
Introduction

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Postcolonial provenance research is not only a matter of ‘knowing better’ and ‘knowing more’. Provenance research as an intellectual and political project has a number of larger aims with long-term theoretical, practical and political implications that need to be kept in mind when diving into the specificities of object histories. Firstly, it is a project of institutional (self-)critique, of institutional repositioning and reform of institutional practices. Secondly it aims to open up European institutions to transnational dialogue and foster long-term ‘fair and just’ relationships (to borrow a phrase from the field of provenance research on Nazi-looted Cultural Property) with stakeholders from formerly colonised countries. And thirdly, as part of the broader project of redressing colonial injustices, it is geared towards renegotiating the future of museum collections, in particular towards enabling restitution and repatriation. The last aspect is often the most difficult, but also the most transformative one – for both European institutions as well as stakeholders in the countries of origin.

The PAESE project was able to advance conversations on restitution in a number of cases. The Municipal Museum of Brunswick (*Städtisches Museum Braunschweig*) was at the centre of these conversations. In 2021 the museum received an OvaMbanderu delegation from Namibia that came to verify the provenance of a cartridge belt attributed to OvaMbanderu Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva who had revolted against German colonial occupation in 1896.

Less than a year later a delegation from the Bangwa Kingdom in Cameroon was invited to come and see, amongst other objects, the regalia of Fontem Asunganyi, which had been looted in the course of German military campaigns around 1900. Moreover, the Lower Saxony State Museum Hanover (*Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover*) had already engaged in provenance research on the mortal remains of three Namibian individuals before 2018. This section brings together experiences from the two restitution cases concerning Namibia.

Namibia has played an important role in postcolonial debates in Germany – Namibian activists have been campaigning in Germany for the acknowledgement of the colonial genocide for more than 20 years. When it comes to restitution issues, Namibia is, together with Nigeria, at the forefront of debates and processes. The very first restitution of Namibian cultural heritage from a German institution took place in 1996 and still counts amongst the earliest restitution cases in Germany; interestingly, it concerned written documents, namely the letter copy books of Nama Chief Hendrik Witbooi (around 1830–1905), one of the most prominent figures of Namibian history. In 2011, 2014 and 2018 broad public attention was drawn to the debate through the repatriation of the mortal remains of 82 Namibian individuals from a number of German museum and universities. The latter also paved the way for a series of repatriations to Australia, New Zealand and Hawai'i in the subsequent years.¹ In 2019, 23 objects from the Ethnological Museum (*Ethnologisches Museum*) in Berlin, carefully selected in a multi-tiered process in Namibia, were returned.²

Interestingly, the cultural artefacts returned to Namibia so far do not as obviously fall into the category of 'African art' as in the case of other restitutions, e. g. the artworks from the Kingdom of Benin. Many of the Namibian collections in German institutions rather comprise(d) what historian Goodman Gwasira has suggested to call 'belongings': personal effects like jewellery, clothing, everyday and household objects – even of such prominent figures of Namibian history as Chief Hendrik Witbooi, Queen Olugondo of Ndonga, or, as detailed in the contributions below, Chief Kahimemua Nguvaiva. Some of the items returned testify to the Christianisation of South-west African societies in the 19th century, e. g. Hendrik Witbooi's bible or the *padrão* of Cape Cross.³

The National Museum of Namibia in Windhoek has come to be the custodian of the majority of the returned subjects and objects, as Chief Curator

Nzila M. Libanda-Mubusisi details below. In the meantime the museum has set up a network of community researchers who conduct research on the history of objects and object types in local languages with local methodologies, e. g. oral history research. In the face of more ongoing restitution conversations between German and Swiss institutions and Namibian stakeholders, it seems likely that the National Museum of Namibia will continue to receive items of Namibian cultural heritage from ‘source museums’, as they have been called by historians Jeremy Silvester and Napandulwe Shiweda.⁴ Silvester and Shiweda have set the term ‘source museum’ against the somewhat overused term ‘source community’ so as to point to the necessity to reverse our gaze and put countries of origin centre stage.

The contributions of this section bring up a series of key questions in the current German-Namibian as well as the international restitution debate. One inquires as to the kind of provenance research needed to ‘individualise’ human remains and objects and to be able to attribute and return them to communities and families in Namibia. Claudia Andratschke details how historiographic and scientific methods can be combined in order to deconstruct legends and myths of provenance transmitted in institutions since the colonial era.⁵ While her example makes an argument for interdisciplinary provenance research, the second case shows how provenance research also needs to become ‘un-disciplined’. Curator Rainer Hatoum, member of the Nguvauva family Freddy Nguvauva and historian Werner Hillebrecht (interviewed by historian Lars Müller) detail a remarkable example of transnational collaboration in which academically trained and ‘traditionally trained’ historians and heritage professionals of different fields – plus a journalist – cooperated in order to reconstruct the identity and history of the cartridge belt of 19th-century chief Kahimemua Nguvauva. Early attempts by scholars to locate the belt in the 1990s had failed, and even OvaHerero Chief Alfons Maharero’s mention of it in a speech in 2011 in Berlin had not been followed-up on. The example shows how searching for an object and provenancing it can be a matter of decades of futile attempts before concerted efforts to revise the various hints and fragments of evidence eventually lead to an identification.

