

Network Conference “Collections from Colonial Contexts: Challenges, Tasks, Strategies”

Organized by the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts

24.11.2020, 09:00 – 15:30 (online)

Final Report

The online network conference “Collections from Colonial Contexts: Challenges, tasks, Strategies” took place on November 24, 2020 within the framework of Germany’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Its main aims were to present the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts to European and international actors, to promote the networking of experts from Germany, Europe and the countries and societies of origin, and to identify and document future cooperation options for the German Contact Point. Further aims were also to identify the needs and interests of people and institutions in the countries and societies of origin and to create communication channels and facilitate encounters that enable a common dialogue characterized by mutual respect. The conference is the first in a series of workshops, round tables, and international expert forums to be organized by the German Contact Point and which intend to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and the joint development of strategies in the context of the German Contact Point’s mandate.

The conference focused on three areas of activity, as defined in the "Framework Principles for dealing with collections from colonial contexts", which are 1. Transparency and documentation; 2. Return, and 3. Cultural exchange and International Cooperation. In three thematic panels, participants from different regions of the world discussed measures, tasks and current challenges in dealing with collection from colonial contexts, shared practical experiences, and exchanged ideas about future cooperation perspectives. The recommendations for action that resulted from the discussions during the conference are a valuable contribution to overcoming the existing and future challenges and tasks of the German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts.

The panel discussions were complemented with presentations by two partner institutions of the German Contact Point, the German Lost Art Foundation with its Department for Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts and the Federal Foreign Office on the planned International Museum Cooperation Agency. In addition, conference participants were introduced to the mandate and work of the Federation-Länder Working Group on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts, which is a

national committee of political and civil society stakeholders providing the political setting for the German Contact Point and closely monitoring its progress.

1. Panel „Transparency and Documentation“

Moderation: Prof. Dr. Eckart Köhne (President of the German Museums Association)

Panelists: *Prof. Dr. Wiebke Ahrndt* (Director of the Übersee-Museum in Bremen), *Flower Manase* (Curator of the National Museum of Tanzania), *Dr. Jonathan Fine* (Head of the Ethnological Museum of the Berlin State Museums – Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), *Christian Nana Tchuisseu* (Curator and Director of the Blackitude Museum, Chairperson of ICOM Cameroon)

Rapporteur: *Dr. Michaela Stoffels* (Policy Officer, Dpt. of Education, Culture, Sports and Non-Discrimination, Association of German Cities)

Participants of the panel on “Transparency and Documentation” discussed the challenges in the areas of documenting, digitizing and achieving transparency regarding collections from colonial contexts. One of the main topics discussed were the structures and support that German and European institutions will need to achieve transparency when dealing with collections from colonial contexts. Further relevant talking points were the tools and methods to present information about these collections online in order to facilitate collaboration and make them easily accessible to colleagues in the countries and societies of origin. Participants also shared best practices related to achieving transparency in Europe as well as in the countries and societies of origin, and talked about the process of change that the museum as an institution will go through while documenting and digitizing collections from colonial context. The following section presents a summary of the main aspects discussed in the panel.

- Transparency and documentation of collections from colonial contexts goes beyond opening a digital inventory. It is a process of continuous cooperation with the countries and societies of origin to inventory, document and digitize cultural objects while also taking into account the ethical, legal, scientific, and technical dimensions of the process.
- Cultural objects from collections from colonial contexts should be documented taking into account their meaning, context and function in the countries and societies of origin. This previous assessment could allow museums and institutions to decide if the information on the object should be published online or not, or whether to cooperate with the countries and societies of origin to facilitate return.
- Ethics is a main aspect to consider in processes of documentation and digital publication of collections from colonial contexts. Museums are not only documenting objects with different

stories but also making information on the lives and past lives of different peoples and communities available online. Therefore, a key component to any documentation and digitization process is the close cooperation with the communities of origin.

