

herausfordernde wie spannende Schritte erforderlich, um das Ethnologische Museum in eine Institution zu verwandeln, die der postmigrantischen und postkolonialen Realität im 21. Jahrhundert gerecht wird.

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2.2.2 Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures.

A Joint Namibian–German Research, Exhibition and Restitution Project

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[provenance research, restitution, Germany, Namibia, art]

When Ways of Decolonising African Collections Meet

Ethnographic museums are in dire need of rethinking their modes of engaging and curating their collections (Karp, et al. 2006; Kraus and Noack 2015). They have to come to terms with their colonial pasts (Byrne, et al. 2011; Förster, et al. 2018; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Hicks 2020) and develop new ways of »sharing cultural heritage« (Buijs, et al. 2010) and »sharing knowledge« (Scholz 2017) to forge more equitable forms of transcultural relations (Golding and Modest 2013; Ivanov, et al. 2018; Peers and Brown 2003). Restitution is an integral part of such new »relational ethics« fields (Sarr and Savoy 2018) and can contribute to social healing in communities afflicted by colonial legacies of economic exploitation, cultural oppression and the expropriation of land (Peers 2013).

In 2014, the Museums Association of Namibia (MAN) started the »Africa Accessioned« project which aimed to map all collections from Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana held in museums in Europe. MAN's vision was to create transparency about museum holdings and develop formats with which to reconnect the museum collections with stakeholders in the collections' regions of origin. The vision was to reimagine the muse-

um »as [a] process« and as a »medium for global dialogue« (Silvester 2018: 67). In 2018, Jonathan Fine, then curator of the Namibian collections at the Ethnologisches Museum (EM) in Berlin, Larissa Förster, academic advisor, and Julia Binter, project coordinator and provenance researcher, teamed up with MAN, consisting of late Jeremy Silvester (1953–2021), Nehoa Hilma Kautondokwa and Ndapewoshali Ndahafa Ilunga, to conceptualise a collaborative project which was to examine the histories of the collections and to develop plans for how, by whom and where the cultural belongings, should be cared for, handled and presented in the future (Binter et al. 2020). The project title »Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures« reflects these two movements in time: a critical investigation into the collections' entanglements with the extremely violent and oppressive German colonial occupation of Namibia (1884–1915) and the reconnection of cultural belongings with heritage communities, artists, academics, museum professionals and the wider public in Namibia to develop creative futures with them.

Collaborative Provenance and Artistic Research in Berlin

The key to the collaboration was that each party brought to the table their research focuses and methodologies. While the Berlin team sought to tackle the colonial entanglements of the collection (Förster et al. 2004; Kößler 2017; Silvester and Gewald 2003; Zimmerer 2008), MAN introduced a decolonial reading of the collections as an archive of Namibian fashion and design (Biwa 2012; Hendrickson 1996). Consequently, when tasked with selecting experts to come to Berlin to study the collections there, MAN nominated a curator, Golda !Ha-Eiros, a historian and MAN's museum developer, Nehoa Hilma Kautondokwa, a cultural officer, Hertha Kaunapawa Bukassa, MAN's designer, Ndapewoshali Ndahafa Ilunga, the former head of the National Archives of Namibia, Werner Hillebrecht, and renowned fashion designer Cynthia Schimming (1953–2022). During two to three-month stays, the Namibian team members studied the near to 1,400 cultural belongings from Namibia held at the EM, sent photos to elders and relatives in Namibia to collect additional information on the belongings' historical and cultural significance, and started drawing up criteria according to which cultural belongings were to be selected to return home. It was an intellectually and emotionally challenging process, addressing collective trauma such as epistemological loss and colonial violence against women and children (Binter and Fine 2020). In the end, the seven experts nominated by MAN as well as two selection committees in Namibia, comprising scholars, curators, artists and community representatives, settled on the criteria, comprising historical, spiritual and cultural significance, rarity in contemporary Namibia, gender and generation, and selected 23 cultural belongings which were to return to Namibia in May 2022. The team also curated an exhibition on their collaborative research process which opened in September 2021 at the Humboldt Forum. The exhibition is not in the form of a typical presentation of museum objects, but rather focuses on the relationships of people with cultural belongings and highlights the plurality of forms of knowledge that made the collaborative research possible.

