection, but also numerous archaeological pieces that Bauer transferred to the museum, mainly from the central highlands of Mexico. However, these were not included in the project.

a doctorate from the Universität Bern, Switzerland.[5] After two years at the German school in Mexico City, Bauer returned to Berlin for several months and began studying the anthropology of the Americas with Eduard Seler, working with him at the KMV.[6] Speaking Spanish and being academically trained, Bauer was identified by the museum staff as an ideal person to increase the collections from Mexico, at that time particularly from the regions of Tehuacan, Cuzcatlan and Teotitlan del Camino.[7] Equipped with the title of an agent and representative ('encargado y representante'), Bauer returned to Mexico in September 1901 and began collecting for the Berlin museum.[8]

In this context, Bauer organized his first trip to the Mazateca region in 1903. For three weeks he gathered, among other ethnographic and archaeological objects, the Mazatec ethnographic collection,[9] which Eduard Seler describes as being 'the first one [of the museum] which entails information on the household items [...] of a primordial people ['*Urvolk*'] of the Mexican republic'.[10] As János Gyarmati has elaborated in more detail, at the same time Bauer was acquiring a Mazatec collection for the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest. During his travels, Bauer generally purchased items from villagers, local traders and collectors with the intention of reselling them. He mentions that he stayed for several days or weeks to befriend the locals, as they were initially reluctant to offer him their possessions. He also excavated some archaeological objects himself (Gyarmati 2006:48–49).[11]

Driven by academic interest, he took notes about the provenance, designation and attribution of the objects and took several photos. In his publications, Bauer mentioned a few Mazatec informants and linked their knowledge to the objects he sent across the Atlantic (see, for example, Bauer 1908). Among them were Othón García, a former Huautla political leader and administrator of the Rebenacq coffee ranch close to the Río Tonto, and the ritual specialist Feliciano Severiano, who explained to him the meaning and use of ritual objects. Both are also mentioned in the detailed descriptions

5 Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Studentenliste Philosophische Fakultät 1810–1907, 83. Rektorat, p. 18; Matrikelbuch 1891–1893, 82–83. Rektorat, p. 102. Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern, STABE BB 05.10.1703, Pp. 251, 255.

6 Historical Archive of the Field Museum, Chicago, letter by Wilhelm Bauer to George A. Dorsey, 5th of July 1904, Pp. 1–7, here p. 2.

7 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 771/1901, letter by Karl von den Steinen to unknown, 29th of July 1901, no specific page.

8 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 771/1901, letter by Wilhelm Bauer to Karl von den Steinen, 26th of September 1901, no specific page.

9 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 499/1903, letter by Wilhelm Bauer to Eduard Seler, 3rd of March 1903, no specific page.

10 Original: '[Die Sammlung Ethnographica der Mazateken] ist eigentlich die erste Sammlung, … die über den Hausrat … eines der Urvölker der mexikanischen Republik Aufschluss gibt ... .' Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 499/1903, letter by Eduard Seler to the Scientific Commission of the Museum, 23rd of July 1903, no specific page.

11 See also: Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 420/1904, letter Wilhelm Bauer to Eduard Seler, 29th of February 1904, p. 1.

of practices and rituals on the museum's index cards (Fig. 4).[12] Bauer returned to the Mazateca region to assemble a second ethnographic collection, which arrived in Berlin in 1908. He maintained a particularly close relationship with the KMV in his role as an agent until 1910.[13] Bauer also worked for collectors and individuals in the USA, Europe and Mexico. Over the years, he established archaeological and ethnographic collections in several museums in Europe and the United States of America (Gyarmati 2006; Gaida 2011; König 2007; König and Sellen 2015; Sellen 2015). He also published some scholarly works (Bauer 1908, 1916).

However, Bauer disagreed with the Mexican Revolution and the end of the Porfiriato,[14] especially with the coming to power of Francisco Madero, who initiated the insurrection to depose President Porfirio Díaz. Accordingly, he left Mexico in 1912. He also published a critique of German foreign policy, which he considered too opportunistic (Bauer-Thoma 1913). A late trace of him in the archive of the EM is his correspondence with the director of the America Department from 1927, Konrad Theodor Preuss, in which he sells photos to Berlin of private archaeological collections, including those of the collector Fernando Sologuren from Oaxaca, and asks for recommendations to sell them to other anthropological museums as well.[15]

At this point, we can conclude that Bauer was an important seller of archaeological and ethnographic collections from Mexico who worked within the scientific networks of his time and used his scholarly identity especially to offer his services to museums. His biography and international connections have a lot of potential to complement our knowledge of early anthropology and collecting (Dreessen 2025). The historical and cultural value of his Mazatec collection, including information about local customs and the Mazatec language, will be best assessed by today's Mazatec people. The extent to which Bauer acted unlawfully or unethically in his collecting activities must be investigated further.

12 See also Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0599 I B 043 Amerika, E 634/1904, letter Wilhelm Bauer to Eduard Seler, 13th of April 1904, no specific page.

13 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0554 I B 042 Amerika, E 326/1927, letter by Ernst Vatter to Karl Theodor Preuss, 18th of March 1927, no specific page.

14 The authoritarian regime of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico (1876–1911), which ended with the Mexican Revolution.

15 Historical Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, I/MV 0554 I B 042 Amerika, E 326/1927, letters by Wilhelm Bauer to Karl Theodor Preuss, 26th of March 1927, 7th of May 1927, 16th of May, 1st of June 1927, 25th of June 1927, Pp. 24–28.

Gabriela García's Experiences

In the following section, Gabriela García shares her thoughts on her experiences in Berlin and with the collection.[16]

How did you experience the collaboration and your stay in Berlin?

I thought the work we did as a team was very important. The availability of colleagues in Berlin and the fact that they had already made progress with the documentation and registration of the collection were very significant steps forward. It served as a basis and facilitated my approach to the collection. We made a good team in the textual analyses and the interest that each of us showed in contributing our knowledge. For instance, the Mazatec language was written with German spellings and without everyone's support it would not have been easy to discover some of the names of these objects that Bauer recorded in the field notes.

What meaning does the Mazatec collection have for you and the Mazatec people in general?

As a Mazatec woman, this collection means a lot to me. I find it very valuable and interesting to rediscover the use and meanings of each of the objects in the collection. These objects tell us about the history of the Mazatec communities from over a hundred years ago. It is as if these stories have been suspended in time. It gives us food for thought about our region and its natural environment, an example of which are the changes that have been occurring, especially to the climate, and how this has affected the production of plant material, which as Mazatecs we used in the production of different utensils. It also makes us reflect on when we have introduced so many industrially produced everyday utensils into our homes. For me it is important to mention that in the Mazatec communities there are people who dedicate their lives to different areas: there are artisans, producers, artists, weavers, potters, etc., and there are also those who create art for personal or family use. One of the examples I can mention are the grandmothers and grandfathers, father or mother: when a baby is born in the family, they take their machete, walk to the forest, look for a tree, cut off a branch and make a cradle from it. This is life in the Mazatec culture and in the regions of Oaxaca.

I dare say that more than one person will be interested in learning more about this collection.

16 The original interview was conducted by the other authors of this article in March 2025, in written form and in Spanish, and then translated into English.

How did you experience seeing historical objects from the Mazatec region in Berlin?

I admit that I was not familiar with some of these objects. As I mentioned earlier, I connected many of them to the stories my mother and grandmothers shared with me, so the words they imparted at some point took on a great deal of meaning when I had these objects so close.

Which object or objects caught your attention or inspired you?

The ceremonial bundles, the reed mats, the *huipiles*. They all caught my attention in one way or another. I wish I could have had the Mazatec community with me to show them each of these objects so that together we could contribute to their description, elaboration and use.

What is the significance of Bauer's documentation and information on the Mazatec for you?

This information is very valuable because it provides insights into the places Bauer visited in the Mazatec region, allowing us to identify the sources of some objects through this documentation. But what I find even more interesting is that the Mazateco that Bauer recorded is not from a single place. It is worth mentioning that the Mazatec language has sixteen linguistic variants, which means that there are different variants of the language in the notes that make up the collection, which enriches it even more.

What kind of collaborations do you imagine or hope for in the future between the EM and the Mazatec people and communities?

Having had the pleasure of getting to know the objects and materials in the Mazatec collection and working a little with them, I would like to contribute more knowledge in order to enrich the information about these objects. I would like to emphasize the following activities:

- Work on researching the history of materials that have fallen into disuse.
- Document the techniques used to make utensils that are still used in the region.
- Above all, describe each object, making the most of the knowledge of the elderly or the artisans in the region. This would facilitate the cataloguing of these materials.
- Digitize the images of the objects, notes and documents that form part of the collection for their preservation.
- Transcribe the Mazatec texts found in the notes and consider inviting as colleagues Mazatec writers from the municipalities where these objects were obtained.

We have also dealt with these points to some extent in the various work meetings that have been held with colleagues from the Museum there in Berlin. We are currently working on a photographic exhibition with the support of the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse) of the EM and the Alfredo Harp Helú Oaxaca Foundation. We really hope that this exhibition will be well received in the Mazatec communities and that it becomes a source of reflection and inspiration for those who are fighting to preserve the Mazatec language and culture in general.

Is there anything you would like to share about your experience in Berlin?

Acknowledgements. I thank God and each and every one of the people who took me in when I was there, those who guided me and looked after me, as it was my first time travelling abroad. Thank you for everything you shared with me, the meals, the laughter, the conversations, the little walks. Above all, thank you for having considered me for this project. (On a personal note, never leave your train ticket at home when travelling in the city!)[17]

Epilogue

At the time of the exhibition's inauguration, the Berlin Mazatec collection was made accessible online. Work and research on the collection continued, including the transcription of the notes in Mazateco. So far, the exhibition has attracted the interest of visitors in the history of the Mazateca region. This might stimulate future research and exchanges of knowledge about materials and cultural techniques within and outside the EM.

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Further acknowledgements

This project has received support from many people and institutions in a variety of ways, for which we are very grateful. We would especially like to thank our project partners Dr Sebastián van Doesburg and Demián Ortiz Maciel from the BIJC and Dr Alejandro de Ávila Blomberg from the Museo Textil in Oaxaca, Mexico. At the EM, we are especially grateful to the photographer Claudia Obrocki for her excellent documentation of the collection objects and the processing of the historical photos, to collection manager Ines Seibt for the initial preparation of the object catalogue and the digitisation of the index cards, Valerie von Stillfried from the Education and Outreach Department, the CoMuse team, the Department of Conservation and Restoration, especially Kai Patricia Engelhardt, and the Media Department. We would also like to express our sincere thanks to the IAI, in particular Dr Ulrike Mühlschlegel, Dr Gregor Wolff and Toni Matzdorf, as well as to the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest, Dr Tímea Bata and Dr János Gyarmati, for providing documents and historical photos of Wilhelm Bauer. Professor Dr Michael Dürr, linguist and specialist in American studies, helped us in our search for documents about Wilhelm Bauer with advice and assistance.

Macucu: Experiences in Long-term Collaboration between a Museum and an Indigenous Community

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Abstract: This article describes a long-term, process-oriented collaboration between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Kotiria community of Macucu in Colombia. This cooperation has evolved into a deep relational engagement in which cultural objects are seen as living entities and mediators between the Museum and the community. Through joint activities, such as the construction of a traditional longhouse and the creation of a botanical garden, cultural practices were revitalized and intergenerational learning was fostered. However, the article also addresses the tensions, power asymmetries and challenges that can arise in transcultural collaborations of this kind.
[Long-term collaboration, Indigenous knowledge revitalization, museum-community relations]

Introduction

Looking at the discourse surrounding ethnological museums and the resulting programmes of recent years, one might be tempted to think that collaboration is a kind of magic formula with which these institutions deal with their collections, which are marked by colonial guilt and traumas. Establishing contact with the descendants of the former creators and owners promises insights into the past and present significance of the cultural belongings and perhaps also assistance in dealing with them in the future, whether in relation to exhibitions or other museum activities.

However, collaborations between museums and so-called source communities are usually project-based. After establishing initial contact, the focus is usually on collaboratively solving tasks that are often predefined, such as joint provenance research or curating an exhibition together. External factors such as financing and time-frames naturally limit the scope. These circumstances initially also apply to most of the projects initiated as part of the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse). Since the whole endeavour is a project, its parts are also necessarily project-like.

In my contribution, I will introduce the somewhat different long-term cooperation between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Kotiria community of Macucu in the lower Vaupés region of Colombia. This cooperation is different simply because it started as early as 2018 as part of a project to connect Indigenous students with the cultural belongings of their ancestors. Since then it has gone through many phases, not to mention financial frameworks. Over time, the resocialization of the Berlin collection

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developed into a joint deep dive into the community's knowledge and ancestral stories, in which the 'objects' are less important than dreaming for a better life, especially for future generations. The CoMuse framework gave the cooperation the opportunity to continue 'the process' (a term used by community members to describe the different activities and phases of the collaboration) by creating a community garden to preserve traditional knowledge of medicinal and dye plants.

In this article, I will briefly describe the various steps in 'the process', highlighting the specific tensions that arise in transcultural constellations, in particular when they last longer than the normal time-span of a project. I myself am involved in this process in various ways. On the one hand, I helped initiate it; on the other hand, I have become so closely connected to the people in Macucu that I find it difficult to take a step back and write about it. At no point did I assume the position of a researcher in Macucu, so this text is much more a personal account than a systematic analysis of a museum collaboration.

The following question, which I consider particularly relevant and pressing in long-term collaborations, is addressed in the article: How is it possible to deal with the obvious power imbalance between the heritage institution with the collections and the money on the one hand, and the Indigenous community with its site-specific problems on the other hand, especially in moments of tension and in the long run? I also reflect on the deeper meaning and future perspectives of such long-term relationships. What is their transformative potential, and how can it be unfolded sustainably?

Digital Beginnings with the Indigenous School in Mitú

Contact with the community of Macucu in Colombia was first established in 2017/18 in the context of a third-party funded project[1] with representatives of Indigenous educational institutions; its objective was to develop a digital platform for joint research on the Berlin collection (Scholz 2017 a/b, 2021 a/c).[2] A close partner in this four-year project was Diana Guzmán, a teacher at the Indigenous secondary school Escuela Normal Superior Indígena María Reina (ENOSIMAR) in Mitú, the capital of the state of Vaupés in Colombia. Diana Guzmán runs a small community museum at the school, and she also uses the museum space for teaching. In the early years of the collaboration, the aim was to introduce the Berlin collection to Indigenous students from different

1 The project, called 'Living objects in Amazonia and in the Museum – Shared Knowledge in the Humboldt Forum', lasted from 2016–2021 and was funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung and the Kulturstiftung des Bundes, with Indigenous partners from Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela.

