

III.

Managing, Using and Researching Objects
in Collections

Lost Objects, Missing Documentation

Provenance Research on the Ethnographic Collection of the
German Institute of Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture
in Witzenhausen

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Martin Nadarzynski

Abstract

Using two selected case studies, this chapter addresses the challenges of provenance research in a small, private collection that originated during and was shaped by the German colonial period. In addition to the origins of the collection, its heterogeneous composition, and its use to the present day, the challenges are discussed along with possible solutions to meet the difficulties that have historically arisen.

Objets perdus, documentation manquante : recherche de provenance sur la collection ethnographique de l'institut allemand d'agriculture tropicale et subtropicale à Witzenhausen (Résumé)

Ce chapitre aborde, à travers deux études de cas spécifiques, les défis de la recherche de provenance dans une petite collection privée qui a vu le jour pendant la période coloniale allemande et qui a été marquée par cette période. Outre les origines de la collection, sa composition hétérogène et son utilisation jusqu'à présent, ce document évoque les enjeux et les solutions possibles pour répondre aux difficultés qui ont émergé au fil de l'histoire.

Introduction

This chapter takes an in-depth look at a small collection of objects in a rural town in northern Hesse. The ethnographic collection of the German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (*Deutsches Institut für tropische und subtropische Landwirtschaft*, hereafter DITSL) in Witzenhausen has a long and eventful history, which has shaped the current form of exhibits and poses challenges for provenance and collection research. It consists of approximately 2,300 inventoried objects, most of which come from former German colonial territories, making the collection very heterogeneous.¹ Officially, the collection belongs to the DITSL and is on permanent loan to the current Museum Witzenhausen (formerly *Völkerkundliches Museum Witzenhausen*), which is organised as an independent foundation. Support of this foundation is shared equally by the DITSL and the city of Witzenhausen.

This chapter is a synthesis of seven months of field research from August 2019 to February 2020², and presents the history of the collection and the institutions associated with it. Further, the problems and challenges of provenance research are highlighted instructively through two case studies from the Namibian section. Tracing the overall history of the collection in order to set the general context and then examining the intricacies of the two case studies unveils the idiosyncrasies and situatedness of these two cases, linked as they are to the German colonial period. In conclusion, the special features of the collection are summarised and contextualised with the challenges of provenance research more generally.

The History of the Collection in Brief

Witzenhausen is located in the Werra valley between Kassel and Göttingen and thus in the center of Germany. In 1899, the German Colonial School (*Deutsche Kolonialschule*, hereafter DKS) bought a former Williamite monastery in which to expand its offerings.³ The DKS had been founded a year earlier “under the protectorate and presidency of Prince Wilhelm zu Wied in his castle in Neuwied”⁴ by representatives of colonially interested industry and Hanseatic

colonial firms.⁵ The founding director was the Protestant military pastor Ernst Albert Fabarius (1859–1927), who directed the school until his death. His goal was to train young men at the school to become colonial farmers, knowledgeable about growing crops in the tropics, and to develop their characters. The three-year training therefore included an agricultural practical year, handicraft lessons, and lectures on botany, tropical hygiene and ethnology, among other topics.⁶ The school educated 2,308 students between 1899 and 1944.⁷

The ethnographic collection was also established under Fabarius's direction, beginning with a cooperation between the DKS and Felix von Luschan (1854–1929), then directorial assistant at the Royal Ethnological Museum in Berlin. In return for a donation of 41 ethnographic objects from the then German colony Togoland (*Deutsch-Togo*), Luschan distributed his "Instructions for Collecting" (*Anleitung zum Sammeln*) among the DKS graduates.⁸ For this purpose, Fabarius published an appeal for donations in the school magazine *Deutscher Kulturpionier* (German Culture Pioneer), asking former students to send objects for the DKS' ethnographic collection.⁹ The tone of his appeal aligned with the so-called "rescue" or "salvage ethnology" of the time,¹⁰ and no specific instructions were given regarding collecting priorities. The graduates of the DKS therefore sent objects to Witzenhausen "that they considered interesting or worth collecting".¹¹

