

II.

Collecting Strategies and Collectors' Networks

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Provenance Research on Hamburg's  
Colonial World Trade Networks

# Provenance Research on Hamburg's Colonial World Trade Networks

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## Abstract

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, numerous trading posts in many regions of West Africa served as ports of call for German merchants. These trading posts were an integral part of the colonial world trade network. In the Hamburg context, this is particularly evident in the large number of ethnographic objects from West Africa in the collections of the *Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK)* in Hamburg, Germany. However, colonial world trade, arguably the largest collectors' network of former European colonies of its time, has long been disregarded in the historical reappraisal of ethnological museum collections. Suspicions of dubious acquisitions have not been considered comparable to the appropriation practices of military and scientific individuals in colonial contexts. The provenance research project at the *MARKK*, ongoing since July 2020, focuses specifically on traders who "collected" ethnographic objects, as well as on object biographies.

## *Recherche de provenance sur les réseaux commerciaux mondiaux de l'époque coloniale de Hambourg (Résumé)*

À la fin du XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle et au début du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle, de nombreux comptoirs dans différentes régions d'Afrique de l'Ouest ont servi d'escale aux marchands allemands. Ces comptoirs faisaient partie intégrante du réseau commercial mondial de l'époque coloniale. Dans le contexte de Hambourg, cela se traduit notamment par la présence d'un grand nombre d'objets ethnographiques d'Afrique de l'Ouest au sein des collections du Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) à Hambourg en Allemagne. Cependant, le commerce colonial mondial, probablement le plus grand réseau de collectionneurs des anciennes colonies européennes de l'époque, a longtemps été oublié dans la réévaluation historique des collections des musées ethnologiques. Les soupçons d'acquisitions douteuses n'ont pas été considérés comme comparables aux pratiques d'appropriation des militaires et des scientifiques dans les contextes coloniaux. Le projet de recherche de provenance du MARKK, en cours depuis juillet 2020, met l'accent sur les marchands qui ont «collecté» des objets ethnographiques, ainsi que sur les biographies des objets.

## **Provenance Research on Hamburg's Colonial World Trade Networks**

In recent years, public interest has increasingly focused on ethnographic museums whose collections of non-European art and artifacts were “acquired” in the age of colonialism and served, among other things, to establish and disseminate racist narratives. Colonial structures extended from the founding idea of such museums deep into the identity of the former ethnographic museums (*Völkerkundemuseen*). The effects can still be seen today. In the new millennium, for the first time criticism comes not only from representatives and from citizens of formerly colonised countries but also from a broad public in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, countless cultural objects were *translocated* to Europe, many of which were colonial looted goods.<sup>2</sup> As early as the 1970s, there was a debate about the potential restitution of cultural property.<sup>3</sup> However, requests for restitution – especially from African states – were either rejected or sat out at the time, the current holders referring to formal legal arguments and the allegedly better storage conditions in Western collections, among other aspects.<sup>4</sup>

In Germany, the informed public began to address questions referring to colonial history in 2002 during reflections on the use of the rebuilt Berlin Palace (now home to the *Humboldt Forum*). Not least since the presentation of the founding directorate of the Humboldt Forum in 2015,<sup>5</sup> the discussion has regularly filled the feature pages of the German press. This public debate became more intensive with Emmanuel Macron's speech at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso (2017) in which he addressed the prospect of restitution of looted cultural heritage to African states,<sup>6</sup> as well as with the publication of the report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018).<sup>7</sup> The central demand of the latter is a reversal of the burden of proof in favour of those who reclaim cultural property.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2021, a provenance research project on trade networks as the basis for the distribution of colonial ethnographic objects from West Africa and Oceania and the procurers of collection goods for the former Ethnological Museum (*Museum für Völkerkunde*) in Hamburg between 1860 and 1920 has been conducted at the same institution, today with the name *Museum am Rothenbaum* (MARKK). This chapter focuses on the investigations throughout the first project year in which exclusively objects from West Africa (especially from Nigeria and Cameroon) were considered. One of the targets of the project is to investigate the circumstances in which ethnographic objects were appropriated and to substantiate suspicious cases with regard to colonial injustice. At the same time, the project aims to examine the role of Hamburg's trading companies in the world trade network of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