- Before making information on collections from colonial contexts available online, there is urgent need for previous groundwork. This includes agreeing on the right database or databases, developing standards for online publication, and exchanging information and views with the countries and societies of origin regarding which would be the right platforms and data models that facilitate further cooperation and information exchange.
- Museums and museum professionals should understand processes of documentation and digital publication of collections from colonial contexts as a constant work in progress that is not 100% accurate. Working on transparency and documentation is also as an invitation to discuss and explore possibilities of knowledge creation, cooperation and co-production with the countries and societies of origin.
- While aiming to achieve transparency, museums and institutions in Germany and Europe should acknowledge the wishes from the countries and communities of origin regarding which information can or should be published online, especially when dealing with sacred or religious objects and human remains.
- The amount of effort, support and resources that museums in Germany will need, in the medium and long term, in order to achieve transparency and documentation and implement the recently agreed on “3-road strategy” should not be underestimated. In this respect, museums and institutions will need the support from politics in terms of the resources that will be available for this task, and from the Contact Point in facilitating communication with colleagues in the countries and societies of origin.
- The “3-road strategy” on the documentation and digital publication of collections from colonial contexts held in Germany is welcomed as a good opportunity for museums and cultural institutions to set priorities and find ways to move forward on the process of achieving transparency while also taking into account multidisciplinary and multicultural perspectives.
- When deciding on the right or more adequate database to make information on collections from colonial contexts available online, a priority should be given to addressing the needs of the communities and societies in the countries of origin, and not only those of the scientific communities in Europe and Germany. Any tool that provides access to this information needs to be engaging, must enable exchange of information about and around the objects, and should be easily accessible to people from the countries and societies of origin.

- A challenge for museums with collections from colonial contexts will be to understand that there are different approaches to knowledge access and authority regarding certain objects, as many German and European institutions are used to the idea that they hold a monopoly on the information on cultural objects. Working closely with countries and societies of origin is relevant for realizing that there are different lines authority about who is allowed to talk about the meaning of an object, who is entitled to be initiated into secret information and whether that information can be made public or not.
- Achieving transparency through documentation and digitization of collections from colonial contexts while working in close cooperation with countries and societies of origin is a process that could lead to change the museums and the mindset of museum professionals. Especially in the case of ethnological museums, it could lead to understand and acknowledge the plurality of perspectives, knowledge systems and approaches that there are for dealing with cultural objects from colonial contexts.

2. Panel „Return“

Moderation: *Prof. Dr. Markus Hilgert* (Secretary General of the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States)

Panelists: *Prof. Dr. Ines de Castro* (Director of the Linden-Museums in Stuttgart), *Te Herekiele Herewini* (Head of Repatriation at the Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand), *Alexander Herman* (Assistant Director at the Institute of Art and Law, United Kingdom), *Dr. El Hadji Malick Ndiaye* (Curator of the Théodore Monod Museum of African Art - Institut Fondamental D'Afrique Noire in Dakar).

Rapporteur: Dr. Leopold von Carlowitz (Research Associate, German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts)

Participants of the panel on **Return** presented the current mechanisms and best practices for the return of cultural objects from colonial contexts and discussed the main political, ethical, legal and practical challenges in this topic. Participants also shared their personal and professional views on this complex topic and talked about the relevance of agreeing on the right terminology when addressing issues related to the return of cultural objects or human remains. Another relevant aspect during the discussion was the significance of “return” as a means for doing justice for the past wrongs and as a main component for the long process of reconciliation and decoloniality Germany and Europe should embark on together with the countries and societies of origin. The following section presents a summary of the main aspects discussed in the panel.