These objects were curated by students of the DKS, referred to as the "museum group", until World War I. Under the guidance of a lecturer at the DKS, they arranged the objects and inventoried them, whereby "the often insufficient designation of the objects made itself unpleasantly felt".¹² Between 1914 and 1918, the collection was put into storage and, after World War I, given a nostalgic significance for the German colonies on the one hand, and a scientific approach on the other. In addition to a sign reading "Don't forget our colonies" (*Vergesst unsere Kolonien nicht*), the collection was organised from 1922 onwards according to categories such as religion, weapons and objects of daily use.¹³

From 1924, the collection, which continued to grow steadily, was taken over by the newly founded Colonial Studies Institute (*Kolonialkundliches Institut*, hereafter KKI). It was affiliated to the DKS and offered in-depth courses for the latter's graduates. In addition to collection management, it therefore also took over the organisation of the library. It has not yet been possible to clarify the approach to collection management of the KKI.¹⁴ What is certain, however, is that the collection was reorganised into different rooms. This spatial arrangement can be traced back using a contemporary inventory book begun around 1927/1928.

During World War II, the collection was again stored in the former collection building and damaged there by rainwater that entered the premises.¹⁵ From 1949 on, the collection was again open to the public and was reorganised in 1963/64 under the direction of the ethnologist Dr Walther Nippold (1890–1970). A contemporary witness describes the collection arrangement and use in the 1960s as follows:

*We had ethnology as a subject. And we went in [the museum], were overwhelmed by what was there, but for what was waiting for us outside later [after the training course], it didn't help too much. [...] Maybe we didn't use it as much as we could have, because for us the tropical greenhouse was more important.*¹⁶

The collection received its last and current place of storage with the establishment of the Foundation for the Ethnological Museum Witzenhausen (*Stiftung Völkerkundliches Museum Witzenhausen*) in 1976.¹⁷ This was founded by the DITSL and the City of Witzenhausen, and the collection was officially given to the foundation as a permanent loan by the DITSL, the foundation's only property being the museum building and not being endowed with personnel funds.

Hanns Bagdahn (1910–2007) and Walter Breipohl (1909–2002) worked in the museum from 1976 on a voluntary basis. Bagdahn was at the DKS from 1928 to 1930, when he left for Angola, where he worked as a coffee and sisal plantation manager. He returned to Germany in the wake of Angola's independence and then set up the museum with Walter Breipohl, another DKS graduate. They recorded the collection photographically, documented it in handwritten inventories, and displayed it in glass cases over three floors.¹⁸ Bagdahn placed an emphasis on public tours, where the museum served as a stage for his life experiences since he spoke about the objects in relation to his personal narrative.¹⁹

Beginning in the 1990s, the exhibition was modified by young ethnologists who worked in Witzenhausen on short-term job creation schemes. During this period, the handwritten inventory lists from 1976 were digitised using the computer program Excel. From 2007 on, the museum has also actively been used as a learning site of the *Weltgarten Witzenhausen* (World Garden Witzenhausen) which includes educational workshops based on the Sustainable Development Goals, and a digitisation project was started in October 2019.²⁰

Two case studies show detailed provenance history from the Namibian holdings of the DITSL's ethnographic collection – a headdress and a pair of sandals.