"The critical and differentiated examination of role models and power structures that have their origins in colonialism"<sup>9</sup> can be traced by researching an object's or a collection's history, including the chain of ownership, meaning the affiliation and appropriation history of objects. Primarily, provenance research should involve cooperation with partners from the objects' countries of origin in order to better understand their meaning and history. It is therefore necessary to contextualise the objects regarding their economic, political, spiritual and social value.<sup>10</sup> By reconstructing the objects' original context, provenance research also focuses on the local actors' scope of actions, possibilities of resistance and possible processes in a colonial context. The broader history of interrelations thus brings a clearer understanding regarding aspects such as reciprocal appropriations, influences and exchanges.<sup>11</sup> To meet this objective, provenance researchers carefully inspect artefacts and closely investigate the historical documentation.<sup>12</sup>

By communicating with the cooperation partners from the formerly colonised regions, Eurocentric ways of thinking can be counterbalanced.<sup>13</sup> Colonially informed classification categories are a good example of an approach that can be readjusted with the help of said partners.<sup>14</sup> Of course, this intercultural cooperation can bring various challenges: there could be technical problems while communicating digitally and/or language difficulties. Sometimes even the need to break with rigid structures of formal knowledge production could arise.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, these challenges must be overcome in order to decolonise the research.

## Research Procedure and Results from the First Year

Provenance research on the *MARKK*'s West Africa collections initially aimed to identify relevant object holdings. Before the project started, it had not been determined which collection items were to be included in the research. This had the advantage of gaining an overview of the existing holdings before taking a closer look at certain items in a second step. A different approach (with a focus on individual objects consigned by only one person, for instance) would not have been expedient for a basic research project with a duration of initially twelve months.

To determine the holdings to be investigated certain criteria were established that the items had to fulfil: First, the objects had to have been received by the museum (or its predecessor institutions) between 1860 and 1920. Whether they were donations or purchases was initially irrelevant. Second, the objects had to come from certain geographical regions. For this purpose, contingents were defined that could also be mapped in databases using so-called location thesauri. Forming contingents according to ethnic groups (meaning across recent national borders) would not have been expedient for the overview approach chosen here, since collection holdings by no means always show a one-to-one allocation with regard to their makers and thus there could have been duplications within the contingents.

Nevertheless, the ethnic group of the respective makers of objects was certainly relevant in the later consideration of the objects in order to draw specific conclusions about possible places or regions of origin within the national borders. This was relevant, for example, when distinguishing between an object

from the so-called Cross River region on the border of Cameroon and Nigeria, or an object from the south of Cameroon, close to the borders with the two recent states of Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. However, both objects were sometimes produced and collected on the territory of present-day Cameroon.

The established regional contingents according to already existing location thesauri from west to east along the West African Atlantic coastline were Guinea Bissau (this thesaurus includes the Bissagos Islands and Guinea), Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Togo, Dahomey / Republic of Benin, Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea / Gabon / Cameroon. This classification should also be considered in the context of colonial history, as most of the objects in the *MARKK's* West Africa collections come from regions where the strongest colonial presence of (German or Hamburg) trading companies were based.<sup>16</sup>

The *MARKK's* collections do not contain any ethnographic objects from the area of today's Republic of Côte d'Ivoire that should have been included in the study after filtering according to inclusion criteria (no consignments before 1920 and later consignments by ethnographic object dealers).

Criteria for inclusion in the study were:

- Objects originate from regions along the West African coastal strip (collections south of the Sahara) and have a current inventory match (i.e., are present in the museum)
- collection and/or consignment period between 1860 and 1920
- broader context of Hamburg's world trade (only persons/collectors who were associated with the merchant class and related seafaring and overseas trade)
- not resulting from military or scientific expeditions (e.g. Mecklenburg Expedition)
- no consignments of ethnographic object dealers (e.g. Julius Konietzko or the firm J. F. G. Umlauff)

The persons associated with the respective location thesaurus contingents were identified while determining the holdings to be examined. A distinction was made between already known and previously unknown individuals. Since extensive research is already available on some Hamburg trading houses (such as the merchant shipping company C. Woermann<sup>17</sup>), these were included in the investigation (as employers of individuals associated with the museum, for instance), but due to time constraints were not taken into account given their over-exposed position within the Hamburg trading network.