- For the countries and societies of origin, return is an essential component of dealing with collections from colonial contexts. Cultural objects held in German and European museums are open books that hold the memory and history of societies and communities' lives and past lives, and are furthermore key to understand and rewrite common and local histories and continue building a national identity. They are also relevant components for further economic, social, cultural and political development.
- It is important to agree on the right terminology when addressing issues related to the return of cultural objects and human remains from colonial contexts. For some participants, the term "return" does not take into account an acknowledgement of the past wrongs and the action of giving something back to the rightful owner of an object, a notion that is said to be embedded in the term "restitution".
- Return or restitution could be an opportunity for Germany, Europe and the countries and societies of origin to rebalance their international partnerships, redefine political and cultural relationships, and renew cooperation as ways of cultural diplomacy while openly addressing the issues of their common colonial history.
- Human remains are not museum objects but ancestors of societies and communities of origin. When dealing with the return of human remains, there should be an understanding of the common history between Europe and the countries and societies of origin as well as a recognition of the fact that, for a long period of history, there was a tacit understanding that Europeans could own and trade indigenous people's bodies. Acknowledging a responsibility regarding human remains would mean that German and European institutions open their doors and facilitate the return of the ancestors to countries and societies of origin.
- Physical return and repatriation does not necessarily mean there is restitution and reconciliation. These aspects need to be considered and engaged in long-term collaboration and cooperation projects in which the communities and societies of origin are actively engaged.
- The Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme of the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum in New Zealand is a good example and best practice on how local and indigenous communities, in this case the Māori and Moriori, are given the authority and mandate to lead and decide on processes of return of their cultural heritage and the human remains of their ancestors. This programme provides the needed support for the Māori and Moriori to engage with local communities and international institutions and actors on behalf of the New Zealand government.

- Ethnographic museum in Germany and Europe were created following colonial terms and structures, and these colonial structures are still used in the ways the collections are assembled, presented and researched. Return is therefore a necessary step in coming to terms with the colonial past and an essential part of a healing process that involves creating trust and building a basis for dialogue and cooperation with the countries and societies of origin.
- Return should not be seen as a single or one-way action but as a process that involves scientific research, political decision-making and agreements at different levels, as well as constant dialogue and cooperation with the countries and societies of origin. Processes of return could also result in the building and establishment of long-term partnerships between German or European cultural institutions and the countries and societies of origin to facilitate further cooperation when dealing with collections from colonial contexts.
- A challenge for German and European museums when dealing with collections from colonial contexts is identifying and deciding on the rightful ownership of an object, as many objects were included in museums' collections and inventories without any further information regarding their provenance. This is an issue that still needs to be solved but that can be addressed within the framework of cooperation projects and activities with the countries and societies of origin.
- For museums in Germany to be able to build transnational and sustainable long-lasting partnerships with the countries and societies of origin that could result in the return of cultural objects, there needs to be a revision of the current museum structures and resources that are available to achieve this mission. If museums are to fulfil civil society's expectations when dealing with collections from colonial contexts, they will need further support in terms of improving the current structures and facilitating access to additional resources.
- One of the main challenges on the part of the countries and societies of origin is that European museums continue to decide on the terms of the discussions and on the ways the processes of return or restitution should move forward. European institution should realize that the terms and conditions in which the dialogue should be carried out in order to reach an agreement have changed. There is also a need to understand that institutions and museums in the countries and societies of origin have the knowledge and the necessary capacities to safeguard their cultural heritage.

3. Panel „Cultural Exchange, International Cooperation“

Moderation: Dr. Andreas Grger (Director-General of Culture and Communication at the German Federal Foreign Office)

Panelists: *Prof. Dr. Barbara Plankensteiner* (Director Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Knste der Welt), *Dr. George Abungu* (Director of Okello Abungu Heritage Consultants), *Prof. Dr. Barbara Gbel* (Director of the Ibero-American Institute - Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), *Prof. Dr. Beate Reifenscheid* (President of ICOM Germany), *Juan Mayr Maldonado* (Environmentalist and photographer, Former Colombian Ambassador to Germany)

Rapporteur: Mara Leonor Prez Ramrez (Research Associate, German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts)

The panel on “Cultural Exchange and international Cooperation” presented an overview of different experiences and practical approaches regarding international cooperation and collaboration with the countries and societies of origin when dealing with collections from colonial contexts. Participants also shared possible ways forward to improve current international cooperation mechanisms and schemes and talked about the need to develop a more open and engaging dialogue to address the different needs, issues and expectations. In addition, participant also stressed the need to articulate different types of objects and collections by acknowledging that dealing with collections from colonial contexts is an issue that involves not only museums but also libraries and archives. The panel also offered an opportunity to present and discuss the challenges regarding cultural exchange and international cooperation, and to share ideas on future perspectives and improved mechanisms for exchange and collaboration. The following section presents a summary of the main aspects discussed in the panel.