A Headdress

The Namibian holdings of the DITSL's ethnographic collection consist of a total of 230 inventoried objects originating from present-day Namibia, which covers a large part of the then colony of German Southwest Africa. Weapons make up the largest part of this (sub-)collection. In the existing inventory, 13 donors are named, to whom over 90 objects have been assigned. For the rest of the collection, only rudimentary information and often no provenance information is provided. An example is the object with inventory number 94:



Figure 1 | Part of an Ekori, Ethnographic Collection DITSL, Inventory Number 94
© Ethnographic Collection DITSL (Photo: Martin Nadarzinski)

It is 45 cm high and has a diameter of 12 cm. The object consists of several parts: a basic shape made of leather, with a convex and a smooth side. On the convex shaped surface, three rows of irregularly shaped metal beads are sewn, divided approximately in half into vertical and horizontal rows. Three leaf-shaped leather pieces of approximately equal size radiate from this decorated basic shape, onto which they are sewn with decorative stitching. According to the inventory list, the object is a headdress. The only information given in addition to the measurements and a description of the material is a geographic descriptor of "Namibia" and an ethnic classification as "Herero". After further research, it became apparent that the object is part of a so-called *ekori*, a pre-Christian headdress of an Ovaherero woman, which was displaced by textile headdresses with the onset of Christianisation.²¹ Further information, such as who acquired the object when and under what circumstances it was sent to Witzenhausen, are not available.

This poses a few fundamental problems for provenance research, which in the particular case of the ethnographic collection of the DITSL and its history can nevertheless offer approaches to a solution. Today, the student files of the DKS graduates are still preserved, in which, in a few cases, references to object donations have survived. However, this is a rarity.²² There continues to be little to no historical record of the collection itself beyond the regular reports of (selected) donations and remarks in the school magazine *Deutscher Kulturpionier*.²³ In turn, further conclusions can be drawn from the lack of a museum or collection archive, as neither the DKS, the DITSL nor the Museum Witzenhausen had the historical significance of their objects in mind. In the context of the DKS, a pedagogical use likely predominated as the objects were probably increasingly integrated into teaching. This makes sense according to the corresponding thinking of the times. For both the Museum Witzenhausen and the DITSL, this focus can be explained by the fact that ethnological (subject) knowledge and thus perspectives on the historical aspects of the collections were missing.²⁴

This inference, based on the lack of information about the object, nevertheless provides a framework for provenance research. Another approach is to evaluate other sources that comprise the collection. Based on the donors noted in the inventory list, it can be stated that over 75 percent of the current Namibia holdings probably came to Witzenhausen before 1976.²⁵ Another source that supports this thesis is a photo card index made by Bagdahn and Breipohl, which has not been continued²⁶ but in which the object is also noted, providing a first temporal clue.

The motivation for the acquisition can also be traced back to the specifics of the ethnographic collection of the DITSL. The collection developed primarily through the networks of the DKS graduates, which also ensured collection expansions after 1945.²⁷ Due to the respective collection calls by Fabarius (see above/endnote 9) and later by the then DITSL director Otto Schmaltz from 1975, neither of which expressed any firm specifications regarding desired objects, the collection was shaped by idealised, stereotypical perceptions of the collectors in addition to the question of acquisition possibilities.²⁸ Accordingly, the collection is reminiscent of a “boys club”, as an interlocutor once put it.²⁹

These processes must also be considered in provenance research and can be evidenced in the object example of the headdress with inventory number 94. However, even with objects for which much more provenance information is available, unforeseen challenges can arise, as in the next case study, a pair of sandals.

A Pair of Sandals

Two leather sandals in the collection are catalogued under inventory number 132, and consist of a foot-shaped base from which leather straps are attached to the front third of the sole. These are knotted together with other straps further down the sole, presumably used for fastening. The leather of the soles differs in colour from the straps, being much darker and sometimes brittle.