2 See also https://www.smb.museum/museen-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/forschung/lebende-dinge-in-amazonien-und-im-museum-geteiltes-wissen-im-humboldt-forum/, accessed April 1, 2025.

backgrounds and to establish joint digital research. However, this proved to be very cumbersome and ultimately not very useful for the dialogue over the artifacts.

At the latest after my first visit to Mitú in 2017, we used the rooms of the municipal administration and the adult education facilities in the evenings in order to have an internet connection, but content was repeatedly lost due to power shortages etc. It then became clear that, although the digital platform was a nice idea, it failed due to the lack of infrastructure in Mitú at that time.

Furthermore, Diana initially pointed out rather hesitantly, but over time more and more clearly, that her strategy in working with the young people was different. Her aim was to introduce the students to living cultural practices that are still being mastered, at least to some extent, by the older people living in the communities, but are increasingly being lost among the younger generation. Working with digital photos of historical museum objects, by contrast, felt lifeless and fell short of this goal.

Diana herself had first visited the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin in 2014 together with her husband Orlando Villegas, also a teacher at ENOSIMAR, as part of a workshop organized by colleagues from the universities of Berlin, Bonn and Marburg (Kraus et al. 2018). During this visit, the Indigenous guests discussed, among other things, the storage of ritual objects such as the dance ornaments of initiated men, which should be kept together in a so-called 'feather box' made of palm leaves when not in use. The discovery that the individual elements, which the Indigenous people see as the body parts of clan elders, were stored in different boxes and shelves was met with great irritation. Furthermore, the visit triggered a process of reflection on the preservation of cultural practices and the state of traditional knowledge for Diana and Orlando, who after 2016 became my close partners. According to them, much of what they found in the museum had been lost locally over the course of the violent history of contact and colonization, especially because of missionary work.

In the following years, Diana and Orlando, along with other Indigenous guests from the upper Rio Negro, visited the museum again, when the strategies of conserving the ritual dance adornments in the storage room were an important topic of discussion. As a result, which is not the focus here and will therefore not be discussed in further detail, we jointly decided on some changes to the Museum's storage practices (see Scholz 2021b). Over the course of the project the focus shifted to the Indigenous community, but the choice of topics for the work there was directly related to the experiences in the storage room. Handing over the lead for concrete activities to the Indigenous partners was for me a clear strategy of dealing with the inevitable power imbalance. However, this does not make cooperation any easier because the Indigenous partners have their own internal struggles, hierarchies and power imbalances, a factor I will discuss below.

Connecting with Macucu

The first workshop in Macucu took place in March 2018. For Diana's husband Orlando, who was born in this community, it was a reconnection with his roots. Since the death of his father a few years earlier, he had only been to Macucu very rarely.

Macucu is located about a half day's journey from Mitú, on the lower Vaupés, half an hour by boat from the Brazilian border in the core territory of the Kotiria. According to the traditional marriage rule of the Tukano groups, to which the Kotiria also belong, marriages are only possible between members of different ethnolinguistic groups, so that not only the Kotiria but also the Cubeo and Desana live in Macucu, as well as individuals who have a non-Indigenous parent. Traditionally, members of the Ñahori clan, one of the high clans in the hierarchy of the Kotiria, are settled in Macucu. However, many of the clan's descendants do not live there permanently; most of those who have higher education seek work in Mitú, Villavicencio, or Bogotá. The community thus consists of only four or five (partly young) families all year round, but all children older than four years of age spend the week at the boarding school in Villa Fátima, which is about an hour's boat ride away. These circumstances, especially the school system, put the community at risk of fragmentation and the gradual loss of traditional cultural practices and Indigenous languages.

The first workshop that Diana organized together with Orlando in Macucu was dedicated to the topic of plant fibres, among them the *cumare* fibre. This is used to make dance ornaments like those in the Berlin collection, and many other items of daily and specific use. The instructors were people from the community, particularly the elders. The students travelled together with Diana, myself and Natalia Pavia, who documented this and all subsequent workshops in Macucu audiovisually from Mitú.

This first workshop initiated 'the process' without having been planned (because the focus here had actually been on the ENOSIMAR students). The fact that Macucu had become the site of a heritage project through Orlando's mediation caused something in the residents, as Orlando emphasized again in November 2024 in an interview for the CoMuse podcast:

> What we really have to recognize is that the community has been kind of abandoned, people have been kind of discouraged, and when we were able to make contact with the museum and Andrea's work, which has also supported us, I think that somehow the community has gained new energy and support, kind of like reclaiming their territory.[3]

For my aim of reconnecting the Berlin historical collections with living people, the stay was an essential experience and the starting point for the 'deep dive' I undertook at the beginning. Diana had told me many times that the artefacts in the Berlin museum col-

3 https://comuse.org/en/podcast/11-long-term-cooperation-with-the-village-community-macucu-in-colombia, last accessed September 11, 2025.

lection are not mere objects: they should actually be treated as living beings, as if they were ambassadors of the Indigenous territories. Through my practical engagement with the plants, fibres and techniques, and by observing their embodiment by the people, the sentence started making a lot of sense to me.

Cultural Elements as Ambassadors: Feather Box and Longhouse

Some months later, in October 2018, I organized a small conference in Berlin to which I invited Indigenous representatives from all the educational and political organizations I was working with in my five-year project, as well as some colleagues from other museums. The event was predominantly Indigenous, and there was a clear consensus about the relational condition of certain artefacts in the collection, among them the ritual dance ornaments of the Tukano groups. As they are conceived as body parts, it was considered very dangerous to give them back to any community without knowing exactly where they belong. But the fact that they were kept by the museum in Berlin implied that the latter had a responsibility towards the communities of origin. Behind these consensual statements stood a wider conception of conservation. Conservation from an Indigenous perspective should go far beyond the storing of artefacts in a safe and dry storage room. Conservation also meant direct engagement for the territories where the collection items come from. A Ye'kwana representative[4] from Brazil even stated outright that without safe and sane Indigenous territories, the artefacts in the museum would completely lose their meaning.

Referring the discussions at the conference back to the situation in Macucu, it was clear that the next step in 'the process' would be to build a traditional longhouse.[5] The first workshop and the obligatory celebration with lots of manioc beer at the end had been realized in a simple communal house with a metal roof, leading the community members to complain about the lack of a proper house of knowledge. The discourse of loss was in general very dominant among the people in Macucu, which is not surprising given local accounts of the history of contact, and especially the activities of the missionaries. During the 20th century, many people died due to forced labour in the rubber forests or from disease, and the few who remained were prompted to give up their communal living in the longhouses and to start dwelling in individual houses.

Leticia (a now 65-year-old woman), who came as an adult to make her living in Macucu, told us the story of her grandparents in November 2019:

4 Julio Ye'kwana, then president of the Ye'kwanas organizsation Wanasseduume (Roraima, Brazil).

5 While the construction itself was declared a 'workshop' and was financed by the Volkswagen Stiftung, the documentation was possible due to additional funding from the Humboldt Forum foundation. The result was a 25-minute documentary that was first shown during the Humboldt Forum's East Wing opening in 2022.

> My grandfather had a *maloka* (longhouse), and I lived there with him and my mother... My father went to San José to work. At that time, the work with rubber was done under coercion. And my father left and my mother stayed behind alone. [...] When I was little, we lived at the headwaters of a small river and had a *maloka* there. Everyone lived like that, our grandparents... And why? Because the rubber tappers came and took people away, just like that, here on the banks of the rivers... So they hid [...], they lived in a large *maloka*. Then the nuns came, to where my grandparents were, they visited them and took them to Colón. [...] They took them, built houses there, and that's where my grandfather lived.[6]

There was only one person in the community left who could remember the last longhouse in Macucu, the then 87-year-old *abuelo* ('grandfather') Casimiro Villegas. He was the one who gave the instructions, as Jaiver, the leader of the community narrated:

> For us of the new generation, it is the first time we are building a *casa ancestral* (ancestral house), which is also called a *maloka*. It was a bit hard. We had never built a house that big before. But thanks to the help of Casimiro, the grandfather, with what he knew, what he had experienced with his parents; well, he had the knowledge. When we started building, he passed it on to us, we asked him all the time. He showed us, and in this way we kept building. It was hard, yes, it was a bit tough because it was the first time we had done a job like this. But with pride and because of this initiative, we had the courage to finish the work. And now we feel a great happiness to be under the house we built! First, the *abuelo* showed us the orientation of the *maloka*, where the doors belong, where the sun rises and sets. That is the direction of the doors. You can't do it the other way around, like with the houses where we live now. That's why you always build the doors in this direction, where the sun rises and sets. We knew about most of the parts (of the house), because we still use the leaves of the *karaná*. With the materials, yes... but we had never built a house of this size before. That was the only difference. Thanks to our grandfather, thanks to the knowledge he has, we made it.[7]

But grandfather Casimiro himself still expressed the feeling that something was missing, despite feeling happy with the construction of the longhouse, as Jaiver recounted, translating from Kotiria into Spanish:

> The only weakness he feels now is not being able to dance with all the equipment needed for it, the instruments and so on. He feels that he has failed. [...] the whites took everything, leaving us with nothing, and it is very sad not to have anything to show for it. If we still had all that, then everything would be different. [...] All this happened mainly because of evangelization, through the missionaries. They said

6 Interview with Leticia Acosta in November 2019.
7 Interview with Jaiver Ramírez in November 2019.

Fig. 1 Filming of the last step in the construction process. Photo: Mikko Gaestel, 2019

> that the Indigenous people were like animals that they had to make human. They took everything and destroyed what the Indigenous people had here that they could have used to show that they had their own, a different culture. To destroy all that is like losing an arm; you are left all alone. That was the hardest blow we had to take here, we who live on the Vaupés River. I think that those with the most vibrant culture at the moment are those who live at the headwaters of the small rivers because the missionaries didn't go there. I think they are the ones who have the tools and everything they need to show that their culture is alive. Unfortunately, we can't do that because we have been hit hardest in this area.[8]

The construction of the longhouse was a very complex process that lasted at least from June to November 2019, when the new house was inaugurated. I will not go into further details here, but it is important to mention that there is not only a clear connection between feather ornaments and body parts, as Jaiver implicitly states, but also one between the longhouse and the feather box. According to Hugh-Jones (2019:84), 'leaves,

8 Interview with Jaiver Ramírez and Casimiro Villegas in November 2019.

feathers, and, by extension, feather ornaments, are all one and the same. This is also suggested in a Cubeo story where the Owner of Caraná gives the deities a box whose top half contains leaves to roof their *maloka* and the bottom half contains the ornaments they should use in a dance to celebrate the end of house-building.' The Kotiria's story of the origin of Caraná is very similar. Thus, it was not by chance that the initial encounter with the dance ornaments in the storage room had led to the construction of a traditional longhouse/house of knowledge.

The filming of the last steps in the construction, all the in-depth interviews we conducted with the community members and the inauguration of the traditional longhouse together with guests from neighbouring communities marked a clear peak in 'the process' and evoked many hopes regarding the steps to be followed. While the men wanted to go more deeply into the topic of the dance ornaments, the women wished to conduct a ceramics workshop and to revive this important women-centred knowledge, which they were on the verge of losing.

Unfortunately, what came next was the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, I could not travel for a while, and it was not possible to organize any further workshops.

Ceramics and Fractures

As the project was funded by the VW foundation, which ended during the pandemic, i.e. by the end of 2020, funding for the workshops became more difficult. Through the CoMuse project, we were finally able to organize the ceramics workshop in 2023, instructed by the then 63-year-old Leticia, who had been taught by her mother, grandmother and some Cubeo people in a pottery workshop.

For the first time, this workshop also had official participants (not only guests) from the neighbouring community of Naná who had become interested in 'the process'. On the one hand, this was appreciated because it clearly showed the success of the cooperation. On the other hand, some strange rumours started that exploded during the next workshop in November 2023.

There were always certain tensions during the visits. But as everything in Macucu was intimate and based on family ties, it was possible to ignore downsides, such as the heavy, sometimes violent energy that started to emerge when people were drinking. Among health workers who are engaged in mental health issues in the state of Vaupés, it is well known that Indigenous people use their traditional drinking parties to get rid of their suffering and trauma, sometimes with very tragic consequences. Indigenous people are used to carrying a big burden, be it the early loss of parents, close relatives, children, violence, racism and the lack of educational and labour opportunities, not to mention the everyday struggle to survive as an Indigenous person in a postmodern world.

In November 2023, several complicated issues came together. This workshop was organized in the context of another third party-funded project in which I collaborated

with my Brazilian colleague Thiago da Costa Oliveira, who himself invited Indigenous persons from the Brazilian part of the upper Rio Negro to participate.[9] Those individuals, who had to travel very far, received a payment, as they were treated as instructors by my colleague. This was partly true because they were experts in the traditional ecological calendar, the topic of the workshop. When the drinking party at the end of the workshop started, some young men from Naná became very angry about the fact that 'the Brazilians' had been paid and put in the centre of the event, while the people from Naná were largely ignored regarding both their knowledge and their lack of payments. Furthermore, the pure size of the endeavour, with many people moving by boat downriver, created the impression of a huge project with a lot of funding. Orlando had to answer very confrontational questions in the next zonal assembly about 'the exact amount of money the museum and Orlando are handling for Macucu' (some people imagined a sort of infrastructure project), while the regional leaders complained about the lack of transparency. I think the fact that Orlando does not live permanently in Macucu but most of the time in Mitú made everything even more difficult.

Again, I will not go into further detail here. I learned a lot from the 2023 confrontations, and I had to correct my image of the lower Vaupés as a big family in a natural paradise where people just love each other. Internal hierarchies and competition between communities should never be underestimated. After that, Orlando and I decided to reduce the next workshops, as Macucu was simply too small to house bigger groups with all the confusion that might entail.