Returning Home

On 30 May 2022, the 23 selected cultural belongings were officially welcomed home at a press conference at the Independence Memorial Museum in Windhoek. Representatives of all partner institutions as well as of the funding body, the Gerda Henkel Foundation, that had made the return and subsequent research with the cultural belongings possible, underlined the importance of the cultural belongings for adding to the existing public memory about the cultural heritage of the country. The second phase of the project, which

Fig. 1 Julia Binter, Cynthia Schimming, Nehoa Kautondokwa and Jonathan Fine at the depot of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. Film still from *Tracing Namibian-German Collaborations*, a film by Moritz Fehr © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2020.



has thus begun, seeks to further improve the storage and conservation infrastructure in Namibian museums and to establish sustainable research and curatorial methods with which to welcome home cultural belongings, reconnect them to oral history, visual and performing art and safeguard the intangible cultural heritage surfacing in these processes. It continues the academic engagement with the returned cultural belongings in the form of MA scholarships at the University of Namibia and introduces a community research process which reconnects the returned cultural belongings as well as collections at the National Museum of Namibia with communities across Namibia.

The Museum of Namibian Fashion

The second phase also sets out to rethink the role of museums in current-day Namibia and works towards amplifying the role of Namibian museums as community resource centres where a variety of forms of knowledge is produced, preserved and made accessible for both current and future generations. One important strategy to realise this vision is the Museum of Namibian Fashion in Otjiwarongo where visitors can view historical items of clothing and accessories as well as contemporary designs inspired by Namibia's rich history and cultural diversity. The museum was developed in a series of workshops which brought together stakeholders from heritage, museums, academia and the fashion industry. They gave individuals working in the fashion industry the opportunity to interact with the cultural belongings to inspire young Namibian creatives to develop products that can be worn and will have a uniquely Namibian identity. In the same year, the Namibian Heritage Week's theme echoed the mission of the MFN: »Feshene, ke tlhale e e re lomaganang« (»Fashion, the threads that bind us together«).

Artistic Research and Communal Knowledge

To further strengthen the artistic engagement with the returned cultural belongings, an additional project entitled »Artistic Research and Communal Knowledge – Building Trust



Fig. 2 Joint workshop of the »Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures« and »Artistic Research and Communal Knowledge« projects in Okombahe, September 2023. Community researchers and contemporary artists discussing the historical and cultural significance of the returned cultural belongings. Photo: Willem Vrey.

for a Better Future«, was conceived, co-funded by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Gerda Henkel Foundation as part of the Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures Project. It brings together contemporary artists, knowledge keepers and artisans in heritage communities in Namibia to develop new, more equitable ways of sharing knowledge and skills across generations, class, and urban-rural divides. They will work together to reactivate the knowledge and skills related to the cultural belongings and, thereby, address and redress silences and gaps in Namibia's historiography and cultural heritage resulting from the colonization of the country by the German Empire (1844–1915) and South Africa (1919–1990). The contemporary artists will act as translators of communal knowledge, understood as oral histories, performative knowledge as well as artisanal skills, which have been preserved and cared for within communities, despite their violent suppression during colonialism and continued marginalization after Namibia's independence.

Outlook

As pilot project, »Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures« perceives the restitution of cultural belongings from colonial contexts in a holistic way. It started with collaborative provenance research and artistic engagement with the collections in Berlin and the selection of cultural belongings according to criteria set by the Namibian project partners. It also comprises the enhancement of infrastructure and capacity building in conservation in Namibia to enable the welcoming home of cultural belongings. Moreover, it sees the physical return of cultural belongings not as the end but the beginning of the process, reconnecting them with heritage communities, artists, academics and the wider public in Namibia. In April 2024, the final exhibition at the National Art Gallery of Namibia not only displayed the returned cultural belongings from Berlin and collections from the National Museum of Namibia but also teased out the many layers of knowledge and inspiration that can be drawn from an encounter with these cultural belongings. It became a platform to engage a wider Namibian public on questions of restitution of cultural belongings and the role and value of communal knowledge and artistic research not just in the past and present, but also in the future of Namibia.

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