

## Kooperationen

### Experiencing handling sessions at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: The perspective and reflection of a collection manager

I have been working at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin as a collection manager for the last three years and I have been involved in the African collections between 2019 and 2021. My work as a collection manager mainly consists of organising the content of the collections in a way that facilitates access to the objects and allows others (curators, researchers, guests) to work with them.

Concretely this means, organising the objects into adequate storage spaces, conducting basic documentation research on the objects and entering this information into the museums digital documentation system. Museum collection management also involves the daily care of the collections according to certain preservation principles. This includes the maintenance of adequate climate conditions within the collections such as general standards of cleanliness, and the close observation of integrated pest management to prevent the objects' materials from deterioration.

In 2020 I worked on the research project "Tansania-Deutschland: Geteilte Objektgeschichten?" ("Tanzania–Germany: Shared Object Histories?") where my main task was to digitize East-African objects potentially linked to Tanzania so that provenance research could be carried out. Parallel to this, Maasai researcher Laibor Kalanga Moko came into the collections in order to physically engage with the objects I had previously photographed, and which he had first seen digitally. More than a visit, this kind of session within the collections is commonly referred to as a "handling session", that is to say, a definite moment in time during which someone external to the museum may come into the collections to not only see but also manipulate a certain amount of objects.

The handling session with L. K. Moko was not the first one I had organised, yet it was the first which I experienced in its entirety. Indeed, on previous occasions I only went as far as preparing the sessions, generating lists of objects, locating them and displaying them for the occasion. As a collection manager, I would usually be in charge of welcoming the researchers and their guests, whilst having them sign various administrative forms and providing them with protective clothing so that they can enter the collections according to specific conservation measures.

Whilst working as a collection manager can at times feel like a lonely enterprise, the human experience that comes with hosting handling sessions feels particularly gratifying. Despite their short duration, the moments of interaction provided by such occasions are a unique opportunity to engage with a variety of narratives and to emotionally sense the value such dialogical processes bear for the actors involved. Seeing the material culture come to life as it does on these occasions, nurtures a deeper perception of the collections I frequent on a daily basis.

#### **Preparing the session**

When the curator of the East-African collections Paola Ivanov contacted me to organise a handling session with her PhD student L. K. Moko, my reaction was one of excitement, as I was told to not only prepare the session but also be present throughout. Prior to this occasion I had been photographing Maasai objects held in the collections and had been updating their documentation on our database, which was then made available to L. K. Moko for his research. I was told by the curator that the session was particularly

important for L. K. Moko's research, as it would serve to testify to the actual location of the objects in the German State collections to his community. It was therefore planned that Lisa Maier, a visual anthropology student, would accompany L. K. Moko on this journey to record the encounter with the objects on camera. The film would then be used by L. K. Moko as part of his research and shown to his community as a way to nurture a discussion over their relation to these objects in regard to notions of ownership and alienability (Moko, 2021).

As we prepared for the session, L. K. Moko, the curator, the restorer and I had to agree on a certain amount of objects to be viewed. Because of resources, time and space limitations it was decided that only a certain number of objects would be viewed at a time. First, we had to ensure that the objects could be located and were easily accessible. Once the selection was made, the objects had to be examined and cleaned by the restorer to ensure that they could be handled and to establish in what manner this could proceed without causing damage. Once we agreed on a selection, my role as a collection manager prior to the visit consisted of locating the objects, taking them out of their respective storage areas, carefully transporting them and preparing them on a display table set up for the occasion.

### **The session**

#### *On accessing things*

When L. Maier and L. K. Moko came to the museum on the day of the handling session, I picked them up at the security office of the museum where they had to announce themselves and passed the point beyond which they could no longer access other locations without any further guidance or the necessary keys. From one building to the next, I guided them towards my office where I greeted them with a stack of administrative forms to read and sign. These forms are but another required step in the process of accessing the collections. They inform the guests of the collections' status of contamination and of the health risks connected to entering them. After providing L. Maier and L. K. Moko with required protective clothing, namely overalls, masks and gloves, I led them to the East African collections. We went down several floors, passing a multitude of doors each to be opened with a different key and walked endless corridors until we finally reached our destination. Taking them through that architectural maze felt like leading them to an uttermost secret place. A well-guarded treasure cave (the collections being located in the basement of the building could only reinforce that impression) located in a fortress of which I was the key holder. Walking the sheer distance through that building complex accompanied by the guests filled me with ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, I was excited to be able to play a role in facilitating access to a place that I was realising was so remote from the public and so difficult to access. On the other hand, I almost felt embarrassed and wanted to apologise for the imposing nature of the institutional complex that was revealing itself before our eyes. What struck me in the experience of accompanying the guests through the process of accessing the collections was the appreciation that despite handling sessions seemingly becoming a defining trait of the museum's postcolonial agenda, realising such an event does not happen at the click of a finger. Rather, it requires all involved to follow a particular process, which often takes time and requires the intervention of a few gatekeepers, be them administrative, social or material.

