

IX.

Whose Voices?

Beyond the PAESE-Conference

Les voix de qui ?

Au-delà de la conférence PAESE

Whose Voices?

On Power, Terminology and the
Definition of Community

A Postscript

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Albert Gouaffo, Flower Manase, Nzila M. Libanda-Mubusisi and Tommy Y. Buga

Editorial Note

This postscript revisits and discusses key questions that came to light during the conference or in the course of collaboration in the PAESE project. In line with the guiding question: “Whose Voices?”, the final word of the PAESE conference was given to our colleagues from the countries of origin. Our partners, Flower Manase (National Museum, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), Nzila M. Libanda-Mubusisi (National Museum Windhoek, Namibia), Tommy Buga (National Museum and Art Gallery, Port Moresby, PNG) and Albert Gouaffo (University of Dschang, Cameroon), were asked to give a short opening statement focusing on one important point from their perspective. These statements are printed in the following, having been edited for purposes of clarity. Richard Tsogang Fossi (Technical University Berlin) chaired the discussion and has summarised the debate in the paper that follows the statements. We sincerely thank our partners and hope to provide further impulses for the research field and to continue the discussion in the future.

Albert Gouaffo / Flower Manase / Nzila M. Libanda-Mubusisi / Tommy Y. Buga, Whose Voices? On Power, Terminology and the Definition of Community. A Postscript, in: *Provenance Research on Collections from Colonial Contexts. Principles, Approaches, Challenges*, hrsg. von C. Andratschke et al., Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net-ART-Books, 2023 (Veröffentlichungen des Netzwerks Provenienzforschung in Niedersachsen, Band 5), S. 490–496. <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1270.c18928>

*Les voix de qui ? Pouvoir, terminologie et définition
de la communauté : Post-scriptum (Note de la rédaction)*

Ce post-scriptum reprend et évoque des questions fondamentales mises en lumière pendant la conférence ou dans le cadre de la collaboration au projet PAESE. En accord avec la question directrice : « Les voix de qui ? », le mot de la fin de la conférence PAESE a été donné à nos collègues des pays d'origine. Nos partenaires, Flower Manase (Musée national, Dar es Salaam, Tanzanie), Nzila M. Libanda-Mubusisi (Musée national Windhoek, Namibie), Tommy Buga (Musée national et galerie d'art, Port Moresby, PNG) et Albert Gouaffo (Université de Dschang, Cameroun), ont été invité à faire une brève présentation préliminaire en mettant l'accent sur un point important à leurs yeux. Ces déclarations sont imprimées dans les pages qui suivent, après avoir été éditées dans un souci de clarté. Richard Tsogang Fossi (Université technique de Berlin) a présidé la discussion et a résumé le débat dans l'article qui suit les déclarations. Nous remercions sincèrement nos partenaires et nous espérons apporter un nouvel élan au domaine de la recherche et poursuivre la discussion à l'avenir.

Flower Manase (National Museum, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania)

Defining and Engaging our Communities

My background is in museum collaboration and provenance research, and from this perspective the topic of collection is strongly connected to that of restitution. I feel, however, that more must be done to connect the museums within the communities, which means in effect a community museum. This is an area that was not reflected on much during our conference but highly significant for work in the museum context. Most of the national museums in Europe acquired their inventories in colonised or formerly colonised states. And this conference has shown great similarities in orientation and interpretation, boding well for looking into the future, transforming the museum as such, re-interpreting our collections and trying to reflect not only on collections in Europe but also on those in African museums, as these collections were also put together during colonial times.

But in this transformation process I would emphasise that museums in both Africa and in Europe need to take a few steps back and ask the question: "Who are we serving?" The original objective of the museums was to

serve the higher classes, who were generally educated people. Are we trying to serve these higher classes and elites, or are we trying to engage each and everyone in the community? And if we are aiming for the latter, we should think carefully about our agenda in this aspect of the project and dialogue, especially when it comes to provenance research and restitution.