Similar to the headdress (inventory number 96), the pair of sandals is given the geographic reference of present-day Namibia, but here information about the collector is also provided. According to the current inventory list the sandals were sent to Witzenhausen by a certain Rudolf Seitz.³⁰ Seitz attended the DKS between 1901 and 1903, and after his education went to the then colony of German East Africa (*Deutsch-Ostafrika*), where he died in 1916 during World War I.³¹ The sandals are mentioned in the *Deutscher Kulturpionier* in 1906 with a larger bundle of everyday objects³² and, at the DKS, they were presumably counted among the East Africa Collection.³³

The attribution to Namibia only appears in the handwritten inventory list of 1976, from which it has been transferred to the current digitised



Figure 2 | A Pair of Sandals. Collected by Rudolf Seitz, Ethnographic Collection, DITSL, Inventory number 132
© Ethnographic Collection DITSL (Photo: Martin Nadarzinski)

inventory.³⁴ It therefore seems reasonable to assume that Bagdahn and Breipohl made at least one mistake when re-inventorying the collection, not least because there is no institutionalised archive on the collecting activities of the DKS graduates or the collection management.

For provenance research, we can conclude from this that the inventory list is not to be trusted unchecked. Due to the possibility that further incorrect allocations have also been inscribed, theoretically every entry in the inventory list of 1976/77 requires additional confirmation before attributing provenance from Namibia. This review would have to include not only the inventory list and its special features, as shown by the collection history and the first case study, but also the material typology of the objects in order to create the clearest possible sourcing.³⁵

Conclusion

Quite fundamentally, provenance research requires time and personnel that neither the *Stiftung Völkerkundliches Museum Witzenhausen* nor the DITSL have at their disposal. This, in addition to the possibly erroneous information about the holdings and the unclear acquisition contexts due to missing provenance information, pose the greatest challenge for provenance research on the ethnographic collection at the DITSL.

As described above, it is a private collection, and the DITSL itself is a private limited company (DITSL GmbH). On the one hand, this special form and structure offer particular advantages: the work is flexible and, unlike in other museums, there are (currently) few bureaucratic obstacles to repatriating sensitive items such as human remains, which also enabled the return of a human skull to Namibia in 2018.³⁶ Conversely, this also means, however, that for provenance research funds must be raised externally. In addition, there is no staff position at the DITSL or at the museum itself to ensure constant scientific supervision of the collection. Therefore, provenance research here, like the digitisation of the collection and research in and about the ethnographic collection of the DITSL in general, resembles a piecemeal effort. This is also evident in the digitisation project that started in October 2019 and can be described as characteristic of the scholarly engagement with the DITSL collection.³⁷

The case studies in this chapter exemplify the entire ethnographic collection of the DITSL in the sense that, while no provenance information is available for a large part of the collection, there are other ways to locate the objects geographically and temporally. Possibilities include the DITSL archives with surviving student files, a materiality-based approach, and written records at other institutions and archives. This process takes time and resources not currently available at the DITSL. Nevertheless, this effort would be worthwhile, as provenance research in the DITSL ethnographic collection would shed light not only on how the collection came to be but also on the activities of the graduates and the DKS as a colonial educational institution. In addition, further insights can be gained on other individuals and institutions in the German colonial movement as well as on colonial revisionist actors.

