

Welcome

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Dear Readers,

It is an honour to welcome you to this publication based on the international conference “Provenance Research on Collections from Colonial Contexts. Principles, Approaches, Challenges” concerning postcolonial provenance research.

German and European colonialism is currently at the centre of an intense debate in numerous countries – a debate in which many different groups are engaged. As President of Leibniz University Hannover, it is important to me that these discussions also take place at our university and with the people who teach and study there. On the one hand, it is important to incorporate scientific expertise in the debate, but also to deal with the legacy of colonialism or involvement by researching colonialism in our own institutions.

Provenance research deals with questions such as how objects from colonial contexts came to Europe and Germany, as well as what history they have in the respective collections and museums. Museums, including those here in Lower Saxony, are closely linked to colonialism with their collections from different African and Asian countries researched in the PAESE project.

Research into the history of these collections is necessary to start a dialogue about the future of these objects with the descendants of the former producers or users of these objects. This research can only be done in close cooperation between museums and universities. We have to make use of the access and knowledge of the museums and we have to utilise the expertise of different disciplines – and to let the results flow back into scientific research fields.

The cooperation between universities and museums is one reason why I am pleased to give a welcome note. Two departments at our university are intensively involved in this work: The Department of History is strongly engaged in the field of provenance research within the subject area “History of Africa”. One issue of the department is to investigate Africa’s multiple relationships with Europe. The question of how objects came from Africa to Europe during the colonial period is an important factor that also influences today’s relations.

Projects by the Faculty of Law and the Department of Civil Law and History of Law take a different perspective on the conditions of acquisition in colonial contexts, but also the results of provenance research. Provenance research is not the end of the road, but in many cases it leads to questions of how to deal with the objects in the future. With regard to questions concerning restitution, an ethical and formal approach is needed. It is important to analyse not only the legal situation (hard law), but also ethical norms (soft law) in order to derive consequences and recommendations for action.

Besides cooperation between museums and universities as well as the different disciplinary perspectives on objects in today’s museums, I would like to add another point. Modern science is hardly conceivable without international exchange, and this university looks back proudly on over 168 collaborations with partners in 40 countries. Such cooperation is crucial with regard to the field of provenance research, since both research on the objects and questions about their future can only be dealt with in dialogue with descendants of the formerly colonised.

I wish you all many new insights and an inspiring read.