The focus was primarily on the previously unknown individuals whose consignments were examined in the light of their respective circumstances of acquisition. It transpired that not every individual investigated had actually been active on the ground in West Africa. Rather, a number of the persons researched apparently relied on acquisition opportunities and structures created by intermediaries.

Since it is not possible to separate research on the objects in focus and the consignors associated with them in a meaningful way, during the research all sources consulted were evaluated with regard to available information on the objects themselves and on the consignors. First, the documentation available at the *MARKK*, consisting of historical incoming and outgoing books, item lists, historical catalogue cards as well as available photographic material, was analysed and reviewed. In addition, the records in the *MARKK* archives were systematically searched for clues along certain key words (such as the names of consigning individuals). The documents consulted were also digitised so that the material could be made available to colleagues in both Germany and, above all, West Africa. It was therefore necessary to translate the documentation.

Due to the importance of the holdings within the West Africa collection of the *MARKK* and the large number of objects from this region, the focus in establishing a research cooperation with partners in West Africa was placed on those holdings that originate from Nigeria. Even before the start of the project, the director of the *MARKK* had already held talks with Dr Babajide Ololajulo from the University of Ibadan, who had declared his willingness to cooperate and agreed to be responsible for local research. Two other colleagues in Nigeria joined the cooperation thanks to his mediation.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic joint research on site was impossible. The framework conditions of the cooperation as well as milestones to be achieved and any limitations were therefore revisited (for example journeys to northern Nigeria were not possible due to the critical security situation) in a kick-off meeting via Zoom. A weekly *jour fixe* was agreed upon, which always took place on Fridays, so that on the one hand the results of the previous days could be discussed and, on the other, the upcoming research activities for the coming week could be prepared and planned together. Considering the overall short project duration, the weekly update turned out to be very practical, as the colleagues on site were able to react quickly to new results from Hamburg and vice versa.

At the beginning of the cooperation, an overview of the collection items to be examined was shared with the colleagues in the form of database extracts. In addition, the information available on the actors up to that point

was passed on to the cooperation partners. Finally, the collection of objects from Nigeria was divided into work packages according to the above-mentioned research questions of the project, as the ethnographic objects to be examined come from different regions of the country (a large number of Yoruba works from the west of Nigeria and objects from other producers from the Calabar area in the east of the country).

Finally, two different research approaches were pursued. Abisola Lawal Ruykat from the University of Ibadan travelled to relevant (historical) locations in southern Nigeria where there had been branch offices of Hamburg trading houses. On site, she conducted interviews with local informants. The aim was to talk to people who could remember information about the colonial collecting activities of Europeans in the respective region, with a focus on the concrete circumstances of acquisition. Joseph Ayodokun (also from the University of Ibadan), conducted archival research in Ibadan, Lagos and Calabar.

## Location Thesaurus Contingents and Consignors' Biographies

After completion of the research project, all data records entered in the *MARKK* database will be transferred to the German Lost Art Foundation's "Proveana" database.

Since 2020, some 500 objects and their associated consignors have been examined. In addition, more than 150 objects from the *MARKK*'s Benin collection were published on the website of the German Contact Point for Colonial Contexts, Berlin (*Kontaktstelle für Sammlungsgut aus kolonialen Kontexten*).<sup>18</sup> Since many of the 50 or so players associated with the Benin collection were active in Hamburg's colonial trading environment, the research results gathered so far on the consignors of the Hamburg collection will be included in the datasets handed to the German Lost Art Foundation, as well as to the Digital Benin research team.



