



Opening Remarks

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On behalf of the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover (*Landesmuseum Hannover*), I am very pleased to present this publication of the conference on colonial collections that we organised at Leibniz University Hannover in 2021.

The great importance of the topic is also reflected in the activities of our museum over the past years. Since 2008, we have had a department dedicated to provenance research, which initially only dealt with cultural property seized as a result of Nazi persecution, but since 2013 has been geared towards all sections and disciplines of the museum. We were thus one of the first institutions in Germany to consciously focus on objects from the former European colonies in addition to those acquired primarily during the Nazi era. The first visible expression of the new attitude towards the colonial era was already evident in the exhibition “Taboo?! Hidden Forces – Secret Knowledge” (*Tabu?! Verborgene Kräfte – geheimes Wissen*) in 2012, in which all of Lower Saxony’s major collections worked together on a project for the first time. The aspect of provenance was the focus of the exhibition “A Difficult Legacy. Remnants of Colonialism Today” (*Heikles Erbe. Koloniale Spuren bis in die Gegenwart*), presented by Alexis von Poser and Bianca Baumann at the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover in 2016/17. It was our first approach to a postcolonial museum practice dealing with holdings from colonial contexts: collectors were

identified and confronted with resistance within the colonies, and precise and tangible questions were asked about objects from possible contexts of injustice.

In this volume we present the first results of a joint project that was also initiated by the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover. "Provenance Research in Non-European Collections and Ethnology in Lower Saxony" (PAESE) has been funded by the Volkswagen Foundation since 2018. At that time, there was no national funding, nor did there exist a research infrastructure in the field of provenance research on collections from colonial contexts. We are therefore very grateful to the Volkswagen Foundation for supporting this innovative project outside its usual funding guidelines.

Under the aegis of the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover, the collections in Hanover, Göttingen, Hildesheim, Brunswick and Oldenburg are being studied in close cooperation with the Leibniz University Hannover (Faculty of Law), the Georg-August-University Göttingen (Institute of Ethnology and Chair of Modern and Contemporary History) and the Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg (Institute of History). The objectives of PAESE are to conduct basic research on acquisition practices and on networking with German and non-European partners. Another important aspect is transparency, which is achieved through an informative website with a database. We have invited numerous researchers from countries of the Global South to Lower Saxony, thus opening up a close dialogue on how to deal with collections from the colonial era.

It is my personal concern to look at our collections from multiple perspectives. Thanks to their training, German ethnologists can provide important impulses, but it is only through the observation of an object by people from the same cultural context that further information emerges. For example, during the PAESE project, a simple bow from Tanzania was identified as a weapon used by insurgents during the Maji-Maji War in what was then German East Africa. Other, orally transmitted traditions and experiences can also be recorded in our collections just by working together. Furthermore, many people from Africa live in Germany and have rightly demanded their inclusion in recent years. We want to strengthen this dialogue in the future and open up our holdings if there is interest from the societies of origin. Our own team also needs to become more diverse and international.

In the future, we hope to have individual exhibits or even entire exhibitions travel to the countries of origin. However, such a tour is not easy to organise: Firstly, it must be ensured that the often sensitive objects are not damaged during transport, and secondly, art transports over many thousands of kilometres are expensive. This will require national support. We are, however, quite willing to do so and look forward to such cooperation.

The permanent return of objects to their country of origin is of course also an option. However, museums are only the “trustees” (or administrators) of the collections. Any deaccessioning must be justified and agreed with the respective governmental institution. In our case, the objects are the property of the Federal State of Lower Saxony, which is why the Ministry of Science and Culture ultimately decides on their whereabouts. So far, we have restituted human remains to Australia and Namibia. Should there be further returns in the future, I hope that this would not be the end of the cooperation. The objects in our collections are part of our common past through their history, indeed they connect the non-European countries and Germany to this day. It would be fatal if restitution meant that we stopped working together on our heritage. Therefore, I am grateful that during the conference we not only looked into the past and present and reported to each other which research has already been successfully carried out, but that we also looked into the future and discussed different ways of future cooperation.

Finally, I would like to thank Claudia Andratschke and Lars Müller, and all those who have worked hard to organise the conference and to finalise this volume. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Volker Epping, the President of the Leibniz University Hannover, for the opportunity to hold the hybrid conference at the university. It is another example of the excellent cooperation between the Lower Saxony State Museum and the Leibniz University.