The Garden and the Future

The current step in 'the process' (2024/25) at the moment of writing this article (also financed as part of CoMuse), consists in the 'botanical garden', a project people in Macucu very much desired to realize because they wanted to be able to treat diseases and injuries with traditional medicines and wished to deepen their knowledge of the plants that are used for body painting and the dying of artefacts.[10]

Again, the people from Macucu collaborated with their relatives from Naná, who also contributed plants to the garden. The fact that the lot for the garden was opened in Macucu and not in Naná was again criticized by some, but this time Orlando implemented a very clear and transparent payment system, and I tried to explain to the people in Naná that it was not possible simply to double the project and open a new branch in the other village, as that this would exceed my possibilities.

In general, I find it difficult to explain the Macucu collaboration to outsiders. It is definitely much more than a project because there are very strong affective relations

9 See https://amazoniafuturelab.fh-potsdam.de/, Workshop on the Tukano Calendar.
10 Interview for Podcast „Gegen die Gewohnheit", November 2024, cf. link above.

involved that almost feel like family ties. At the same time, I cannot help myself falling time and time again into the role of explaining to my partners that the museum is not a funding agency, that the goal of the project can never be 'just helping people in Macucu out of their misery', that there must always be a degree of mutual learning involved and that it must be consciously promoted to the outside world. I genuinely do not know if there is any hope in 'the process' continuing independently of myself and the Museum. Jaiver stresses the importance of having not only financial but also mental support, expressing this clearly:

> I believe that without you, these steps that we have taken, that we have been taking in the different activities, [...] we would not have succeeded. Yes, because [...] for all activities, you need support, someone who is there to help us, right? And this is a very important tool, the support you have given us, and I hope that we continue working together towards the future and help to preserve all that is traditional in the culture of the Indigenous peoples that has been lost over many years, but that little by little we can rescue [them], eh? The little we have, eh? To encourage and motivate all young people and future generations so that this beautiful wisdom of the Indigenous peoples is not lost.[11]

I find it particularly important that, through the long-term collaboration, I myself have incorporated the relational perspective on the cultural elements from the upper Rio Negro and feel a responsibility for the territories and the people, especially for future generations, as do my partners. Despite the fact that the concrete future of my collaboration with people in Macucu is now very open – CoMuse funding is almost over, and the Museum cannot subsidize projects in Macucu forever – 'the process' has shaped the way I work in the museum, and this will continue in one way or another.

11 Ibid.

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The *Museo del Niwan Nha* in Yalambojoch, Guatemala

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Abstract: A community museum is currently being established at the Niwan Nha Cultural Centre in the Guatemalan village of Yalambojoch. Through a collaboration with the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, copies of stone sculptures collected for the museum by Eduard Seler in the 19th century at neighbouring archaeological sites are helping residents to connect with a local past that has been locally lost to collecting and looting activities.
[Yalambojoch, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, archaeology, Chuj Maya culture, community museum, stone sculptures, plaster casts]

Introduction

In the late 19th century, archaeological sites in the Chaculá region, located in the northwestern corner of the Guatemalan highlands, were the focus of two very different German collectors: Gustavo Kanter and Eduard Seler. Kanter had owned the Chaculá *finca* or farm since the early 1890s. The presence of several archaeological sites on his land seems to have fuelled his desire to collect antiquities on his *finca*, turning him into an amateur archaeologist. Seler, pioneering scholar of Mesoamerican Indigenous cultures and employee at the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (today:

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Ethnologisches Museum Berlin), Germany, visited the region with his wife Caecilie in 1896 for the purpose of researching and collecting antiquities (Seler 1901). The couple's stay lasted less than three months, enough time to assemble an extensive collection that was subsequently sent to the museum in Berlin, where it is preserved to the present day. Later, and likely inspired by the illustrious visitors, Kanter went on to establish his own archaeological museum in Chaculá. At the time, it came to be considered one of the most important in the country (Recinos 1913:205). However, political problems forced Kanter to leave his *finca* in 1915 (Navarrete 1979:14–15) and flee to the nearby Mexican state of Chiapas, where he died around 1920. The museum and its archaeological collection were vandalized, looted and forgotten for decades, until 1975, when the Guatemalan archaeologist Carlos Navarrete documented its pitiful remains (Navarrete 1979).

In 2013 the Proyecto Arqueológico de la Región de Chaculá (PARCHA) was established to locate and document the archaeological sites originally reported by Eduard Seler (1901), as well as conduct new investigations in the region. A total of six field seasons have been conducted between 2013 and 2022. Together with a study of the materials in the Seler collection of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, Seler's studies in the region were successfully contextualized (Wölfel 2022). During the discussion following a presentation of the fifth season's (2018) research results in the village of Yalambojoch, the idea of establishing a community museum emerged. Although originally the interest was specifically in housing and exhibiting archaeological objects found during excavations at the sites around Yalambojoch, in later meetings with interested community leaders additional themes were identified, such as traditional life and the civil war, which was particularly brutal in this area during the 1980s (Falla 2011). Especially with regard to the latter, the museum has the potential to preserve the historical memory of these events, which is very present among village elders, for future generations, considering that there is no formal place of memory for the victims of violence, neither in Yalambojoch, nor in nearby San Francisco, the site of a horrific massacre. Additionally, the donation in 2022 of a collection of Maya textiles from different parts of the department of Huehuetenango complements the themes proposed by the community.

Concerning the subject of archaeology, it seemed logical to establish a connection between the museum in Berlin and the new community museum, given first that the study of material and immaterial cultural heritage is of fundamental importance for anthropological museums and that the Berlin museum possesses an extensive collection from the Chaculá region. A first visit by conservator Kai Patricia Engelhardt, representing the museum, took place in February and March 2020 (Figure 1) at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented the project from continuing immediately.

As a site for the museum, the Centro Cultural Niwan Nha ('Big House' in Chuj) was chosen, a complex of several buildings that from the 1990s onwards were built atop a hill on which the Guatemalan army had established a military post during the 1980s. In fact, the army had bulldozed and removed a few metres from the top of the

Fig. 1 Meeting at the main hall of the Niwan Nha, 1 March 2020, photograph by Julián Pérez Camposeco

hill, where a small archaeological site was located. Several objects from the remains of this site, found during the construction of the Niwan Nha, have been preserved and will be exhibited in the museum.

Funded by private donations from Sweden, and represented in Yalambojoch by Per Bylund Andersen, the NGO Colchaj Nac Luum ('Land and Freedom' in Chuj, the Mayan language spoken in the region) has inaugurated several projects over the years: a kindergarten (1997), a library (2000), a textile workshop (2003), a main hall for events (2008) and above all, since 2006, a secondary school (*Instituto Básico*). Due to the increasing importance of migration to the United States in the past fifteen to twenty years (see also Falla and Yojcom 2012), the interest of young people in secondary education has constantly decreased, leading ultimately to the closure of the secondary school in 2018. The former school rooms were subsequently repurposed for the museum. At the same time, the library was relocated to one of the rooms in the same building. With these changes, the Niwan Nha is positioning itself more towards becoming a cultural centre.

Today, the civil association Awum Te' ('tree planters' in Chuj), founded in 2003, which works in the fields of culture, education, the environment and community devel-

opment, owns the centre and the museum. Members constitute the majority of Yalambojoch's residents. All maintenance and future development of the museum project will be organized and carried out by the association. Revenues generated by timber production from 103 hectares of forest, owned and managed by Awum Te', ensure the long-term financing of the Centro Cultural Niwan Nha, including the museum.

At the end of 2021, Ulrich Wölfel's parents, the late Dr. Horst Wölfel and Karin Wölfel, made a generous donation in support of the museum, covering the costs of renovating the rooms and purchasing furniture and basic equipment for the new museum. Additionally, a project was initiated to compile the history of Yalambojoch, as told by the villagers, to provide a counterbalance to what is written by anthropologists and historians. The results will be published in the form of a book.

With this support, work began on renovating the secondary school rooms in 2022. Two rooms house the permanent exhibition, one room serves as a library, and a large room at the entrance to the building is being used for temporary exhibitions and the projection of videos and movies. In the latter room, at the end of August 2023, a temporary exhibition, 'Agua, Territorio y Conflictos: Mapas históricos de las cuencas de los ríos Nentón–Lagartero, Pojom–Santo Domingo e Ixcán', prepared by the Cofradía Cartográfica Cuchumateca, was installed and inaugurated.

The present article has two main goals: first, to present the case study of the Yalambojoch community museum as a collaborative process; and second, to foreground the possibilities of using replicas of sculptures in working together with local communities on key questions of decolonial museum practice. We show how in the present case replicas with a complex provenance history can interact with oral tradition and memory, thus creating a dialogue that ultimately has the potential to help a local community in its efforts to re-discover the richness and diversity of its archaeological heritage.

The Collaborative Project

Within the framework of a cooperation project between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Museo Comunitario de Yalambojoch in Guatemala, a small archaeological exhibition was designed for which three replica sculptures were sent. This project is an example of the importance not only of replicas in museum practice, but also of the decolonization and diversification of museum practice pursued in the 'Collaborative Museum' (CoMuse) initiative. In addition to the exhibition, the project also includes the integration of the conservation knowledge and experience of Kai Patricia Engelhardt, the conservator from the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin.

The installation of the exhibition, together with the inhabitants of Yalambojoch, took place during August 2025 (Figure 2). Two of the replicas were mounted on wooden pedestals, while a third, due to its flat shape, was hung on a wall. The exhibition graphics, produced in Berlin, include three large banners documenting the journey of

Fig. 2 The inaugurated exposition with plaster casts and banners, 27 September 2025, photograph by Ulrich Wölfel

Eduard Seler and his wife Caecilie Seler-Sachs to Yalambojoch and the archaeological significance of the replicas. These copies are complemented by a table supporting a glass case with original objects recovered during construction of the school houses in the 1990s, with additional pieces coming from different parts of the community. Placed on a separate wall is a collection of photographs from the 1980s, made by Swedish photographer Anette Palm Wigart, showing the inhabitants of Yalambojoch in exile during the civil war.

A key component of the project is the integration of the local community in the exhibition process. The inauguration of the exhibition took place on 24 August 2025 (Figure 3). A local band invited participants to enjoy the music and dancing. After a short welcome address by the institutions involved in the museum, the *rezador* (traditional "prayer maker") of Yalambojoch, Pedro Lucas Jorge, performed a ceremony praying for the well-being of the community and especially the success of the museum project. During the short guided tours that followed, visitors were excited to see the fruits of all the work. Younger visitors in particular showed great interest in the pre-Columbian objects. In the future, workshops are planned to elaborate didactic materials, train visitor guides and help expand the exhibition with local collections.

In addition, based on footage recorded around and during the inauguration, project documentation will be created, which will be exhibited in both Berlin and Yalambo-

Fig. 3 Inauguration of the exhibition, 24 August 2025, photograph by Erasmo Josué De León Velásquez

joch to show the development of the project and the views of the local community. The presentation of the project at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin will be an integral part of the cooperation. At the media station 'Communication', the project will be presented in the form of photographs, short films and interviews with the participating community members in order to make the intercultural exchange and the creation of the exhibition accessible to a broader public.

The Sculpture Replicas

The selection of three sculptures to be sent to Yalambojoch as replicas was made by Ulrich Wölfel, based on his provenance research on the Seler collection. During his stay at Chaculá in 1896, Seler had made paper moulds (for the technique, see e.g. Borchardt 1911) of thirteen sculptures, seven of which represent pieces that he could not take to Berlin (these either remained *in situ* or entered the Kanter collection) and six corresponding to objects considered particularly valuable, which, in addition to being sent to Berlin, received 'backup copies' due to the long and dangerous journey

(Wölfel 2022:256–258). Once in Berlin, the Königliche Gipsformerei (Royal Plaster Workshop) made moulds to produce the casts. These were made available for sale to the interested public (Generalverwaltung der Königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1902:98), as well as being sent to other museums (e.g. the American Museum of Natural History in New York).

The selection made for the Yalambojoch museum reflects (a) different types of sculptures (ancestral figures, relief discs, stelae with hieroglyphic inscriptions) and (b) different biographies of the original objects (loss in Guatemala as part of the Kanter museum; loss in Germany during World War II; original preserved and on display at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin). The two objects whose originals have been lost are of particular importance, as the preserved copies take the place of the originals, at least from the point of view of archaeology and museology. It is important to note that none of the sculptures come from Yalambojoch or its immediate vicinity (stone sculptures from sites near this village are unknown), but from the nearby (~14–18 km in a direct line) archaeological sites of Tres Lagunas, Casa del Sol (north of Quen Santo) and possibly Quen Santo (the Sacchaná stela was found by Seler in a secondary, modern context). Thus, the museum, being the only one in the area, fulfils a regional function in its efforts to preserve and promote the history of the Chaculá region.

In collaboration with the Gipsformerei der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, two plaster copies were prepared, painted in colours similar to the original objects. The third replica, the Sacchaná stela, is an excellent example of the use of digital reproduction techniques. As for technical reasons it was not possible to use the moulds in the Plaster Workshop, a different process had to be employed for this object. Fortunately, the University of Bonn's 'Text Database and Dictionary of Classical Mayan' project had previously scanned the stela at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin. Using the resulting model, a 3D sand print was made. This technology permits the reproduction of complex structures in great detail, giving them a realistic texture. The print was subsequently hand-painted.

It is essential to stress that the collaboration with the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, although physical objects have been sent from Berlin to Yalambojoch, is not a restitution, but rather part of an effort to recover, preserve and strengthen the historical memory of the Chuj people. The replicas complement the original objects on display at the museum, thus showcasing the great variety of archaeological objects at the regional level. In addition, the context of the extraction from their places of origin tells the story of the 'Liberal Reform' of dictator Justo Rufino Barrios (President of Guatemala, 1873–1885), which caused the largest expropriation of Indigenous communal lands in the country's history, opening the way for the establishment of *fincas* in places where Indigenous villages had previously existed.

Memories of the Sculptures

The looting and subsequent dispersal of objects from the Kanter collection resulted in the loss of a large part of the formerly extensive corpus of stone sculptures in the region. Today, only nine sculpture fragments from the Kanter museum remain at Chaculá (Wölfel 2022:1, Fig. 1.11), in addition to a few more fragments at the site of Quen Santo. While the inhabitants of Yalambojoch frequently find archaeological objects such as pottery vessels, obsidian blades and stone tools in their fields, during the construction of houses or during occasional explorations of local caves (the same applies to human remains), stone sculptures are a rarity that evoke feelings of surprise, curiosity and in some cases memories of times past.

