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Dialogues between Theory and Practice

Approaches and Case Studies of Postcolonial Provenance Research

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Provenance research on collections from colonial contexts is, simply put, “more than a question of origin,”¹ but necessarily implies opening new avenues to collaborative approaches that raise awareness of divergent and conflicting meanings associated with past processes of appropriation / dispossession and transfer / loss of objects by the individuals and groups involved on both sides. This desideratum for a postcolonial provenance research worthy of its designation, which has been frequently voiced in recent times, is usually accompanied by the demand for transparent cooperation with the societies or communities of origin on an equal footing. The challenges involved are manifold if the claim is not to pay mere lip service that fashionably grazes the surface of an otherwise self-referential research persistently oriented towards “knowledge production for European museums”.²

In this respect, it is not surprising that the concept of origin and the designations of “societies of origin” derived from it are currently being discussed as highly problematic. They perpetuate the colonial archive and its underlying epistemologies of power in several ways. Not only in the sense that they served to legitimise colonially conditioned power relations by categorising the colonised as supposedly static, ethnically organised groups, but were also adopted as classification concepts for ethnological museum collections. As Weber-Sinn and Ivanov argue, this homogenising term persists not least in

restitution debates that would be more interested in the assumed origins than the trajectories of objects within and between societies, as if “a whole society [were] the quasi natural single ‘author’ of a cultural item,” which “obscures regional and transregional entanglements as well as social, gender and generational differences – among others – within one society.”³

That this critical reflection should not only apply to the conditions and circumstances that shaped the historical processes of authorship, appropriation / dispossession and transfer of objects in the colonial context but is also relevant with regard to the descendants and stakeholders of the previous owners, is astutely addressed in the two case studies presented here by Bianca Baumann and Drossilia Dikegue Igouwe.

In her research paper on the biography of a royal wooden portrait figure from the western region of present-day Cameroon, Bianca Baumann emphasises the necessity of a mixed methodological approach in order to bring together the respective narratives, interpretations, attributions of meaning and (social) values that shaped the handling of this object in colonial interaction and accompanied the change of ownership.

Baumann’s blending of historiographical and social anthropological approaches contributes to detaching the circumstances of the transfer of the portrait figure from the one-sided view of the surviving archival sources and to bringing possible motives of the donors into play. In this respect, the interviews the researcher has conducted with various stakeholders, i.e., regional and local rulers, dignitaries, as well as Cameroonian scholars and museum experts, provide her with insight into the knowledge systems that situated the object politically and culturally. This not only sheds light both on the significance attributed to the portrait figure, which symbolised royal power then as now, and on possible political rationales for presenting it as a gift to the German officer and later consignor to the museum in Hanover, but it also underwrites claims and expectations by the interviewees that Germany honours the bond activated by the gift-giving of their ascendants. This is not primarily about restitution, but about reactivating social relations that were set in motion by the previous change of ownership and that could translate into financial or infrastructural support for regional projects from the German side. As Baumann concludes, the multiplicity of interpretations and perspectives raised by collaborative postcolonial provenance research, testify for the high relational potential of the objects and collections removed under colonial conditions insofar as they foster the establishment of new contact zones between “societies of the present place-of-repository and former place-of-use.”⁴

In her study of ethnographic objects from the present-day regions of Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Southern Cameroon, which are kept in the Ethnographic Museum in Lübeck, Drossilia Dikegue Igouwe addresses the problem of exogenous and endogenous perceptions of what she understands as Fang cultural heritage objects. The objective of her provenance research is to (re) make visible the intangible values, knowledge and practical know-how that remained hidden or were concealed in the process of appropriating the objects and transferring them to European collections. Dikegue Igouwe thus ties in with recent research opinions according to which anthropological collections are “knowledge repositories for the collaborative processing of history”⁵ whose potential far outstrips the mere materiality to which these objects in European museum collections are usually reduced.

As the author’s preliminary findings in exploring Fang reliquary figurines and masks (formerly) attributed to Fang rituals suggest, colonially-influenced ethnological assumptions about a single origin or sole authorship of these objects, which emerged in the process of appropriation by Europeans and were solidified on inventory maps, should be set aside in favour of an examination of the circulation routes, cultural borrowings and ritual circumstances of use that may have shaped the social life and cultural meaning of the objects prior to their removal, in order to also trace the involvement of all participants in their trajectories within and between African societies. However, we might ask to what extent we should qualify the retrospective testimonies collected in this regard as endogenous narratives, as the author herself mentions in passing.

What unites both case studies is the ambition of their authors to go beyond binary narratives and self-referential interpretations of objects of colonial contexts by taking up the challenge of testing and implementing appropriate methods to enter into a dialogue with descendants and actors of the “societies of origin”. The diverging and conflicting meanings they attach to past processes of dispossession and transfer and their present effects are to be understood as an indispensable corrective to Eurocentric perspectives on these historical processes and thus as an integral part of a collaborative postcolonial provenance research that still needs to be further developed, mindful of the unequal socio-cultural conditions between the present places of storage and the former places of use of the objects in question.

- 1 Headline of the Interview with Antoinette Maget Dominicé (Junior Professor for Cultural Heritage and Provenance Research, Institute of Art History, LMU, Munich), Uta Werlich (Director of the Five Continents Museum, Munich), and Philipp Schorch (Professor of Museum Anthropology at LMU). See Filser, Hubert; Thureau, Martin: “More than a question of origin” in: *Einsichten / Insights*, 4 July 2022, <https://www.lmu.de/en/newsroom/news-overview/news/more-than-a-question-of-origin.html>, accessed 1 July 2023.
- 2 See the contribution of Bianca Baumann in this volume.
- 3 Weber-Sinn, Kristin; Ivanov, Paola (2020): “‘Collaborative’ provenance research – About the (im) possibility of smashing colonial frameworks”, in: *Museum & Society*, Vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 66–81, p. 75.
- 4 See the contribution of Bianca Baumann in this volume.
- 5 Philipp Schorch in the interview with Hubert Filser & Martin Thureau (see endnote 1).