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- 2 For further elaboration see: Nadarzinski, Martin "Sandalen aus Ostafrika?", in: *Retour. Freier Blog für Provenienzforschung*, <https://retour.hypotheses.org/932>, accessed 24 April 2023; Nadarzinski, Martin (2020): *Namibia in Witzenhausen. Die ethnographische Sammlung des Deutschen Instituts für tropische und subtropische Landwirtschaft*, Frankfurt am Main; Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, p. 167.
- 3 Nadarzinski 2020, *Namibia in Witzenhausen*, p. 9.
- 4 Böhlke, Jens (1995): *Zur Geschichte der Deutschen Kolonialschule in Witzenhausen. Aspekte ihres Entstehens und Wirkens*, Witzenhausen, p. 36.
- 5 Linne, Karsten (2017): *Von Witzenhausen in die Welt. Ausbildung und Arbeit von Tropenlandwirten 1898 bis 1971*, Göttingen, p. 19.
- 6 Baum, Eckhard (1997): *Daheim und überm Meer. Von der deutschen Kolonialschule zum Deutschen Institut für Tropische und Subtropische Landwirtschaft*. Witzenhausen, pp. 53–57; Linne 2017, *Von Witzenhausen in die Welt*, pp. 124–125.
- 7 Linne 2017, *Von Witzenhausen in die Welt*, p. 129.
- 8 Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, p. 166.
- 9 Fabarius, Ernst Albert (1901): "Völkerkunde. Zur Beachtung, insbesondere für unsere Kameraden draußen", in: *Deutscher Kulturpionier*, Vol. 1, no. 4, p. 41.
- 10 See Brandstetter, Anne: "Dinge und Theorien in der Ethnologie: Zusammenhänge und Berührungspunkte", in: Edenheiser, Iris; Förster, Larissa (2019) (Eds): *Museumsethologie. Eine Einführung. Theorien. Debatten. Praktiken*, Berlin, pp. 52–69.
- 11 Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, p. 168.
- 12 Anonymous (1904): "Museum und Sammlungen", in: *Deutscher Kulturpionier*, Vol. 8, no. 3–4, p. 48.
- 13 Nadarzinski, 2020, *Namibia in Witzenhausen*, p. 12, Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, p. 167.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Nippold, Walter (1951): "Die Lage der völkerkundlichen Sammlungen nach dem Krieg", in: *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol. 76, no. 2, p. 311.
- 16 Interview A with Martin Nadarzinski; 10 November 2019; Main-Taunus-Kreis/Germany, 27:00–31:05.
- 17 Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, p. 167.
- 18 Nadarzinski, 2020, *Namibia in Witzenhausen*, pp. 14–15.
- 19 Nadarzinski, 2020, *Namibia in Witzenhausen*, pp. 23–27; Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, pp. 170–171.
- 20 Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, pp. 251; 255–257.
- 21 Hillebrecht, Werner: "Alles nicht so einfach. Beobachtungen aus einem 'Ursprungsland' – Zur Restitutionsdebatte in Namibia", *Afrika Süd*, <https://www.afrika-sued.org/ausgaben/heft-5-2019/alles-nicht-so-einfach/>, accessed 22 April 2023.
- 22 See for example Hulverscheidt, Marion; Stoecker, Holger; Hülsebusch, Christian (2017): *Die Spur des Schädels*, Witzenhausen.
- 23 Nadarzinski, 2020, *Namibia in Witzenhausen*, pp. 17–20.
- 24 Ibid., p. 23.
- 25 Ibid., p. 30.
- 26 Ibid., p. 15.
- 27 Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, p. 170.

- 28 Ibid., pp. 168–169.
- 29 Informal conversation B with Martin Nadarzinski, 12 November 2019, Witzenhausen/Germany.
- 30 Nadarzinski, 2020, *Sandalen*, Retour, 24 September 2021.
- 31 Anonymous (1919): "Rudolf Seitz", in: *Deutscher Kulturpionier*, Vol. 17–19, no. 2, p. 23.
- 32 Anonymous (1907): "Geschenke", in: *Deutscher Kulturpionier*, Vol. 6–7, no. 2, p. 35; Nadarzinski, 2020, *Sandalen*, Retour, 24 September 2021.
- 33 Nadarzinski, 2020, *Sandalen*, Retour, 24 September 2021.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 This and further research could not be carried out to date, primarily due to a lack of financial resources.
- 36 See Hulverscheidt; Stoecker; Hülsebusch, 2017, *Spur des Schädels* or Hulverscheidt, Marion; Stoecker, Holger: "Erinnerungen an einen Schädel. Zum Umgang mit menschlichen Überresten im völk-erkundlichen Museum Witzenhausen", in Brandstetter, Anne; Hierholzer, Vera (2018) (Eds): *Nicht nur Raubkunst! Sensible Dinge in Museen und universitären Sammlungen*, Göttingen, pp. 205–222.
- 37 Nadarzinski & Link, 2021, *Sammlungsdigitalisierung*, pp. 177–178.