- Building trust and establishing international networks to facilitate international cooperation and collaboration when dealing with collections from colonial contexts is a long-term process of constant negotiation and dialogue that should allow for change and adaptation to take place. In this respect, the Benin Dialogue Group illustrates a best practice example on how building trust and establishing a solid network between European institutions and stakeholders in the countries and societies of origin can result in a long lasting collaborative partnership that results in the establishment and developing of concrete projects and further cooperation schemes.
- The Digital Benin Project is a result of the continuous cooperation and collaboration between the different stakeholders that are part of the Benin Dialogue Group. The project brings together experts from different parts of the world with the aim of establishing a collaborative digital platform that brings together information and provides access to information on

collections looted from the Kingdom of Benin during the colonial occupation. The platform will include material culture, documentary and archival information as well as photography, in order to enable research and knowledge of this relevant chapter on African art history.

- Within the framework of international cooperation projects and endeavours, it is relevant for the involved parties to be able to change and adapt to the current or ongoing needs and circumstances. It is also relevant to address questions like who is driving the cooperation agenda and the process, and which terminologies are used for carrying out co-curation and co-creation partnerships and projects, as there are some neo-colonial concepts and practices that are embedded in international relations.
- Taking transparency, documentation and return seriously means articulating the different types of objects and collections and emphasizing their contextual embeddedness, in order to overcome historically wrong divides between different types of collections and institutions. This necessarily means interconnecting the collections in museums, libraries and archives, not only within a country but also between countries.
- With regard to cooperation when dealing with collections from colonial contexts, there is much to be learnt from the experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean, as this region has a long historical experience of colonialism and decolonialism. Latin America and the Caribbean have valuable experiences related to the establishment of institutions and institutional frameworks that empower indigenous and Afro-American communities, and are opening spaces of social contestation, debate and controversy that go beyond building trust to allow a mutual learning process to take place.
- In addition, recent knowledge production in Latin America and the Caribbean on key issues like legal pluralism, critical reflections of colonialism and decolonialism, conviviality, inequality and knowledge asymmetries could be helpful for European and German institutions within the framework of cultural exchange and international cooperation when dealing with collections from colonial contexts.
- Establishing partnerships and long-lasting cooperation schemes when dealing with collections from colonial context opens an opportunity for European and German museums and institutions to accept and acknowledge traditional and indigenous knowledge systems. For indigenous and tribal communities, like the case of the Kogi people in Colombia, cultural objects play a role that goes beyond that of being collection objects. They are key and active elements for addressing local issues like restoration of the environment, dealing with climate change, the reclamation of the lost territory and the right to practice their own religion.
- Opening the dialogue for return within the framework of cultural exchange and international cooperation projects is an essential component to building trust and achieving a basis for

dialogue and collaboration. In this respect, German and European institution should work closely with the countries, communities and societies of origin, in order to try to find ways to address the existing complexities and allow processes to be more simple and less bureaucratic.

- The ICOM Code of Ethics, which presents international standards for the practice of museum professionals, highlights the importance of working closely with the communities and societies of origin. Principle 6 states that “museum collections should reflect the cultural and natural heritage of the communities from which they have been derived” and further mentions the relevance of working closely with the countries and societies of origin for documenting and presenting collections.
- At the international and national levels, ICOM aims to broaden the conversation surrounding topics like diversity, equity, decolonization, inclusion and racism, and wants to play an active role on how these aspects are addressed by museums, especially with regard to dealing with collections from colonial contexts. In addition, ICOM wants to support processes of “global heritage governance” as a starting point to think about what might be needed to decolonize conservation and museum practice and transform it into a decolonized practice of care.
- International cooperation and cultural exchange related to dealing with collections from colonial contexts could lead museums and institutions to change their working focus, alter their perspective and think about multi-perspective narratives and methods to present cultural objects and contents. It might also lead to address questions like why some forms of knowledge are given priority or authority over others, how to organize and categorize knowledge, how to select the criteria for cataloguing and documenting collections, and how to decide what is to be presented and represented.
- Cultural exchange and international cooperation are components of a long-term process of building confidence to heal historical alienation, hurt, displacement and inequalities. They should be based on openness and respect, and the capacity to listen, acknowledge and negotiate different views, knowledge systems, perspectives, approaches and expectations.