Bild	Invent.	Objektbezeichnung	Spender/Veräußerer B. In.	Eingangsd.	Herkunft	Herkunft laut Postenliste	Museumsobjekt	Ethnie
	C 1161	Schnupftabakdose aus Horn mit Deckel	H. v. Linstow	19. Sept. 1885	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Archipel / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo
	C 1162	Schnupftabakdose aus Horn, beschliffen mit Deckel	H. v. Linstow	19. Sept. 1885	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Archipel / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo
	C 1163	Speer	H. v. Linstow	19. Sept. 1885	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Archipel / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo
	C 1164	Speer	H. v. Linstow	19. Sept. 1885	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Archipel / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo
	C 1165	Speer	H. v. Linstow	19. Sept. 1885	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Archipel / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo
	C 1166	Speer	H. v. Linstow	19. Sept. 1885	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Archipel / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo
	C 1170	Holzessel	H. v. Linstow	19. Sept. 1885	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Archipel / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo
	C 1345	Löffel aus Holz, beschliffen (sitzende Figur)	Dr. Heint. Traun	29. August 1889	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Ins. / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo
	C 1346	Löffel aus Holz	Dr. Heint. Traun	29. August 1889	Afrika/Westafrika/Guinea-Bissau/Bissag		Bissagos-Ins. / Bissagos-Ins. / FB 4 [Murdock Klassifikation]	*Afrika>Bidyogo

Figure 1 | Guinea Bissau location thesaurus, exemplary object selection, items managed with *IMDASpro* version 6.3.43 © *MARKK* Hamburg 2021.

Table 1 | Objects examined in the West Africa Inventory, as of summer 2021.

Location thesaurus	Number of objects
Guinea Bissau (including Bissagos Archipelago)/Guinea	34
Sierra Leone	9
Liberia	12
Ghana	34
Togo	61
Dahomey (today Republic of Benin)	14
Nigeria (including Gaiser Collection, without Benin Collection)	55 (+69)
Equatorial Guinea/Gabon/Cameroon	134

## Case Study: A Gelede mask from West Africa



Figure 2 | Gelede mask, undocumented Yoruba artist, 19<sup>th</sup> century. Donation Lizzy Büsch 1934, Wood, painted, MARKK Hamburg, Inventory Number 34.59:1 © MARKK Hamburg (Photo: Paul Schimweg)

Gelede masks (see Figure 2) are made by members of the Yoruba people (an ethnic group living mainly in the southwest of present-day Nigeria) and used in social and ritual contexts. The wooden masks promote peace and happiness and usually consist of an elaborately carved head attachment and a costume made of various fabrics. The typical attachment depicts a human head carrying a tray. This serves as a “stage” on which to project the ideals of the society in sculptural metaphors. Mostly, Gelede performances take place during the annual festival in honour of Iya Nla, the Great Mother.<sup>19</sup> By looking at the iconography and materiality of the objects, general conclusions can be made about the artists who create the masks, while in most cases the identities of previous owners and makers are undocumented.

In 1934, a person named “Ms. L. Büsch” donated such a Gelede mask (Inventory Number 34.59:1, see Figure 2) to the former Hamburg Ethnological Museum (today MARKK). The identity of the donor was unknown at MARKK. Beyond an entry note in the so-called “Postenliste” (giving barely any information other than the address of the donor), there was no documentation available in the museum. The only additional information was a historical inventory card of the mask itself.

Based on the object itself, its style and iconography as well as the information on the inventory card, we might assume that the mask stems from West Africa and must have been translocated to Europe before 1934 (year of donation). Given the historical context, it appears likely that it was acquired before 1918. It also seems probable that the donor of the object, “Ms. L. Büsch”, was associated with a Hamburg shipping or trading company, as literally shiploads of ethnographic objects from West Africa came to Hamburg via trading companies using the harbour.<sup>20</sup>

In December 1876, an import/export company was founded by Johann (“John”) Witt (1833–1915) and Oscar Theodor Büsch (1851–1891). It specialised in trading raw materials (e.g. palm hearts) from West Africa and set up factories for this purpose in Lagos in present-day Nigeria.<sup>21</sup> Even before founding the company, John Witt worked for the Hamburg firm *G. L. Gaiser* in Africa and represented the city of Hamburg as consul in East Africa and Zanzibar.<sup>22</sup>