Although the Kanter museum in Chaculá had disappeared many decades ago, some of the inhabitants of Yalambojoch still remember the house that contained the stone figures, located near the old road to Nentón that passed by the main house of Finca Chaculá. As a young man, Pedro Lucas Jorge saw the sculptures:

> I think I was twelve, fifteen years old when I was there at Chaculá with my late father. We always looked at stones like this one [points to the copy of the ancestor figure], but they are no more than just stones, but they have figures of people. And there are quite a few, maybe eight or ten, just like this one. But who knows if they are still there or if they have been taken away, who knows how that is? Like this Gustavo Kanter, he said that previously the land was his, with the land of the Laguna Brava, it was his, he said. Well, since they are German people, who knows where they come to another country to invade our place. But those from El Aguacate [neighbouring village] fought him, so they say, [and] evicted him, and he went somewhere else, to the state of Chiapas, Mexico; who knows where he went. (Interview with Pedro Lucas Jorge, Yalambojoch, 26 February 2025)

The ancestor figure was already at Finca Chaculá when Seler visited the place (Seler 1901:Plate VIII) and was later found in Kanter's museum, as evidenced by a photograph taken by his son-in-law, Gustavo Kaehler, before 1915 (reproduced by Burkitt 1924:138). Furthermore, we know that it remained in the museum building after the looting that took place that year, thanks to a photograph taken by Franz Termer in February 1926 (Photographic Archive of the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg, Germany), whereas in 1975, when Carlos Navarrete documented the remains of the collection, it was no longer there (Navarrete 1979). It is not clear whether Don Pedro could have seen it when he passed by the house with the figures.

Fig. 4 Inspection of the crates with plaster casts, 26 February 2025, photograph by Ulrich Wölfel

Discussion

During a meeting at the museum on 26 February 2025, in which several members of Awum Te' involved in cultural issues participated, an intense discussion developed about the importance and significance of the sculptures sent as copies from Berlin (Figure 4). In addition to the feeling of happiness of having received objects that have no parallel in the archaeological remains with which the people of Yalambojoch are familiar, a sense of loss and of a lack of knowledge was noted. The loss of the objects was attributed to the little interest in these kinds of objects shown by previous generations of people from Yalambojoch. It was further noted that archaeological materials, due to centuries of Christianization efforts, no longer play a significant role in traditional religion, as their significance is largely unknown today. The lack of interest in history was also attributed to the focus on the daily chores of peasants and farmers. However, the arrival of the copies from Berlin immediately sparked fresh interest in the pre-Columbian culture of the region and pride in being part of Mayan culture. Comparisons were made with the sculptures on display at the nearby archaeological site of Chinkultic (Chiapas, Mexico), which is open to the public and is well-known among Yalambojoch's neighbours. While in Mexico ruins are seen as something foreign, the new exhi-

bition in Yalambojoch has the potential to change this feeling. As Pascual Gómez Pérez puts it, 'this speaks of us [...] it is something that also allows us to know our history'.

In a country where Indigenous people have been historically exploited, plundered and discriminated against, and where racism still prevails, it is vitally important to recognize that Indigenous people have a history of their own. This history is still hidden, yet it is very powerful in the memories of the people, being preserved in their language.

In contexts where discrimination has penetrated to the bone, it is preferable to deny or hide one's own history. It is our responsibility to give back a little of what has been taken from the Indigenous people. The exhibitions in the museum contribute to the vindication of Yalambojoch as a people and to recognize its past, what their grandparents lived through. Above all, it shows the importance of the Chuj culture and language, as well as emphasizing that the Chuj are a people who have been present in this territory, who have been invaded, massacred, expelled and turned into refugees, but who are nonetheless still present here.

The different events that the Chuj have lived through have formed them as a people. Although they continue to inhabit their territory, they have lost some of their customs, and their children are growing up without knowing all their cultural richness.

The presence of these sculptures is evidence that the Chuj have inhabited this territory and that it has historically belonged to them, despite the various laws and decrees that have affected it. This history deserves to be told, to be known. The new generations have the right to know it, and we hope that accordingly they can proudly say that they belong to an ancient people, and that they speak the language that their ancestors once spoke.

Summary and Conclusions

The participants in the different meetings have shown a great interest in the museum, offering their ideas and opinions. A small group of volunteers has formed a museum committee. However, the number of people actively working on the realization of the project is still very small. Possible reasons for the lack of participants include the absence of people who have migrated to the United States in recent years. Others, who have stayed in Yalambojoch, are occupied in construction work funded with remittance money sent by their friends and relatives in the United States. Furthermore, some people have expressed the opinion that they want to wait until the museum is 'ready' and then see how they might contribute to it. The latter attitude is related to the so-called 'asistencialismo' (welfarism), which entails a certain passivity and expectation. This in turn pushes the non-local participants of the project into more active, dominant roles. In fact, the first exhibition, inaugurated on 24 August 2025, was entirely designed and installed by Kai Patricia Engelhardt and Ulrich Wölfel. To counteract this unintended situation, during the initial exhibition, several of the glass cases will

remain empty, together with calls for community participation. Once having overcome the foreignness of the 'museum' as such, workshops and other activities will eventually lead to a community take-over.

That this is not a vain hope is evident from shifting attitudes towards the project. Whereas during the early planning stage the potential for attracting tourists had often been cited as one of the primary motivations for the museum, the progress in setting up the exhibition and the arrival of the copies has engendered a desire to discover more about local history and identity. It is precisely the replicas that help to create connections between different historical moments: the pre-Hispanic past, the time of the 'Liberal Reform' with the Kanter *finca* and the post-civil-war present with new archaeological research and collaboration with the Berlin museum.

Like all Mayan groups, the Chuj cultivate a rich oral tradition, comprising their history from remote times to the present (see e.g. Piedrasanta 2009; Hopkins 2021). Objects and textual and visual exhibits in the museum, as in the case of Don Pedro cited above, can inspire and strengthen this cultural memory. It will thus be crucial in the planning of future exhibits to document and preserve this immaterial heritage in the Chuj language.

Furthermore, given the continuing importance of archaeological sites in the context of identity and traditional spirituality (see e.g. Frühsorge 2010; Straffi 2014; who both include examples from the Chuj area), it is hoped that future archaeological projects in the Yalambojoch area will also contribute to the museum's exhibits.

The handover ceremony of the replicas to the Yalambojoch Community Museum, celebrated in Berlin on July 18, 2024, in the presence of the Ambassador of the Republic of Guatemala, H.E. Jorge Alfredo Lemcke Arévalo, highlighted the importance of the project for cultural cooperation between Germany and Guatemala. The attendees perceived it as a symbolic act of exchange and respect for the culture of Guatemala's Mayan communities. Thus, the handing over of the replicas was not only an act of remembrance but also a gesture of recognition of the cultural significance of the objects for the Yalambojoch community.

For the future of the collaboration there are many ideas, among them the desire to receive training for the museum's supporters, to create pedagogic materials in Chuj and Spanish, to organize excursions to the museum for students, both from Yalambojoch and from neighbouring villages, to receive further objects, either in the form of copies or (preferably) as originals, and lastly, given the realization of the difficulties in achieving the last point, to consider the possibility of a visit to Berlin to see the exhibition in the Humboldt Forum and the objects in storage in Dahlem. The community museum should be known by people from other villages around Yalambojoch, and if in the future training for those interested in contributing to the museum is implemented, it should be remembered that the exhibitions should be in the language of the villagers. A more enriching exhibition will also provide texts in Chuj.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the late Dr. Horst Wölfel and Karin Wölfel for their generous financial support without which there would be no museum in Yalambojoch. We would also like to thank the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin for the donation of the copies, the financial support and the close cooperation with the staff of the institution. In addition to the museum committee, Per Bylund Andersen, Julián Pérez Camposeco, the late Felipe Gómez, Antonio Raymundo López and Byron Hernández have helped in the realization of the project in Yalambojoch. Many thanks also go to Nikolai Grube, Christian Prager and the project team of 'Text Database and Dictionary of Classical Mayan' at the University of Bonn, who helped with the 3D scans of the Sacchaná stela and provided an explanatory text and drawing for the exhibition. We also would like to thank the members of the Cofradía Cartográfica Cuchumateca, who chose the museum in Yalambojoch as the place for their important exhibition. The implementation of the replicas project was not without its challenges, particularly the transport of the replicas in the summer of 2024. It is only thanks to the close cooperation between the Embassy of the Republic of Guatemala in Germany, the team of the 'Collaborative Museum' (CoMuse) in Berlin and the colleagues in Yalambojoch, that the difficulties could be mastered successfully.

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Do We Care? Reflections on the Multi-Layered Challenges and Opportunities Posed by a Decolonial Approach to Collection-Based Museum Practices

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Abstract: Collections play a crucial role as a meeting point between community stakeholders, guest researchers, international fellows and museum staff, while also carrying the traces of a violent (colonial) past. Conceived as a cross-disciplinary open conversation between the fields of museology, design and fellowship coordination, this article raises questions within the framework of the decolonial ambition of the Collaborative Museum, highlighting notions of care, critiques of racism and a hierarchy-critical understanding of interdisciplinary collaboration.
[ethnographic collections, decolonization, preservation, critique of racism, museum design, transdisciplinarity]

Introduction

The Collaborative Museum (CoMuse), which was initiated at the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin in 2023, comprises over forty international collaborative projects and hosts regular international fellowship programmes. It aims to foster the decolonization of museum practices, promote greater accessibility, and encourage transcultural collaboration across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. As non-curatorial staff engaged with CoMuse from different professional backgrounds – museology (Myriam), design (Szandra) and fellowship coordination (Nadia) – we are coming together after two years to reflect critically on the project's decolonial ambition: Where do we currently stand with regard to our respective fields of practice? What are the aspects we believe need greater attention in the future of the Collaborative Museum project (CoMuse), as well as regarding the transformation of museum practices at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst? Where is the potential for greater understanding and exchange on a more equal footing, given the intensification of diversification and transcultural collaboration? We

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have deliberately chosen to speak from the vantage point of non-curatorial staff. We believe this is essential, as decolonization should not be the concern of those who usually produce discourse alone but should extend across all strata of the institution. Given the three different functions and perspectives, each with its own concerns, it is essential for us to articulate our own positioning clearly by avoiding the use of supposedly neutral language. As Julian Dörr argues, giving up the idea of neutrality is a premise for efforts towards decolonization in the museum, as it begins by questioning assumed certainties and shaking up one's own conceptual framework (Dörr 2022). In alignment with Clémentine Deliss's assertion that a decolonization process requires moving beyond boundaries that are delineated by traditional disciplines (Deliss 2020), we pursue a reflexive dialogue across various fields of practice. To remain true to the nature of our day-to-day critical exchanges at the museum, we have chosen the principle of collective creation in textual form as we enter into a layered dialogue. Throughout the text, each one of us has highlighted concepts, terms or examples in bold that are central to our arguments and that the following author refers to in more detail or approaches differently in the course of the exchange. Using this format, we seek not only to articulate our reflections, but also to embody an approach that disrupts traditional hierarchies of discourse production and opens up a space for alternative ways of engaging and producing knowledge within the museum.

Moments of Encounter

(Myriam) Over the course of the Collaborative Museum, there has been a distinctive intensification of visits to the museum's storage spaces as part of an advocated decolonial effort to improve access to them. Various guests, fellows, artists and community stakeholders have entered the collections for shorter or longer periods of time in order to engage with the material culture held in their premises and to which they are connected.

I have had the opportunity to host various visits to collections in the storages of the Ethnologisches Museum and have always found these moments of encounter an eye opener for grasping the underlying rationale operating within the institution. Having worked in the collections on a day-to-day basis, I see myself as having incorporated a kind of **'conservation habitus'** over time (Perrot 2022). That is, I have developed methods to orient myself within the collections and strategies to engage with museum 'objects'[1] which are representative of a Western positivist conservation rationale. If finding my way through the multitude of corridors that make up the

1 We have chosen to refer to 'object' in quotation marks in order to problematise assumptions around the term that are deeply rooted in a Western positivist world-view, while recognizing that a significant part of the museum's work is to this day built around this kind of terminology.

huge storage rooms of the museum might now seem intuitive to me, I have seen visitors react to the location of the collections, their scenography and composition with a sense of shock and often a feeling of emotional heaviness. The Eurocentric logic by which museum 'objects' are classified, as well as the sheer quantity of 'objects' accumulated and visible across the multitude of cabinets, are just a few manifestations that testify to the **colonial legacy** that is embodied in the collections. My experience of accompanying visitors into the collections has shown me that, far from being a neutral moment, a visit to the museum's collections is intersected by **power relations** inherited from a violent history that can evoke strong emotional responses in those who enter its facilities.

The Museum as a Political Space

(Nadia) When considering the **colonial legacy** of collections, I think that the notion of the museum as a political space is helpful in understanding the kind of **power** dynamics at work in the context of museum collections. In my day-to-day work as a fellowship coordinator, where I had the chance to accompany CoMuse Fellows on their first visits to the collections, I could sense the weight that lies on this special place and its history. Scholars who have pushed critical museum theory forward in recent decades have pointed out the political and social dimensions of museums. They have coined the idea of museums as 'speaking spaces' (Bal 1996:87ff.) and 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997) of ongoing negotiation that challenge given power asymmetries, highlighted the importance of 'radical democratic' participation (Sternfeld 2018, Simon 2010), or emphasized the need for restitution, justice and the redistribution of knowledge (Sarr and Savoy 2018).