The case of Chief Kahimemua Nguvauva’s belt also reminds us of the politically but also ethically most sensitive question of whom to approach for, involve in, inform about, and trust in during restitution conversations. Freddy Nguvauva points to the dilemma that, on the one hand, the postcolonial

nation-state can be a legitimate counterpart for German institutions and in particular for German ministerial actors, but on the other hand, it may be perceived as not really an appropriate representative in negotiations from the point of view of dispossessed communities and families. In his discussion of the restitution of the bible and whip of Chief Hendrik Witbooi in 2019, sociologist Reinhart Kößler reminds us that for dispossessed communities, the imposition of modern statehood is at the core of the colonial experience with its alienating effects – which is why a leading role of governments in restitution processes may be viewed critically by sub-national groups.⁶ In fact, a rather unique element in the restitution conversations on Kahimemua Nguvauva's belt is the involvement of descendants on the side of the settler society that participated in and benefitted from the colonial dispossession of African societies.

In most restitution cases the idea of future collaboration between museum and recipient community is brought up at some point, as also described here by Rainer Hatoum. In this context, the fundamental question is whose desire this collaboration is, on whose terms it can be maintained and how still inherent power asymmetries are dealt with during it. In order to avoid that the concept of collaboration produces neocolonial relations – an effect that museum director Robin Boast diagnosed for the related concept of the 'contact zone'⁷ – institutions will have to continue engaging in radical (self-)critique and self-interrogation while indulging in the new possibilities and perspectives of collaboration. At a conference of the German Lost Art Foundation (*Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste*),⁸ museum director Wayne Modest made a poignant remark: He argued that it is actually not only, as one may think, the mortal remains from the countries of origin that need to be re-humanised in the process of a repatriation, but it is also us as European societies with our institutions and collections built on the violence of colonial expansion that need to be re-humanised.



- 1 For an overview of repatriations and restitutions from Germany to Namibia see Graam, Rikke; Schoofs, Zoe (2021): "Germany's History of Returning Human Remains and Objects from Colonial Contexts: An Overview of Successful Cases and Unsettled Claims between 1970 and 2021". *Working Paper* Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste 3, pp. 25–27, 40–41; Köbler, Reinhart (2021): *The Restitution of Human Remains and Artefacts: Reflecting on Namibian-German Experiences*, on: https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Content/01_Stiftung/DE/Veranstaltungsnachlese/2021/2021-12-20_Konferenz.html, accessed 28 June 2023.
- 2 See Ethnologisches Museum: *23 Objekte des Ethnologischen Museums reisen nach Namibia: Partnerschaft geht in nächste Phase*, 24 May 2022, on: <https://www.smb.museum/nachrichten/detail/23-objekte-des-ethnologischen-museums-reisen-nach-namibia-partnerschaft-geht-in-naechste-phase/>, accessed 28 June 2023.
- 3 For a detailed discussion of these objects and in part also their restitution see Köbler, Reinhart (2019): "The Bible and the Whip – Entanglements Around the Restitution of Robbed Heirlooms", *ABI Working Paper*, on: <https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/the-bible-and-the-whip-entanglements-surrounding-the-restitution-of-looted-heirlooms>, accessed 28 June 2023; and on the stone cross from Cape Cross a special issue of the German Historical Museum's magazine *Historische Urteilskraft* (no. 1/2019).
- 4 Silvester, Jeremy; Shiweda, Napandulwe (2020): "The Return of the Sacred Stones of the Ovambo Kingdoms: Restitution and the Revision of the Past", in: *Museum & Society*, Vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 30–39, here p. 31.
- 5 For a discussion of how to combine historiographic and scientific methods in the provenance research on human remains from colonial contexts see: Winkelmann, Andreas; Stoecker, Holger; Fründt, Sarah; Förster, Larissa (2022): *Interdisziplinäre Provenienzforschung zu menschlichen Überresten aus kolonialen Kontexten. Eine methodische Arbeitshilfe des Deutschen Zentrums Kulturgutverluste, des Berliner Medizinhistorischen Museums der Charité und von ICOM Deutschland*, on: <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.893>, accessed 28 June 2023.
- 6 Köbler, 2019, *The Bible and the Whip*, p. 8.
- 7 Boast, Robin (2011): "Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited", in: *Museum Anthropology*, Vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 56–70.
- 8 Conference "The Long History of Claims for the Return of Cultural Heritage from Colonial Contexts", November 17–19, 2021, see documentation on: https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Content/01_Stiftung/EN/Event-review/2021/2021-12-20_conference.html, accessed 28 June 2023.