The company maintained two steamships, “Johann” and “Kassandra”, which shipped trading goods and commodities between Hamburg, Marseille and Lagos on a regular basis. While we might assume that the Gelede mask as well as other artefacts from West Africa were brought to Hamburg via this trade route and finally passed into the private possession of the Büsch family, it remained unclear who the donor “Ms. L. Büsch” had been. When checking the genealogy of the Büsch family, no family member with a first name starting with the letter “L” could be identified. It was only by finding and contacting living descendants of the Büsch family and interviewing them that it turned out that “Ms. L. Büsch” was actually a person named *Susanne Elisabeth Büsch* (1854–1951), who signed all personal and even official correspondence with her nickname “Lizzy”. She was the daughter of the Hamburg merchant Carl Gustav Adolf Lattmann (1811–1894) and his wife Johanna Elisabeth Lattmann, *née* Amsinck (1819–1883). Lizzy Büsch was married to Oscar Theodor Büsch, one of the co-founders of the Witt & Büsch company.<sup>23</sup>

“Lizzy” Büsch presumably came into possession of the ethnographic objects through the trade connections of her husband. Since Büsch never visited his factories in Africa himself,<sup>24</sup> it can be assumed that the objects were “acquired” either by Witt or another employee of the trading company in the area of present-day Nigeria. Due to a lack of sources, one can only speculate about the exact circumstances of the acquisition. Although there are clear indications of the itineraries by which the objects reached Europe, there is a lack of information on the history of the objects at the *place of removal*, which is often the case in provenance research.

The biggest shortcoming of the study discussed in this chapter is certainly the impossibility to ascertain the affiliation history of the object(s), describing the history of the piece in question up to its acquisition at the point of removal from its original surroundings. Unfortunately, in the contexts studied in this project, the producers and previous owners are rarely documented. This is a problem best addressed by means of research on-site; to date, however, the investigations of the colleagues in Nigeria have been inconclusive, with no further details on who the producers or previous owners of objects currently housed at MARKK were. Nevertheless, the cooperation was fruitful with regard to possible restitution claims as the cultural significance of objects can only be determined through dialogue.

## Outlook

As already indicated, in addition to research on object biographies and the associated individuals, one major goal of the project is the investigation of the Hamburg world trade networks. With the geographical focus on West Africa, only part of the scope of this network has been covered so far.

Currently, the approach implemented for the West African context is applied to a two-year study of the *MARKK* collections that were acquired by persons who were active in the colonial Hamburg trade network in Oceania. There were numerous trading stations on many Pacific islands that served as ports of call for German merchants and were an integral part of colonial world trade in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> In the Hamburg context, this is particularly evident in the large number of ethnographic objects from Oceania in the *MARKK* collections.<sup>26</sup>

With a focus on merchants operating in Hamburg and their activities in German overseas territories in Oceania, the expansion is also a promising project in that persons involved often did not limit their economic interests to specific regions of the network, but rather were active in multiple locales. The company *Hernsheim & Co* for instance, founded by the brothers Franz and Eduard Hernsheim, was primarily active in the copra trade in the Pacific region, particularly in the region of the Bismarck Archipelago and the Marshall Islands, until they established branches in the French Mandate Territory of Cameroon from 1919 after the end of the First World War.<sup>27</sup> This once again emphasises the scope of Hamburg's trade network.

## Conclusions

Hamburg world trade connected the global spheres of German colonialism. Although the complex construct of colonial interdependencies cannot be explained solely in economic terms, trade played a constituent role in the history of the collections of the former Hamburg Ethnological Museum (today *MARKK*). The inter- and transcolonial cross-connections between the different players and the acquisition histories are still reflected in the museum

inventories today. On a geographical or political level, ethnographic objects can be defined by the global networks in which they were traded and/or by the interaction of various colonial and non-colonial players through which they came to the museum. Furthermore, even well-documented translocation biographies are usually not complete: Unsubstantiated conjectures are often part of the provenance chain. The impossibility of a complete documentation is due to omissions in the history of science and politics. Projects to complete this knowledge are subject to time and financial restrictions on both sides (society of origin and museum) but can be fruitful for every party involved. In addition to examining claims for restitution, future museum work should focus on the necessary reappraisal of violent contexts of origin and a new approach to interpretive sovereignty.



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