

III.

Managing, Using and Researching Objects
in Collections

*Gestion, utilisation et recherche d'objets
dans les collections*

Introduction

Managing, Using and Researching Objects in Collections

Introduction

Hannah Stieglitz

In their introductory handbook on colonialism Jürgen Osterhammel and Jan C. Jansen described colonisation as a phenomenon of “colossal Ambiguity”.¹ This attribution is perfectly applicable to the field of postcolonial provenance research which is demanding insights of disciplines abound. Cultural materials with a colonial background have been distributed globally to various Museums, teaching or private collections bigger and smaller in their size by countless people and institutions in differing moments in history. Looking beyond histories of acquisition, ownership, and object biographies this field of research also strives to contribute to a wider understanding of the genesis of these very collections and institutions.² The contributions in this Chapter focus on what happens in the aftermath of the collection and acquisition when the cultural goods become part of a collection. They provide insights into different institutions and ways of dealing with objects and grasp challenges of current provenance research in relation to practices of managing, using and researching objects in collections. Not only do we learn about specific means of documenting (or not-documenting) in individual collection settings, but the multiplicity of sources also including their limits and the people connected to both.

In her article *Paule-Clisthène Dassi Koudjou* gives critical insights into the bigger picture by comparing the very concepts of conservation of African heritage in Germany on the one hand and Cameroon on the other. In her comparison it becomes clear that African and European notions of heritage and conservation of value and preservation differ in existential ways and the loss of cultural goods has been more than a material loss in the aftermath of colonialism. She pleads for community museums as carriers of cultural heritage as they enable a conservation in relation to and with the people who made the objects as there are multiple ways of keeping and valuing objects in a museum.

Martin Nadarzinski describes the questioning procedures of provenance research in the Ethnographic Collection for the German Institute of Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (*Deutsches Institut für tropische und subtropische Landwirtschaft*) in Witzenhausen, Germany. An institution which was founded during the German colonialism and dedicated to the education of young men to become colonial farmers. The challenges and obstacles and the specifics of two Namibian objects in this private collection demonstrate the time and personnel needed for further research that could connect these objects to their history and enable concrete steps like their repatriation.

Katharina Nowak presents a convolute of artefacts from Papua New Guinea which was collected by the German colonial official Wilhelm Knappe (1855–1910) and is now placed at the Museum of Thuringian Folklore in Erfurt, Germany, as the ‘South Seas Collection’. She focuses on practices creating knowledge by dealing with these objects in historical and contemporary settings. It becomes clear that it matters how the items were collected and how they came to Germany. How they were classified, researched, and exhibited shaped the notion of them.

Hannah Stieglitz traces the colonial provenances of three East African rattles in the Ethnographic Collection of the Georg-August-University Göttingen, Germany and the stories revealed by their documentation. She argues that the ways in which the rattles have been documented as objects of the collection has led to a fragmentation of knowledge that has been shaped by the people who acquired and inventoried them rather than by the people who made and used them. The gaps in the documentation refer to the absence of stories which enable the questioning of the processes of (colonial) knowledge production.

- 1 Osterhammel, Jürgen; Jansen, Jan C. (20178): *Kolonialismus. Geschichte, Formen, Folgen*. München, p. 8.
- 2 Förster, Larissa; Eidenheiser, Iris; Fründt, Sarah; Hartmann, Heike (Eds): *Provenienzforschung zu ethnographischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte*. Elektronische Publikation zur Tagung „Provenienzforschung in ethnologischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit“, Museum Fünf Kontinente, München, 7./8. April 2017, Berlin 2018, <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/handle/18452/19769>, accessed 20 April 2023, p. 18.