Mahret Ifeoma Kupka argues that the museum is not a depoliticized space, but rather a political space 'that has always either excluded those categorised as different or turned them into exhibited "objects"' (Kupka 2022). It is precisely these power mechanisms of exclusion that, in my opinion, require more attention when considering colonial continuities, collection visits and the museum's responsibility for decolonization today. The Guidelines for German Museums published by the Deutscher Museumsbund highlight the significant 'overlap' between colonialism and racism (Deutscher Museumsbund 2021a:26). They remind us that 'labelling and categorizing collection items originated in western museums' follows a 'Eurocentric way of thinking' (ibid. 2021:52) and that they 'may contain discriminatory images and reflect colonial or racist ideologies' (ibid. 2021:20). 'The ethnic groups constructed in the colonial era can be deeply engrained in the documentation of collections and have now first to be painstakingly deconstructed' (ibid. 2021:52). While everyone who works at the museum is well aware of the fact that cultural belongings from colonial contexts are historically sensitive items and that 'their acquisition often involved the use of force' (ibid. 2021:20),

less is spoken about how the institution actually deals with discriminatory images or archival descriptions that reflect racist ideologies. The Germanist and historian Dr. Ohiniko M. Toffa confirms this importance when he says (Toffa 2024:91):

> It is about demonstrating the power dynamics of racism in the German colonial period and using this to create spaces for reflection on a de-racialising knowledge practice. De-racialising means, above all, epistemically understanding racism and countering it in order to demand and promote a postcolonial knowledge ethic. De-racialising is thus a crucial component of decolonisation work.

Decolonization and anti-racism therefore go hand in hand (Mbembe 2013:65). I would even say that a critical approach to racism must be at the very core of every decolonial approach, be it in the museum or in civil society. More and more museums[2] and museum initiatives[3] in Western countries with historical ties to colonialism are rightly asking themselves: 'Why is it important for the museum to work critically on racism and discrimination?' And: 'What can educational work critical of discrimination look like in a museum' (Mörsch and Piesche 2025)[4]? If ethnographic museums have been highly political spaces that shaped colonial notions of superiority, new solutions are needed to counter the mechanisms of exclusion and demarcation that still permeate

2 To cite a few examples: an exhibition at the Deutsches Hygiene Museum Dresden: 'Racism. The Invention of Human Races' (2018–2019) (Deutscher Museumsbund 2021b:25); the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam has established a working group for the 'adjustment of colonial terminology' since 2015 by revising discriminatory or racist wordings in archives, collections and digital databases (ibid. 2021:7); Weltmuseum Wien: Project 'Sharing Stories. Dinge sprechen' (2015-2017) (ibid. 2021:19): 'The history of racially motivated research and dispossession and the problem of talking about and interpreting '"the others"' often remains invisible in the way museum 'objects' are exhibited. The project seeks to engage with this history and develop alternative practices of collecting and storytelling.' See also the tour guide 'Change of View: Tracing Racism' at the Historisches Museum Frankfurt which 'takes a look at the permanent exhibitions of the Historical Museum Frankfurt from a perspective that is critical of racism': https://historisches-museum-frankfurt.de/en/interventionsspur?language=en#:~:text=The%20intervention%20tour%20takes%20a,stories%20with%20their%20exhibition%20contributions, accessed October 2025.

3 The membership organization 'Museums Association' in London campaigns for socially engaged museums and has established an anti-racist museum programme, an anti-racism and decolonization steering group, and offers online learning courses as part of their 'Museum Essentials' to introduce anti-racism work for staff in museums:
https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/anti-racism/steering-group/, accessed July 3, 2025.
https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/anti-racism/anti-racist-museums-programme/, accessed July 3, 2025.
https://www.museumsassociation.org/careers/museum-essentials/#museum-essentials-supporting-anti-racism,
accessed July, 3 2025.

4 https://www.lab-bode-pool.de/de/t/museum-bewegen/diskriminierungskritisch-arbeiten/warum-diskriminierungskritik-im-museum/?material=aufsatz-carmen-moersch-peggy-piesche, accessed July 3, 2025.

collections today. The Ethnologisches Museum has, through CoMuse, just started to give this topic more attention, as in collaborative projects like 'MWANO: a decolonial exploration of the Cameroon photo archive'[5] or in the project 'Intertwined Memories',[6] both of which constitute very important steps towards the insight that decoloniality and anti-racism must be thought together. I ask myself how CoMuse could address this important debate further in the future. How do we act and care for those who are still affected by racism today? Could we introduce a kind of discrimination-sensitive 'disclaimer' before entering the collections for the first time? CoMuse as a framework allows a space for experiment and empathy, and potentially for reflecting on the colonial continuities and racist labellings in the collections in order to identify them and to dismantle discriminatory terminology as far as possible. A decolonial approach not only addresses the most explicit forms of racism: it may also reflect on the more subtle forms of epistemic violence that are inscribed in the collections. It may also consider how the construction of a racialized **'Other'**, with all its possible prevailing attributions in a colonial logic, has indirectly impacted other levels, such as spatial designations, archiving and regional or ethnic ascriptions, continuing to leave its mark on the museum and its collections. This requires a multi-perspective approach that takes many voices and an intersectional expertise into account.

The Compliance of Design

(Szandra) You address structural questions that reveal how racist attributions manifest themselves not only on the level of content but also physically. These processes unfold through collective negotiation: as Herbert Blumer emphasizes, the meaning of a thing is not inherent in the thing but is constructed relationally (Blumer 2018:21). Communal attributions are also reflected in design: the layout and materiality of collection and exhibition spaces are based on specific assumptions about how these spaces, and the 'objects' within them, are to be used or preserved. When I recently had the opportunity to visit the storage rooms with you, Myriam, some questions arose: For whom are these spaces designed? Whose scholarly and conservation practices are they intended to serve? Whose perspective on the 'objects' is being affirmed through their design?

What I'm getting at is that the design of spaces, exhibitions and graphic elements is an active player in the museum narrative. It organizes spatial ar-

5 A collaborative project between the Cameroonian film-maker and researcher Augustine Moukodi, Marianne Ballé Moudoumbou, the Media and Education Department of Ethnologisches Museum, and partners in Cameroon. It builds on a first research fellowship conducted in 2024.

6 See essay 'Intertwined memories' in this issue.

rangements, establishes visual hierarchies, emphasizes or disrupts, creates connections, and evokes emotions through colour and form. These design decisions carry cultural inscriptions and can reproduce colonial patterns of thought that are already embedded in the collections' genesis. Design that formally supports classification systems while subordinating the individuality of an artefact to a systemic, material gaze not only reflects institutional logics but also contributes to the construction of an **'Other'**. Building on this observation, I find Dörr's argument for the necessity of abandoning neutrality especially compelling. The design discipline, too, must undergo critical self-examination (Recklies 2022, Khandwala 2019). To what extent do design concepts contribute to the reproduction of Eurocentric thoughts or ideas of cultural superiority? Looking ahead, can storage and exhibition spaces be deconstructed or even re-imagined in decolonizing ways?

If we follow this line of thought regarding the presentations in permanent exhibitions, it becomes clear on multiple levels how design reflects a Western perspective on collection 'objects'. Classical exhibition practices (von Hantelmann et al. 2010:79) tend to decontextualize these 'objects', for example, through being placed in display cabinets. The design neither responds to the individual character of the collection's 'objects' nor acknowledges the fact that these were not created for museum display. The visual and spatial appearance of the collection spaces follows a logic that not only conveys institutional authority over content but actively reproduces it. Just as you, Myriam, speak of a **'conservation habitus'**, we could understand these observations in terms of a **design habitus:** a set of formats rooted in a Western attitude towards collection 'objects' that is used to translate curatorial content into spatial and printed forms. The design directs the gaze and draws on a long-standing tradition that shapes our visual habits and can convey a sense of interpretive authority. It is therefore crucial to recognize the design language that has helped to make Eurocentric world-views visible (Papanek 1971), with the goal of deconstructing, expanding and unlearning them.

To illustrate the normative dimension of design and its influence on our perceptions, I decided to set my contribution in the typeface 'Comic Sans', a font typically associated with children's themes or comics and one that appears out of place in the context of an academic journal.

So, how can design support the transformative aims of ethnological museums? How can design, with its competencies and responsibilities, take part in the discourse? 'Decoloniality is about shattering the familiar', asserts designer Danah Abdulla, as cited by Khandwala in her essay (Khandwala 2019:201). To leave well-trodden design paths behind, it is necessary for me as a designer to develop an understanding of the **individual biographies of 'objects'** and to adopt a fundamentally different approach in framing them. It seems

important to attempt ways that explore sensuous and more-than-academic forms of storytelling and that embrace subjectivity and experimentation. The possibilities here are vast, but for this idea to be implemented practically, designers would need to be integrated differently into the project process, granting them meaningful involvement in content development and the freedom to shape it accordingly.

Perspective is Everything

(Nadia) I would like to take up this crucial point on the **individual biographies of 'objects'**. When we speak about the importance of subjectivity as an antithesis to **neutrality**, perspective is everything. It determines what we perceive as true or false and shapes the way we see the world, how we identify ourselves and how we relate to terms or complex concepts, such as transculturality, justice or equality, based on our lived experiences. From which perspective do we talk when addressing the terms 'collaboration' and 'decolonization', and what types of (maybe contradictory) consequences emerge from asking these questions, depending on our positionality, privileges and possibilities of access? As part of its fellowship program, CoMuse has invited a range of perspectives embracing diverse knowledge production and cultural or artistic inquiry beyond the academic realm. Artists, film-makers, musicians, journalists and educators, alongside historians and scientists, have explored multidisciplinary approaches, created artworks which enter into dialogue with the collections or exhibitions, or have challenged established structures and narratives in other ways, highlighting their personal and **emotional** connection with cultural belongings.

Decolonizing Preservation?

(Myriam) Evoking the **emotional** dimension of a subjective relation to museum pieces leads me to McMaster's notion of 'culturally sensitive' spaces (McMaster 2019:151), which he uses to highlight the ontological complexity of what make up ethnographic collections and the inherent asymmetrical relations that constitute them. He justifies his use of this term in three ways:

> Sensitive because of the manner in which many of these 'objects' were acquired at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth; sensitive because of the need to include Indigenous voices in exhibitions; and sensitive because many Indigenous "things" are, in fact spiritually active and not just dead matter in a Western sense. (McMaster 2019:151)

The latter aspect challenges me directly in the work I do in the collections. As a museologist and collection manager, my tasks fall under one of the five core museum's principles, namely that of preservation. In my everyday practice I am expected to commit to a duty of preservation as stated in the core principles set out by the Deutscher Museumsbund, to which the Ethnologisches Museum conforms.[7] This states that it is the responsibility of the museum to prevent the 'objects' from deteriorating and to implement preventive conservation strategies in order to ensure their maintenance as whole entities available for future generations. Today, the term 'preservation', in the way it is applied in the context of the Ethnologisches Museum, very much embodies a Western positivist world-view, as it is mainly understood in relation to the materiality of the 'objects'. For me, this current understanding of preservation poses challenges to the implementation of a decolonial agenda in the context of the museum collections.

When it comes to entering the collection storages, I observe a dual movement at play that contributes to the emotional impact that visitors might experience. Besides the physical setting, which conveys a Eurocentric rationale, it is the regulatory system embedded in the visit itself which might further amplify a sense of emotional intensity. The process of engaging with collections is regulated by Western conservation standards[8] and unfolds within a logic that reflects a particular way of dealing with 'things', a mode of engagement that usually prioritizes the preservation of 'objects'.[9]

If a decolonial ambition comes hand in hand with fostering access to museum collections, it also necessarily entails opening up to a variety of ways of seeing, feeling and making sense of museum pieces that go beyond their understanding as fragile matter. Depending on one's world-view, cultural belongings may be perceived as relational entities (Dilger et al. 2025) or **'living objects'** (Sully 2007:111) and may, according to those who engage with them, require certain kinds of 'nurturing care' (Ivanov et al. 2024:44) and a type of interaction that differs from Western norms of conservation.

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7 https://www.museumsbund.de/museumsaufgaben/, accessed 4 April 2025.

8 Such standards involve, for instance, defining how many visitors are allowed in the collections, for how long, and under what conditions 'objects' may or may not be handled. While some of these measures have been introduced for safety reasons, they are also deeply rooted in a Eurocentric framework for engaging with material culture.

9 From a conservation standpoint, collection visits can be seen as a potential threat to the maintenance of the material conditions of the 'objects'. This may be caused by the mere transport from one location to another, while, when it comes to the moment of the visit itself, the presence of individuals amongst the collections impacts on changes in temperature and humidity levels, which in turn may lead to physical damage. The same goes for movement and interactions around and with the 'objects', which can lead to vibrations and potential material deterioration. And so, during a so-called handling session, efforts will usually be made to ensure that the session unfolds in such a way that it does not cause material damage to the 'objects' involved. This in turn has implications for the ways in which 'objects' may or not be manipulated.

Living 'Objects'

(Nadia) I would like to add a perspective from two of our CoMuse Fellows on the aspects of **preservation** and the understanding of 'objects' as **living** beings. In the course of a conversation with Fellow and artist Nada Tshibwabwa, he pointed out that 'objects' are not inanimate things and that museums are, in some sense, antithetical to the living energies that flow through 'objects' and all existence on earth. This is because their focus on preservation conflicts with the transient nature of physical matter, death and decay. In contrast, the relationship with history as he knows it from the Democratic Republic of Congo is characterized by a belief in **re-creation** rather than preservation, emphasizing transformation and dialogue that involves a broad, responsive exchange that goes beyond human interactions.[10] This conceptual understanding of 'objects' as relational entities also resonates with the voice of CoMuse Fellow and cultural scientist Ifunanya Madufor. In her poetically written essay (Madufor 2024) about her experience in Berlin, she not only refers to the scientific context of her research on Igbo spirituality but also reflects on the human experience of someone who gets in touch with the heritage of her community during collection visits at the Ethnologisches Museum. She quietly protests against the labelling of the artefacts as mere 'objects', as 'it diminishes their profound significance and central meaning'. She suggests instead identifying them as 'symbols', which, in her words, 'acknowledges not just their roles as manifestations of cultural realities, but gives a deep sense of understanding [to] a people's cosmological framework.'[11] What consequences could possibly emerge from acknowledging 'objects' as living entities in practical terms? How can we re-think preservation with a greater focus on **'re-creation'**, as suggested by Nada Tshibwabwa? These are the kinds of bold and uncomfortable questions CoMuse creates a space for, enabling change to evolve from a multitude of perspectives.