It is not only the collections and the terminology that need to be revisited, but also the museum catalogues and registry books. These contain a great deal of offensive terminology, especially in reference to people in the countries of origin. We need a clear definition of what we are referring to in the local contexts. We can do this through historical sources. We also need to speak to the owners, as the museums are usually mere custodians. Particularly interesting is the video that shows how the Ngonso from the Nso community were placing demands on these collections and how the museums that currently hold the collections responded.

Given that it is our clearly defined objective to move from the colonial museum setting into a newer version of the museum in which we can engage each and every one from the relevant communities, the question is: Where are we transforming to? Are we realising this objective? And how do we define our communities? Who is our community? Whether we are working with the national, state-owned museum, which has its own political agenda, or with the university museums, which have a different agenda, or the community museum – how do we define our community and how do we engage them? How can we listen to their demands and include them in our decision-making processes?

Nzila M. Libanda-Mubusisi
(National Museum, Windhoek, Namibia)

Decolonising Knowledge, or: Whose Voices will be Heard?

These restitution debates are a huge step forward, and it is great to see so many projects taking place in different countries, including Germany. This work helps us to shed light on what happened in the past and to look towards the future.

One concern that recurs in the restitution context is that a country might not be ready to receive its cultural heritage if it were to be restituted today. Of course, we wish for our objects to be returned to us. But the museums in the countries of origin, to where the objects would be returned, are in many

cases not ready to accommodate them. Before objects are returned, an honest discussion needs to take place around where the object in question would be accommodated and what will be required to maintain it. This is an issue of restitution that goes much further than the mere act of returning, one that encompasses mutual dialogue and engagement.

My recommendation would be a preparatory phase in which the circumstances are considered and those involved discuss how – and indeed whether at all – the object should or can be displayed or stored. An object that speaks of ritual, for example, a sensitive object, cannot be displayed. All participants in the process should be included in communication about how to respect these particular rituals that are sacred to the communities of origin.

We can achieve this by continuing to engage each other in dialogue and collaboration. The affected communities welcome the willingness of German museums to cooperate and open their doors to scholars who can identify the objects that need to be returned or repatriated, regardless of the circumstances in which those objects were taken. But moving forwards means not only progressing with regard to the objects themselves, but also by decolonizing the knowledge showcased in these museums. It is also important to consider the values attached to the objects by the communities of origin.

We acknowledge that we cannot change what happened in the past. But what we are doing today – me and you – this we can change: the present and the future. What will be our role in this process, and whose voices will be heard in the discussion moving forwards?

Tommy Yaulin Buga
(National Museum and Art Gallery, Port Moresby, PNG)

Linguistic Violence and the Need to Rewrite Object Descriptions

In order for us to correct the mistakes of the past, we need to come together more often and to re-write some of the problems we are facing, especially descriptions of objects. I am referring here specifically to the construction of terms used in museums and institutions here in Europe. While we do not know where these terms came from, it is likely that they reflect the mindsets and attitudes of a certain period in our shared history. It is now for us as a project research team to sit together and re-write certain linguistic errors that have been made in the past.

One question is whether these expressions were indeed “errors”, as I have referred to them above, or whether they reflect a past mentality. After all, these objects were not collected in our time, but in a time of other views, of territorial views of others. Based on my experience, I strongly believe that some of the errors were made before English was taught in Papua New Guinea, and that that time, without an understanding of basic English, it was not possible for my people to translate the descriptions of objects. I believe that these errors now need to be discussed and corrected. I recommend including and involving students or technical workers from formerly colonised countries of origin who have worked closely with a lot of objects; this can only be a win-win situation for both sides.

When thinking about how we can progress, I imagine where our conferences might be in terms of debate in five or ten years’ time. What sort of terminology will be available to future generations then? And will we have learned to include those from the communities of origin, those who know the objects best, in their definition, categorisation, storage, and description?

Albert Gouaffo (University of Dschang, Cameroon)

Moral Principles of Postcolonial Provenance Research

Having listened to all the presentations of this conference, I have organised my response into three lines of thought: First, I will share my thoughts about postcolonial provenance research; second, I will talk about a moral principle that should guide the framework for our research. And third, I will consider certain challenges that we face in this collaborative effort.