Towards a Duty of Care

(Myriam) This idea of **'re-creation'** as evoked by Nada Tshibwabwa brings me back to what anthropologists Paola Ivanov, Jonas Bens and Laibor Kalanga Moko (see Ivanov et al. 2024) refer to when evoking the Maasai 'objects' held in the

10 Conversation between the author and Nada Tshibwabwa, April 2025.

11 She points out that these symbols, like communal deities or ancestral masks, are much more than static material representation; rather, they express an entire microcosmos of the broader Igbo world-view and 'serve as conduits through which the essence of the divine is deeply experienced.' Ifunanya Madufor quotes a popular saying among the Igbo people that reflects their philosophy of life: *'Ife kwudo, ife ozo akwude be ya,* or nothing stands alone, for there is always an invisible counterpart to everything that has life' (Madufor 2024).

Ethnologisches Museum's collections and whose interpretations they investigated in consultation with Maasai communities in northern Tanzania. According to them, belongings understood as imasaa are 'nonhumans that belong to humans in a way that goes beyond possession' (Ivanov et al. 2024:35). They are relational elements in the sense of 'life-giving entities (...) imbued with a capacity to act, react, and even feel' (ibid. 2024:36–38). Here I wonder: how does one care for museum pieces which are to be understood as body parts (ibid. 2024:37) by those who are connected to them?

If it is the museum's duty to preserve its collections, then I ask: what understanding of preservation emerges from a decolonial framework in light of the multiplicity of interpretative frameworks? I believe that, if increasing the accessibility of collections is a necessary part of the Ethnologisches Museum's decolonial agenda, then it also calls for a rethink of the meaning of its duty to preserve belongings and for a redefinition of the role of those who usually carry it out. I argue that moving away from a duty of preservation to a **duty of care** (Sully 2007) may allow the recognition and incorporation of the human dimension into the work done in the collections and constitute just one step in the process of **repairing** relations and rehabilitating power dynamics.

From Project to Process

(Szandra) Our approaches demonstrate how an ideology of dominance which once helped establish museums (Bennett 1995) continues to permeate all areas of these institutions, from the very existence of collections to collection management, architecture and design, and even the interpersonal dynamics within the institution itself. But how can we use this knowledge, which has already been articulated by numerous authors before us? How can an ideology defined by interpretive authority over the 'foreign' or 'Other' be more thoroughly deconstructed? An intention to decolonize should also apply to the internal institutional hierarchies regarding their emergence and impact. If we want to embody decolonization, we may need to approach the institution's power structures with scepticism. As I have outlined, this takes integral unlearning, including within the field of design. This process can only succeed if it is conceived holistically. In a collaborative practice based on mutual respect and involving a shared process across disciplines, the design part could be iteratively linked to the development of content. Decolonizing, in the sense of pluriversal thinking, would then become a shared practice in which we continuously negotiate how diversifying approaches influence both content and form. In practice, shifting from a project-oriented to a process-oriented mindset seems essential. Lorena Vicini expresses this goal as follows:

> In the context of decolonisation, cultural management is called upon to reflect on democratic processes that maximise the space for collective construction and enable people to take responsibility for the processes they set in motion. (Vicini 2019:172)

She invites institutions to become **spaces of imagination** or **'spaces of experimental setup'** (Vicini 2019:172). From the perspective of my discipline, the following approaches are essential: developing a critical awareness of how design shapes narratives respectively, how design itself entails narratives; cultivating scepticism towards established formats; engaging continuously with design from a decolonial perspective; and establishing long-term, project-independent visual strategies for dealing with **racist and discriminatory imagery**. Additionally, designers should foster an awareness of the individuality and complex contexts of each 'object' presentation and create sensory, inclusive and diverse forms of access that enable layered understandings. Ultimately, engaging with Indigenous concepts of 'objects', such as their perception as living beings, is a prerequisite for rethinking exhibition design. For any of these approaches to be meaningfully integrated, however, it is crucial that designers be involved from the conceptual phase and well before any final presentation format is determined.

Design methodologies such as Design Thinking or Design Ethnography offer tools for mapping processes, defining positions and developing innovative formats through prototyping. In such processes, content and form are developed collaboratively across disciplines, and the design perspective can take on a co-curatorial role. After all, how can meaningful change in design take place if design continues to be regarded within institutions primarily as an executive task, rather than as an integral part of curatorial and interpretive processes?

Within the framework of CoMuse, we are experiencing some promising approaches. I am grateful that we have, across disciplines, embarked on the experiment of writing this joint article. Our at times challenging exchange has, in a short time, given me many impulses to reflect further on my own practice. The work on the expanded collection's visitors' booklet with you, Myriam, is also trying to take a different path. From the very beginning of the conceptual phase we have been in close dialogue, developing the content and visual structure alongside each other using a shared digital platform. Our joint collection visit, along with the conversation with cultural studies scholar Marianne Ballé Moudoumbou and artist Tina Moukodi, further deepened my awareness of the emotional dimension of collection visits, as both of you describe in this article. From a design standpoint, I am currently exploring ways to indicate, alongside the provision of factual information, that the museum critically reflects on the various layers of violence, loss and trauma

embedded in the collections, which can be reactivated during visits. While on a structural level a more sustained response can be imagined, the visual dimension can serve in parallel to communicate this awareness. Drawing-based attempts could be made to make the violent dimensions of the collections visible and to acknowledge visitors in their painful confrontation with it. For example, this could be taken further by artistically documenting future visits and compiling them into a kind of 'archive of encounters'. In this way, greater emphasis could be given to the identities, reactions and ongoing negotiations over the colonial legacy.

Anchoring Anti-Racism in Practice

(Nadia) The notion of institutions as **spaces of imagination and experimentation** is a very fertile ground, which also requires an attitude that is open to trial and error and a self-reflective interrogation on all levels at all times. As an outlook for the future, I would like to think of decolonization as a fruitful path towards an attempt to balance out historical asymmetries and contemporary inequalities of access, while understanding decolonization not as something that 'takes away' but that completes, as Mahret Ifeoma Kupka (Kupka and Raabe 2021) argues:

> The term decolonisation may at first come across as though something was being removed, deconstructed, and dismantled. However, the process is really about making complete, which means integrating the missing, hidden, forcibly excluded parts into the whole. (Kupka and Raabe 2021)[12]

As I have tried to outline, as the very basis of a politics of **repair and care**, it is crucial for an honest and holistic decolonial approach to confront the **racisms** that are still embedded within the museum, its archives and collections, both historically and also with a critical view towards its contemporary continuities. This could be achieved by anchoring anti-racism in collection-based museum practices through working groups, own projects, conferences and think tanks. In practice, how to 'de-racialise' collections (Toffa, 2024) without erasing the historical evidence of violence perpetrated during colonial times? We might think of incorporating principles that introduce a reflection on a meta-level, as has been done in the exhibition 'Leerstellen. Ausstellen',[13] on a large scale for the collection. And this would need to be done systematically, together with voices arising from colonized areas.

12 https://www.talkingobjectslab.org/interview-mit-den-kuratorinnen, accessed July 3, 2025.

13 The exhibition 'Leerstellen.Ausstellen: Objekte aus Tansania und das koloniale Archiv' was on display from 2022 to 2024 at the Humboldt Forum.

To care means acknowledging the emotionality that can arise during collection visits and to think of ways to mobilize expert advice[14] when trauma or pain[15] (Kilomba 2023) is involved. To care means to show empathy, as it unfolds already on a personal and heartfelt level between curators, fellows and museum staff, as can be read in this issue.

Curate as in Curare

(Myriam) I began my reflection by considering how the museum's duty to preserve deserves to be critically assessed in light of a decolonial effort to move away from a dominant Western referential framework while implementing a pluriversal (Mignolo 2018) approach. Referring back to the earlier mentioned example of Maasai perceptions of museum pieces, authors Ivanov, Bens and Moko further explain how, according to their interlocutors, their treatment as inert matter alienated from the individual and social body turns them into 'unhappy objects' (Ivanov et al. 2024:42). Inquiring into what would necessitate their re-establishment as 'happy objects' (ibid. 2024:44), Maasai interlocutors state: 'it is urgent to re-establish a proper relationship of **love and care** towards the belongings in Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum in order to somehow reintegrate them into the community' (ibid. 2024).[16] The implementation of such a relationship would involve various sets of caring strategies, one of them being a purification process which would demand the rubbing of animal fat into the 'objects' (Moko 2023). I assume that carrying out such a caring approach from the current museum's conservative standpoint would prove challenging today, as it would go against the standards of preventive conservation to which it currently conforms. To be able to honour the diversity of approaches to the care of cultural belongings (which cannot be reduced to the singular) according to the sensitivities of those who are connected to them would demand a change in the definition of the museum's core principles. Here, and in light of this unfolding conversation,

14 This could be done by collaborating with initiatives in the future like the 'Mental Health Art Space', a non-profit organization in Berlin with expertise in decoloniality that centres the mental health, well-being, experiences, knowledge, histories, narratives and archives of Black people, Indigenous people and People of Colour, as well as other migrant and marginalized groups: https://mhasberlin.com/, accessed 1 April 2025.

15 The author, artist, psychologist and cultural scientist Grada Kilomba says about colonialism: 'Colonialism is a wound that has never been properly treated, a festering wound that always hurts, sometimes becomes infected, and sometimes bleeds.' In: Exhibition 'O Quilombismo' at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, artwork 'Table of Goods' (2017) by Grada Kilomba: https://www.hkw.de/programme/o-quilombismo/grada-kilomba, accessed 1 April 2025.

16 'The appropriate relationship to *imasaa* is expressing their affection for them, approaching them with love and care' (Ivanov et al. 2024:38).

I believe that the necessity to re-think the museum's responsibility in its duty to care is one that concerns all the sectors of the museum and that would deserve being made an overarching principle for those that are already in place. If looking closely at the term 'curate' – whose Latin etymology refers to 'curare', meaning 'to care for', 'to heal' – then how might the perception of all of us as curators inspire a further sensibilization to broader epistemologies and support the embracing of an underlying responsibility to care?

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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-

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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, transcultural 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 7th 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 humananimal hybrid and was originally a burial object. The then 'Völkerkunde Museum' (today's Ethnologisches Musem) 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 for Anthropology 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

An earlier, shorter and German version of this article was published in the journal iz3w on June 11, 2025, Issue 409, under the title: "Verflochtene Erinnerungen. Wie (ausgerechnet) im Humboldt Forum Erinnerungskultur gelingt".

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On the Road to '5 Questions on the Collections': The Zurich Ethnographic Museum Collaborative Workspace Series Exhibitions 2022-2024

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Abstract: Collaborative research on museum collections is standard today in ethnographic museums, where the power of interpretation, questions of expertise and ownership rights are critically discussed as necessary steps towards decolonizing western museums and knowledge. After a range of collaborative projects, between 2022 and 2024 the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich ran the Workspace Series as a format for making knowledge production in an ethnographic museum transparent and for sharing collections, museum work and collaborative research with originator and migrant communities, as well as the general public. Five key questions were formulated to show how mutual understanding depends on negotiating basic information and ascertaining insights into different perspectives. The aim was to demonstrate how important this mutual trust is for collaborative research that is relevant not only to western audiences, but particularly also to originator communities of collections preserved in our museums.

[provenance research, contemporaneity, reconnecting, object diasporas, trust, skilled practice, object expertise, collaboration, sensitive objects, alternative knowledge systems, pluriverse]

In recent years, agendas concerning provenance research, decolonization and critical curatorship have challenged and entirely transformed museums holding sensitive collections (Brandstetter and Hierholzer 2018:12),[2] particularly ethnographic museums worldwide (see e.g. Doll 2024). Most museums today are committed to this agenda. When the directors of ethnographic museums in the Germanophone world published

1 The author was chair in social anthropology and director of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich from August 2008 to January 2025. Responsible for the museum's overall scientific profile, in the case of the Workspace Series 2022-2024 I was one of a collective team of five curators who jointly, supported by the entire museum team, ultimately developed and realized five exhibitions. In this article I thus include information related to the respective exhibitions provided by Miriam Saada Elabed, Alexis Malefakis, Maike Powroznik and Martina Wernsdörfer. I warmly thank them as well as the new chair and director, Alice Hertzog Frazer, for critically reading and commenting on this contribution. I am also grateful to Helen Rana in Bristol for her English copy-editing.

2 Brandstetter and Hierholzer define sensitive collections as 'artifacts that, from today's perspective, are considered sensitive primarily for ethical reasons and due to their relationship to people outside the collection and [that] therefore require special handling'. See also Fründt 2015.

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the joint 'Heidelberg Statement: Decolonizing requires dialogue, expertise and support' in 2019, they explicitly underlined the necessity of collaborative research.[3]

In Switzerland, a country without formal colonies, this transformation came along with a growing academic and public awareness of the countries' entanglements with colonialism (e.g. Putschert et al. 2013; Putschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015). Today the ten Swiss ethnographic museums in Basle, Berne, Burgdorf, Geneva, Neuchâtel, Lugano, St. Gallen and Zurich are all dedicated to decolonial agendas in one way or another and have put their collections under critical scrutiny. Multiple research projects concerning provenance, if not restitution issues, have been or are being realized. A key project was the Swiss Benin Initiative 2021–2024, a cross-canton project involving eight Swiss ethnographic museums holding so-called 'Benin Bronzes' in their collections. The project was conducted in close collaboration with Nigerian partners and was managed by the Museum Rietberg in Zurich; it resulted in a report outlining the holdings of Benin objects in the participating museums and their provenances. It generated joint declarations and actions in the form of a series of exhibitions in each museum, as well as the joint publication 'Mobilizing: Benin Heritage in Swiss Museums' (Museum Rietberg: Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS); Tisa Francini et al. 2024). Negotiations about transferring the ownership of Benin objects identified in the project as having been looted are currently under way.

While obtaining funding for provenance research and collaborative investigations into collections was initially difficult in Switzerland, more recently the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (Bundesamt für Kultur, BAK) – which also funded the Swiss Benin Initiative – and other funding institutions have understood the urgency of critical and collaborative research on museum collections and launched related funding schemes. All this currently translates into local and national exhibitions[4] broadening and deepening the scope of decolonizing Swiss museums and collections. Thus, recognition of a need to decolonize knowledge and museums has reached the Swiss public.

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3 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/About-us/statements-declarations/Restitution-debate-The-Heidelberg-Statement.html, accessed February 23, 2026. See also the 2024 Zurich Declaration, https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/About-us/statements-declarations/zurich-declaration.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

4 For details on BAK initiatives, see: https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/en/home.html, , accessed February 23, 2026. For local and national exhibitions see e.g. in 2023 the city of Zurich launched the exhibition 'Blinde Flecken: Zürich und der Kolonialismus'. See https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/de/stadtleben/kultur/kultur-leben/kulturangebote/stadthaus-, accessed February 23, 2026. ausstellungen/rueckblick.html#\000032023_blinde_fleckenzuerichundderkolonialismus, accessed February 23, 2026. In September 2024 the National Museum launched the exhibition 'kolonial: Globale Verflechtungen der Schweiz', https://www.landesmuseum.ch/kolonial, accessed February 23, 2026. In 2025 the Berne Historical Museum launched the exhibition 'Resistances: On Dealing with Racism in Bern', produced by the collective 'Das Wandbild muss weg'; see https://www.bhm.ch/en/a-changing-museum/bhm-lab/resistances-comment-aborder-le-racisme-a-berne, accessed February 23, 2026 and https://www.daswandbildmussweg.ch/, accessed February 23, 2026.

Collaborative Research and Exhibiting in a University Context: The Case of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (EMZ)

The Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (EMZ) is described as a case study here, since it was the sum of experiences in collaborative projects which ultimately brought the museum's curatorial team to the conclusion that we should, as the next step, open up the museum to the public as a workspace for collaborative reflection; for this we chose the format of a Workspace Series.

Since the 1990s, when Michael Oppitz was its first chair and director (1990–2008), the EMZ has been conceptualized as a public university museum linked to a chair in social anthropology. This chair is simultaneously director of the museum and therefore responsible for the museum's scientific profile. Each directorship marked and marks a particular era of research and exhibiting as defined by the current team and their individual projects, styles and ambitions, as well as the leading topics and theoretical agendas of the respective times in the history of social anthropology in Switzerland and beyond. Key to understanding these periods of the EMZ are their specific collaborations with originator communities and indigenous scholars.

In the past, several attempts have been made to write the EMZ's history (Szalay et al. 1972; Henking 1980; Münzer and Gerber 1989; Münzer 1989; Gerber et al. 2014), which have provided chronologies and timelines. The EMZ archive holds ample testimony of past and present collaborations. A quick look into these materials shows that the EMZ, like all ethnographic museums, has its own history of collaborating with originator communities and indigenous scholars, which has not yet been academically explored. Even though it is assumed that collectors, researchers and museum curators may have used the power of interpretation to read cultures in Eurocentric ways, there is more to discover in the archives. Today we know all too well that all the actors involved, including creators from originator communities, former owners and those from whom objects may have been looted, will potentially have tried to use their agency and have thus left their traces in the archives. The paradigm shift towards decolonization has made us sensitive to such traces. What questions of authorship and power of interpretation were discussed in past projects? What visions did past collaborators have, and were these understood, muted or respected, listened to, documented and eventually integrated into projects and archives?

One example which impressed me early on was Michael Oppitz, who collaborated closely with the Magar in Nepal on his film *The Shamans in the Land of the Blind* and, in the early 1980s, held the very first screening of this film in the village of the community where he had done field research.[5] The question of collaboration in this film

5 See https://www.filmportal.de/film/schamanen-im-blinden-land_e8bc8d3f6285458b991b509f-06cb0d69, accessed February 23, 2026; see also https://www.berlinale.de/external/programme/archive/pdf/20148212.pdf, accessed February 23, 2026; Oppitz 1981.

project, and how it impacted collaborative projects during Michael Oppitz's time as EMZ director, is certainly worth closer attention.

In 2008 I was appointed professor in social anthropology and started my directorship of the museum. Over the years, our team and I stumbled again and again across hints to past collaborations. This became particularly apparent when collaborators would stand in the museum years after initial contact, reconsidering and reflecting on their past engagement and role, and eventually asking to update or reconsider documentation.[6]

When taking up my directorship, I set a leading agenda for the university museum on the anthropology of skilled practice. Even though not all projects and exhibitions between 2008 and my retirement in 2025 followed this track, skilled practice, the question of expertise and knowledge related to objects and collections always remained central. Over the years, it became one of the museum's defining perspectives.

Focusing on issues of skilled practice entailed including experts of different kinds, among them first of all local community experts. Collaborating was part and parcel of this central focus on skill, in part in view of the fact that the archives usually lack much information about skilled practices linked to objects held in the museum collection. Past collectors' and museum staff's evolutionist, diffusionist etc. agendas haunted how collections were documented: while today we speak of coevalness (Fabian 2014) and a global pluriverse of diverse and alternative knowledge systems when approaching collections, the archives have rarely been updated and have to be read in the contexts of their own times.

We countered such gaps in the archive by bringing experts together in close collaboration on the collections: child creators in Burundi with collectors, industrial designers and anthropologists in the project 'Auto Didactic: wire models from Burundi', curated by Alexis Malefakis and Reto Togni (Malefakis, Togni, and Laely 2017);[7] ceramic masters from Longquan, People's Republic (PR) of China and Swiss and German ceramists and anthropologist/sinologists in 'Celadon in Focus: jade-like porcelains and their masters in Longquan, PR of China', curated by Anette Mertens with Mareile Flitsch in 2019 (Mertens and Flitsch 2019);[8] steep-slope cultivators from Switzerland and Southwest China with anthropologists Rebekka Sutter and Thomas Kaiser in 'ZuHören im

6 One example is the Ethiopian artist Falaka Armide Yimer, whose woodprints from 1970-72, held in the EMZ's collection, were displayed in the exhibition 'Willkommene Kunst: Druckgrafiken aus Kanada und Äthiopien' from November 2010 to February 2012. When Falaka Armide Yimer, now resident in Australia, saw his woodprints in the exhibition in 2010, he was deeply touched and rediscussed his art with the curators Elisabeth Biasio (curator 1988-2006) and Peter Gerber (curator 1975-2010). See Biasio and Gerber 2010.

7 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Auto-Didactica-wire-models-from-Burundi.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

8 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Celadon.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

Steilhang: Körper, Ding und Klang in der Schweiz und im Himalaya' in 2019;[9] and 'Talking with drums:. West African percussion skills in global conversations', curated by anthropologist and drummer Alexis Malefakis, who in 2019 brought together an interdisciplinary team of scientists and drummers from Ghana, Nigeria, Germany and Switzerland.[10] In 2020 the exhibition 'Without honey you have nothing to eat: on the bee knowledge of Ayoréode, Gran Chaco, South America', co-curated by Henriette Stierlin and Maike Powroznik, brought together indigenous wild bee experts with apiculturalists, veterinarians and social anthropologists.[11]

Furthermore, we reconsidered the role of restoration and conservation for ethnographic museums, firmly including technical staff in the research and exhibiting. In my contribution, 'Skills and competences in ethnographic collections' (Flitsch 2019), I proposed developing a method of transprofessional collaboration to show that in many ways conservators and indigenous craftspeople and creators are potentially closer to understanding the material and technical sides of ethnographic objects than curators or the European public. In 2021, 'Hidden complexities: unfolding Miao women's textile skills' was co-curated by handweaver Karola Kaufmann, Asia curator Martina Wernsdörfer and textile restorer and master hand embroiderer Ina von Woyski in collaboration with Miao embroiderers (Wernsdörfer and Flitsch eds. 2022).[12] A follow-up project was the Digital Initiative Zurich DIZH-funded project 'Partners in a trading zone', in which computer scientists, social anthropologists and trained embroiderers explored the question of how scientific disciplines whose links to digitalization are not obvious can become part of the digital transformation.[13]

The increasing awareness and interest of descendants of originator communities in their cultural heritage preserved in western museums and collections slowly led to a rise in these communities' demands for access to the EMZ collections, or at least information on them. Since 2015 we have opted to share if not proactively open up our collections, which began by contacting originator communities before starting research or exhibition preparations. To name but some examples: after the critical exhibition 'Man muss eben alles sammeln' on the collection of the Swiss botanist Hans Schinz, who had been part of the German colonial Lüderitz expedition, we shared the

9 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/Vergangene-Ausstellungen/steilhang.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

10 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Talking-with-drums.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

11 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Ayor%C3%A9ode.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

12 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/hidden-complexities.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

13 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/Forschung-und-Lehre/forschungsprojekte/dizh-partners-in-a-trading-zone.html, accessed February 23, 2026; see the project website https://sticken-programmieren.ch/, accessed February 23, 2026.

Schinz collection with Namibian colleagues and institutions (Beckmann ed. 2012).[14] The project 'Points of View: visions of a museum partnership', curated by Thomas Laely, Raphael Schwere and Mark Meier in 2018/19 in close collaboration with the Igongo Cultural Center in Kampala, Uganda, generated a collaborative exhibition at the EMZ in Zurich and in Kampala, extended by a mobile exhibition through Uganda, on the topic of milk in Uganda and Switzerland (Laely, Meyer, and Schwere eds. 2018).[15] In the case of the exhibitions, 'Mapping – Retracing – Encountering: the Tibet collections of Heinrich Harrer and Peter Aufschnaiter' and 'Encountering – Retracing – Mapping: The Expedition Collections of Heinrich Harrer' in 2018/19, the curators Maike Powroznik and Martina Wernsdörfer turned to sharing the collections and the exhibitions, in the case of the Tibet collections with Tibetans in Switzerland, and in the case of the expedition collections with Maroons in Suriname and the Netherlands. The idea was to understand the perspectives on Harrer and his collecting from those whom Harrer had met. Community members and institutions were involved in the exhibition process, their voices being included and their particular agendas accepted as far as possible. Delegates from the Maroon communities in Suriname, where Harrer had been collecting his artifacts, and in the Netherlands were invited to the exhibitions' opening ceremonies and gave their own guided tours. The exhibitions were documented in a 360° format to be shared online. In Suriname, this documentation was and still is used as teaching material in schools (Flitsch, Powroznik, and Wernsdörfer eds. 2018).

In 2020 we summarized our experience in a joint article entitled 'On the question of decolonizing knowledge in ethnographic museums' (Flitsch, Malefakis et al. 2020). Our idea was to frame the moment of colonial collecting as a moment in the encounter of coevals from alternative contemporaneous knowledgescapes and to understand their skilled practices, locked and preserved with objects resilient to colonial interpretations. This was the key to rewriting and thus decolonizing knowledge through new narratives and counternarratives.

Most of the subsequent exhibitions were collaborative projects, eventually leading to follow-up endeavours.[16] Under Covid-19 pandemic conditions, coinciding with the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the department of social anthropology at the University of Zurich, for example, we shared the heritage of anthropologist Lorenz Löffler. Collaborating with Mrinal Kanti Tripura from the Maleya Foundation in Bangladesh and with descendants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts' (CHT) indigenous farmers Löf-

14 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/Vergangene-Ausstellungen/schinz.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

15 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/Upcoming-Exhibition-Points-of-View.html, accessed February 23, 2026; https://www.pointsofview.uzh.ch/en.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

16 For details of the exhibition projects, see https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv.html. accessed February 23, 2026.

fler had once interviewed, an exhibition was collaboratively organized: 'Recollecting Lorenz Löffler: Multivocal approaches to an ethnographic legacy', curated by Rebekka Sutter, Thomas Kaiser, Mrinal Kanti Tripura and Mareile Flitsch in 2021 (Flitsch et al. 2021).[17] This led to a *Stiftung für Wissenschaftliche Forschung*-funded student collaborative peace project in 2024, where Swiss and Chittagong Hill Tracts' indigenous students conceptualized the Löffler collections as a time capsule. They collaboratively investigated objects in the CHT, the Linden Museum in Stuttgart and the Löffler audio archive at the EMZ in light of their potential meanings under conditions of conflict.[18]

And finally, in 2023, the Kawésqar Foundation from Patagonia in Chile approached us to collaborate on a public debate with citizens in Zurich. They were less interested in talking about the human remains of their ancestors, who had died in 'human zoos' in Zurich in 1882 and not been returned until 2010. Instead, they wanted to talk about who the Kawésqar are today, and which topics link Switzerland and Patagonia. Over the summer of 2023 we gave museum space to the Kawésqar Foundation members and collaborated with them in their dialogue with the public. Maike Powroznik and Francisco Gonzalez, a representative of the Kawésqar, organized the exhibition and programme 'Ko Aswál: the next day'.[19] We were surprised to find that, without knowing about the Workspace Series, the Kawésqar's concerns came very close to the '5 questions on the collections' Workspace Series agenda. 'Ko Aswál' led to a follow-up project on the representation of the Kawésqar in Swiss school books. Another outcome of this project is currently emerging from Kawésqar contacts with indigenous Iivid in eastern Greenland, with whom they share traumatic colonial experiences and a keen interest in whale-hunting, as well as strategies of cultural reconstruction for the long processes of healing from colonial trauma.[20]

17 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/recollecting-lorenz-loeffler.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

18 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/Forschung-und-Lehre/forschungsprojekte/friedensstiftung-bangladesch.html, accessed February 23, 2026.

19 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/Vergangene-Ausstellungen/Ko-Asw%C3%A1l_The-Next-Day.html, accessed February 23, 2026. See also the film which the Kawésqar Foundation created after the summer at the Zurich EMZ: 'Ko Aswál – Voices of the Next Day', Fundación Pueblo Kawésqar in collaboration with Filantropía Cortes Solari. The audiovisual production was by MatocoFilms in Punta Arenas, Chile, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB9rgUPE4kw, accessed February 23, 2026.

20 Recently, a film on a collaborative project on colonial trauma has been released by the Fundación Pueblo Kawésqar: Sanando el Trauma Colonial, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfO0mSTWK7Y, accessed March 2, 2026.

The Question Mark as Icon

Towards the end of my directorship in Zurich, when the curatorial team was faced with deciding the topic for a last joint exhibition, the experiences described above with collaborative research and exhibiting led us to devise the Workspace Series. In the process we reconsidered where we had stood as an ethnographic museum in 2021, with a seemingly anachronistic name and its particular history and collections, and in a country now being reconsidered as colonially entangled. Out of many discussions emerged the idea of temporarily transforming the museum into a workspace to be shared with the public, as well as with concerned communities in and from the collections' countries of origin, and to put the museum under a more or less general question mark.

Where had past collaborative projects led this particular ethnographic museum? With the necessity of collaborative museum work already accepted, we discussed the key problems, failures and deceptions, as well as the positive experiences we had encountered. And it became clear to us that some very basic things had all too often been overlooked and were missing.