Provenance research is ‘normal’ research as in many other fields; the process of shedding some light on a collection, as in any museum or in a classic library. But *postcolonial* provenance research is different. It is an interdisciplinary field of research, where specialisms and different areas of expertise meet. You don’t need to be an ethnologist or a historian; many disciplines are at work here, such as anthropology, political science and other subjects, even literature, when approaching postcolonial provenance research from a cultural point of view. This is fundamental research in the colonial context.

But what do I mean exactly by the colonial context? This is a context of physical, psychological and verbal violence. Anything acquired by trickery,

exchange, threat or fear has not been acquired on an equal footing. And the African states asking for the return of their cultural heritage are not beggars. We therefore need to find out who acquired these objects, whether we are talking about missionaries, colonial merchants, explorers, or others who were looking for something exotic in the colonies, exerting as they did so that symbolic power given to them by their European origin. Everything appropriated in this context, whether referred to as “acquired”, “purchased” or “exchanged”, is now – from our postcolonial viewpoint – a problem to be resolved. Where did these objects go, and why? Where are those objects today, and why? And how can we best manage this past that we have inherited? This is my first point.

My second point is that our work therefore needs to be guided by moral principles. In order to have a real, true, provenance debate we have to trust one another; we need transparency and to collaborate on an equal footing. We want to retrieve objects that belonged to our ancestors. Let us look at the context of transnational collaboration. Europe, particularly its natural history museums, now more than ever finds itself confronted by its colonial past. This conference has made this very clear. And the restitution of African objects takes a lot of time. But the moral principle must be that European museums are only authorised to keep and maintain such objects if permission has been acquired legally in the absence of violence or coercion.

But in doing so we face challenges. We listened yesterday to the mayor of the people of Nso, speaking about the Statue of the Ngonso in Cameroon. It is not up to us Africans to prove that this object belongs or belonged to us. It is up to the Europeans to prove that these objects are truly part of *their* cultural heritage and a significant part of *their* identity, having belonged to *their* ancestors. When we – as have the organisers of this conference – speak of “so-called recipient societies”, it is a matter of *postcolonial* provenance research. For it is often the case that Europeans are unfamiliar with the communities of origin, cannot locate them on a map, and sometimes are even unaware of their existence.

So what can European museums and researchers do? They can share their research findings and infrastructure. Libraries can open their doors to researchers from the countries of origin. Europeans need to understand that, while we may have known *of* one other for centuries, we still don't really *know* each other very well at all. We generally have fixed ideas of each other, based on what we would like the other to be, but not on how they truly are. We now need to foster a new ethical relationship, not based on concepts of

“them” and “us” but just as “us”, thrown together as we are in the world of today, intrinsically connected by our shared past. We may see this past in different ways, but addressing it together could perhaps be the beginning of something new that has hitherto been lacking. Humanity as a whole could benefit immensely from drawing on all the world’s knowledges, including African knowledges, and breaking away from the Eurocentric episteme, this particular universalism that originated in Europe.

Richard, you ask me whether we are ready for this dialogue; whether we can both speak *and* understand, and what we can do to dismantle the persistently asymmetrical power relations that are the lasting consequences of the colonial period. I know that it is possible to recalibrate and rebalance these powers in this situation that is the result of history: this inherited history that we did not live ourselves; in which we were not acting subjects. If we want to put an end to this unbalanced relationship, we need to look in the mirror first of all and question what has happened, and evaluate this joint past and the various memories that we have. I take as my point of departure the assumption that we are postcolonial subjects, and as such we rely on a context and a history that we have not lived, but which we have received. It is our postcolonial task to take stock of the situation and of the past and to look at how we can move forwards together. As a postcolonial subject, I suffer from this imbalance in the same way that people from the privileged world do who have inherited this past. But this is nevertheless the past, and it is a huge step forward that we can all sit at the same table today – this is proof that we can work out a shared future together.