As ethnographic museums know all too well, each collection, each contact with originator and migrant communities, raises different problematics and topics. One important concern is that collaborative projects in western academia very often start with concrete research agendas, questions to be answered and results to be produced – albeit only because the funding and budgeting systems need specification of contents and aims at the outset in order to be allocated. Yet many important issues only emerged in the process of collaboration and often could not be addressed to the extent they deserved due to time schedules, funding limits, overall agendas, structural barriers within the system, etc. So how could we open up the process and develop research questions collaboratively in the initial planning process?

The idea of literally hanging a question mark over the museum, and of the 'Workspace Series – 5 Questions on the Collections', was born. It was announced to the public as follows:

> Where do our collections come from? What stories are attached to them? What expertise is contained in the objects? What human encounters do they bear witness to? And what is the significance of the collections today? With the exhibition series '5 Questions on the Collections', we are thinking of the museum as an open workspace – a space for collaborative exploration and research, as well as critical self-reflection. In doing this, we are making our museum work visible and inviting people to look at the collections and objects from ever new perspectives.

We defined these five questions so as to be answerable for each collection in order to provide the conditions for dialogue with originator communities, as well as with the migrant and general publics.

The question mark became the central icon of the Workspace Series' exhibition design. As a further result of the intense reflection process, the museum is currently in the process of being renamed, with the temporary name 'Völkerkunde?museum'.[21]

5 Questions to Reframe a Collection for Collaborative Research

The following texts describe what the five questions entailed. They appeared on the walls of each exhibition, and many visitors took photographs of them and even selfies in front of them. The takeaway booklets with the exhibition questions had to be continuously replenished.

CONTEXT

From which worlds of knowledge did the collections come to Switzerland?

Societies leave their traces in the material world: in the order and biography of their things; in materials, technology and fabrication; in handling and the social attribution of objects; in the symbolism and meaning of things; and in speech and gestures about specific artefacts. Humans take care to transmit the required knowledge sustainably. From childhood we learn how to move in the material world that surrounds us. Each object is like a piece of mosaic in its world of knowledge, which has its own legitimacy in parallel to many further worlds of knowledge.

However, ethnographic museums' index cards or databases often only contain sparse information. The contexts of the knowledge which is preserved in a collection together with the objects themselves have rarely been sufficiently documented. Thus, a major part of the museum's work consists in exploring the objects' contexts. With the originators' communities and their descendants, we communicate about their 'object diaspora' (Basu 2011) as preserved in the museum. Therefore, it is important to listen carefully to each other.

Without context, objects stay muted, as does the knowledge preserved with them. The workspace series looks for ways to understand the contexts of collections collectively.

PROVENANCE

What is attached to the objects due to their history(ies)?

Each object preserved in the ethnographic museum has its own history(ies). We are hardly ever familiar with their biography of creation and use or know under what

21 In summer 2026, a joint exhibition at the EMZ will push this process of renaming further under the new directorship.

circumstances an object was handed over to whom. How did it arrive in the museum? The most that has survived are written reports or correspondence, which provide at least partial information about the contexts of origin and collecting. This is where provenance research generally comes in.

Where possible, object research today is carried out together with originators or their descendants. This also involves the sometimes problematic contexts of origin and appropriation. Ethical responsibility and the acknowledgement of originatorship oblige us to pursue the provenance of objects.

Our view of the collections' changes: once we can reconstruct the objects' histories, immediately questions arise about the obligations that may attach to an object because of its origin. The memories and perspectives of the originators and their descendants related to their object diaspora need to be listened to. The workspace series opens up a path to future-oriented provenance research. A new way of dealing with the preserved cultural heritage and its histories must, if possible, be found together. Restitution can also be an issue.

SKILL

What should we talk about and agree upon?

All societies have their own ideas about what abilities are needed to succeed in life in one's familiar environment. Humans internalize skill as measure and value. This is as much about dexterity as it is about social competence or about how to carry out a ritual correctly with the right objects. Skill individually drives humans to ever new challenges. As adults, we strive to help the next generation acquire proficiency.

Together with the collections in ethnographic museums, the skills are preserved which were necessary to fabricate the objects, use them and transmit the knowledge they embody. Only when we know what expertise is in the objects, so to speak, can we enter into conversations with each other.

The workspace series opens up the museum to communicate about skill. Our view broadens if we address originators as skilful persons. Which of our skills are comparable to theirs? How has skill changed on site since the objects entered the collections? Does the museum preserve any evidence of skills that might be important for the future? And finally, to whom does the expertise inscribed in the objects belong?

CONTEMPORANEITY

Who were and are talking to each other at the same time?

We call humans who have lived or are living in the same time contemporaries. The denial of contemporaneity was a strategy for exercising power, thus colonialism and slavery were possible because many Europeans did not acknowledge their contemporaries in the conquered territories as equals. Instead, European policy and science located their societies as being in a pre-modern era, removed from their history, as it were.

Contemporaneity, diversity and multivocality are valuable assets to us today, as they have a sustainable effect on museum practice. A particular challenge lies in making contemporaneity visible for the past as well. Which contemporaries encountered each other at the moment of collecting objects? How do we give space to the multivocal views of the collections, the many memories of the objects today and in the future?

The workspace series opens up a path to reflections on the encounters of people with one another. The world and the objects preserved in the museum appear differently as soon as we understand the originators and collectors who encountered each other as contemporaries. How did they communicate with each other? How did the Europeans and the objects' originators perceive each other? And how do these perceptions continue to have an effect today? How do we speak to each other today?

RECONNECTING

What is the collections' significance to their originators' respective communities?

Ethnographic museums preserve mosaic pieces of material and immaterial knowledge and skills from many regions of the world – but for whom actually?

Over a long time, the task of ethnographic museums, including those in Switzerland, has been to inform visitors about the social and cultural life of people in other world regions. The objects therefore served as illustrative material. Those represented rarely had an adequate say in them. In the meantime, this European sovereignty of interpretation has come under criticism. Hence there is currently a debate about what role ethnographic museums should play in the future.

The British anthropologist Paul Basu refers to ethnographic collections as 'object diasporas'. At the moment of collecting, reciprocal relationships are created. We see ourselves committed to these relationships. Which originators of the objects preserved in the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich can be identified today? What do people know about the whereabouts of their cultural heritage in Switzerland, and what value does it have for them today? Only they themselves can answer these questions, including whether their cultural heritage needs restitution.

The workspace series opens up new forms of shaping relationships and in doing so also explores how research questions can be developed together in the future. So what conditions are needed for the reconnection of knowledge, objects and archival materials in the museums with their originators' societies?

The Workspace Series Exhibitions and their Impacts

The Workspace Series was a series of five exhibitions with an overall design developed by the curators in close collaboration with Kathrin Leuenberger (photography and graphic design) and Melissa Caflisch (communication and public relations), with each

exhibition depicted in a different colour. Between 2022 and 2024 the five exhibitions were opened one after the other and ultimately formed one large exhibition on five thematically linked collections. Each of the Workspace Series' exhibitions addressed one of the five questions with special reference to their collaborative approach.

The exhibition 'Honeymoon? 5 Questions on the "Hans Paasche Collection" from East Africa' kicked off the series in May 2022 with a focus on the question of provenance. Curator Alexis Malefakis analysed the collection of this German colonial soldier and examined its significance for Rwanda today in close collaboration with the Rwanda Cultural Heritage Academy. At the request of this Academy, the 'Hans Paasche Collection', which is kept in Zurich, has been made digitally accessible to the Rwandan public for the first time. An interactive digital version of the Zurich workshop exhibition 'Honeymoon?' has been installed at the Ethnographic Museum in Huye in Rwanda for this purpose. Visitors can enter the Zurich exhibition space virtually, learn more about the history of Rwandan cultural assets and their journey to Switzerland, and discover the close collaboration between the Zurich museum and Rwandan experts. In addition, all objects in the collection can be viewed on site in a digital database.

In October 2022, the second exhibition, 'Business Idea? 5 Questions on "the Object Set" from Noanamá, Colombia', opened with a focus on the question of reconnecting. Drawing on international experts of the collection, particularly Magdalena Nierzwicka, Museologist in the District Museum in Torún (Poland), curator Maike Powroznik examined the collecting practices of Polish ethnologist Borys Malkin and actively involved the indigenous Wounaan community and Afro-Colombians as the collection's creators in the research process. The project was funded by Citizen Science UZH and ETH. By reconnecting the collection from the Chocó region of Colombia,[22] we renewed the relationship between the objects' creators and the museum. On the one hand, each individual piece was correctly recontextualized in the exhibition space by our partners from Columbia; on the other hand, the work of two women from the Chocó, Cruz Quilina Piraza and Gloria Murillo Moreno, on the collection in Zurich activated local cultural memory and transferred that memory back into practice – specifically, the production of objects based on historical models from the collection. The newly compiled practical and social knowledge was also summarized for the first time in a teaching aid for schoolchildren in the Chocó.

In early March 2023, the third Workspace Series exhibition followed: 'Looted Goods? 5 Questions on Objects from China at the End of the Imperial Era', with a focus the question of skilled practice. This focus was most rewarding due to the fact that looted objects are rarely well documented. It is only through the traces of skill they carry that their potential stories can be unlocked. Curators Yu Filipiak (from PR of China/Germany) and Mareile Flitsch focused on Chinese objects in Swiss museum

22 Departamento del Chocó, western Columbia.

collections that may have been looted during the Boxer War (1900/1901). The project was supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture. This was the first exhibition on looted goods from the Boxer War in the German-speaking world. One of its outcomes was the publication of the first report on possible looted art from the Boxer War in Swiss collections, written in German, English and Chinese.[23] Based on this report, ethnological museums in Switzerland are currently reviewing their collections and considering further research.

From July 2023, we held the fourth exhibition, 'Mask Dances? 5 Questions on Ritual Costumes from Sri Lanka', with a focus on the question of coevalness. Through a newly acquired collection, curator Martina Wernsdörfer questioned how ritual masks and costumes from Sri Lanka were museum-ized and what role they play today for local actors – including against the backdrop of performances of mask dances during so-called 'human zoos' ('Völkerschauen') in, for example, Zurich around the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries. Linked to the exhibition, joint projects were developed with representatives of various social groups: an interdisciplinary exchange with the Moulagenmuseum der UZH (UZH Moulage Museum) on the topic of illness and healing in Western medicine and Eastern medicine; a 'transfer to society' in the form of a masked dance performance at former sites of 'human zoos' in Zurich with Sri Lankan multidisciplinary artist Deneth Piumakshi Veda Arachchige and Sri Lankan dancer Lahiru Prabashwara Karunarathna; and a Master's thesis on the topic of 'human zoos' and their aftermath, with the participation of representatives of the Sri Lankan diaspora in Switzerland (Schärer 2024).

In November 2023, the last Workspace Series exhibition, 'Workpieces? 5 Questions on Negev Bedouin Embroideries from their Descendants' View', completed the series, taking into focus the question of context. Curator Saada Elabed, herself of Negev Bedouin descent, reflected, in collaboration with Bedouins and the Bedouin diaspora in Switzerland and France, on the political, cultural and social contexts of the embroideries. Her particular interest was issues of perspective, especially how people with a personal connection to these objects view the collection. The exhibition is part of Saada Elabed's doctoral dissertation, in which she examines the contexts and meanings of Bedouin embroidery in museums for Bedouins today. A key collaboration was developed with Bedouin artist Zenab Garbia, who presented her works as contemporary reinterpretations of Bedouin embroidery traditions in the exhibition. Further, the exchange with members of different generations of the Bedouin diaspora opened up a broader understanding. As a descendant of Bedouin embroiderers, Saada Elabed combines personal experiences with scientific reflections through autoethnography and exhibition practice.[24]

23 See https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/Forschung-und-Lehre/abgeschlossene_forschungsprojekte/pluenderware-aus-dem-boxerkrieg.html, accessed March 2, 2026.

24 360° documentations of the workspace series exhibitions can be accessed at https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/360_grad_ausstellungen.html, accessed March 2, 2026.

Concluding Reflections

The Workspace Series was an unusual format for a museum. In the past, exhibiting meant presenting the results of (our) research on collections to the public. With the Workspace Series, the curators were no longer exhibition authors. Rather, they presented a particular collection at the level of our knowledge at the time of the exhibition opening. The open workspace was a room for discussion and collaborative research, which then continuously changed the exhibition – as well as the knowledge about experts to be consulted, discussions to be developed, projects to be formulated, key questions to be answered or even new questions to be formulated.

For visitors to the exhibitions, the Workspace Series was equally unusual. No longer presenting set research results to be consumed, the Workspace Series was intended to inform but also encourage the public to engage in reflection and ultimately contribute their own perspectives, knowledge, thoughts and maybe doubts. Over a timespan of roughly two years, visitors who came to the EMZ wandered through a gradually increasing number of exhibitions. Always equipped with the same questions, the answers to these questions for different collections led to entirely different insights into issues of context, provenance, skilled practice, contemporaneity and reconnecting. During guided tours, workshops and discussions with the public, and in meetings in the workspaces with experts or migrant community members, ever new discussions and topics to explore were unfolded.

Collaborative research on the exhibited collections did not end with the closing of the Workspace Series, but led to new projects, new insights, new questions. In her paper 'The future of the museum is ethnographic', anthropologist Kavita Singh from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, argued that, due to their long road and experience with critically decolonizing museums, the decolonial attitudes ethnographic museums have developed should become a blueprint for the global museum (Singh 2015). Ethnographic museums meanwhile continue to decolonize. The Workspace Series was a testing ground for us to determine on which collaboratively negotiated frame of understanding of an object diaspora in our museum's future collaboration could and should be based.

Academia and funding institutions expect researchers and museums to propose and address relevant topics. How do we define relevant topics and understand the relevance of research? Ethnographic museums should address key topics that are relevant not only to western academia, but hopefully and ideally also to the communities for whom we in the museums are preserving parts of their heritage for the future. Such relevant topics can only be collaboratively defined within processes of intense communication, gradually finding a 'common language', understanding and common ground within processes of building trust. For this, it would certainly be necessary to reassess funding schemes and structural frameworks for museums towards offering more open formats and more flexible and sustainable funding tools.

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