As an anthropology student at University College London, I conducted a small experimental project<sup>1</sup> on the university's ethnographic collections aiming to question its regulatory nature. I did this by turning my attention onto objects which were not typically recognised as ethnographic objects, namely I took an interest in the "gatekeepers"

1 <https://thisisnotjustapipe.wordpress.com>.



**Fig. 1** Handling session in the East-African Collections, Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin  
 © Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Photograph: Lisa Meier

which were located between an external visitor and the collections, asking how one gets to the ethnographic object. Which objects are situated on the way to the collections? This involved the consideration of elements such as administrative forms, locked doors, institution employees, accession numbers, keys and gloves, to name a few. I proposed to consider these elements as ethnographic objects in the sense of “semiophores” (Pomian, 1990), as they were representing the invisible (Pomian, 1990: 31) shadowed by the type of knowledge enacted through the official ethnographic collections. I argued that they too could be seen as objects of knowledge, more precisely as “disciplinary artefacts” (Kirshenblatt Gimblett, 2002: 61) which embodied the regulatory nature of the scientific institution within which they were encompassed.

The observations originally made at UCL a few years ago could not only be reiterated but further exacerbated in the context of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. Even for an employee working within the institution, navigating through the maze of buildings, corridors and staircases feels somewhat disorienting. The number of keys held on my keyring may be witness (Latour, 2000) to the multitude of doors to be unlocked to access any place within the museum complex through which only “insiders” may circulate with a relative sense of agency. Yet from repeating tasks and journeys, one gets used to this odd routine, and what might have felt strange at first, eventually becomes incorporated and normalised. This is why the occasion of welcoming external guests into the collections becomes an exceptional opportunity to reassess what has become too ordinary over time. Such situations prompt me to take some reflexive distance regarding the common procedures I have incorporated into my work. They are the occasion to make the ordinary look different, to estrange my own gaze over the routines that make up my day. The handling session hosted in the East-African collections with researcher L. K. Moko is but one pertinent example for illustrating this. Not only does it allow one to reassess notions of accessibility when it comes to undertaking collaborative projects in the museum, but it also raises questions around the nature of our conservation practices and the impact these may bear on the realisation and experience of such projects.

*On handling things*

Once we passed the double locked door leading to the East-African collections, I unveiled the table I had prepared previously, which was located right by the entrance of the room with glass cabinets on either side. With the three of us gathered around the table, including L. Maier filming the session, the room felt quite cramped and I was much too aware of the space constraints and in fear of the potential risks this could bear for the objects.

Leading up to this session I had been digitizing the objects gathered on the table and in doing so I became aware of some of their material fragility. Beside the excitement of experiencing the session throughout and encouraging L. K. Moko to share his knowledge of the objects, I also observed myself feeling quite tense around the act of handling, and recommended L. K. Moko on multiple occasions to hold certain objects with particular care, especially when these were displaying poor conditions of conservation.

As a collection manager, I occupy one of those rare positions within the museum in which I am nearly continuously in touch with the material culture held in the collections. I transport, handle, measure, photograph and store objects on a daily basis. In the few years of experience I have gathered, I learned how to handle objects according to certain preservation standards and by means of repetitive tasks I incorporated a certain type of 'preservation habitus', which primarily seeks to prevent the objects' material conditions from deteriorating. Underlying this lies a certain rationale which essentially deems the objects as material entities, which due to their age and their biographies (Kopytoff, 1986) have potentially been weakened and should be preserved as a whole. Such an understanding of objects as primarily fragile matter, implies a certain way of dealing and working with them, namely that there are 'right' and 'wrong' ways to handle things. The right thing being that each object should be moved as little as possible, and if necessary, should be handled very carefully so the physical characteristics of the object are maintained and do not deteriorate further.

I remembered from preparing older handling sessions with my colleagues that prior to these we would systematically leave little notes next to the objects that would display particular kinds of fragility. The notes were directed to the participants of the session (usually curators and guests) warning them about handling (or not handling) the objects in certain ways so as to not damage them. These notes contained messages such as "please handle carefully" or "please do not touch this object". It is influenced by these previous experiences that I saw myself carefully ensuring that the objects that were on display during the session with L. K. Moko would not risk deterioration throughout the process.

And so, when L. K. Moko grabbed a spear vertically and planted it on the floor as in to enact the way a Maasai warrior might carry a spear, I found myself battling with conflicting emotions. The trained anthropologist in me wanted to encourage what I perceived to be an act of re-appropriation, whilst the collection manager that I was officially representing saw in it a clash with the handling norms of the museum. The conflict between these two roles may have been further enhanced by the sentiment of a latent confusion surrounding the application of object handling guidelines in the context of sessions with external guests. Unsure about the 'rights' or 'wrongs' of a handling session from a more academic/scientific perspective, my dominating 'preservation habitus' took over and guided my reaction. Having so strongly incorporated the preservation norms of the museum over time, I could not help but feel tension around the spear enactment, whilst my rational anthropological self wanted to further encourage the gesture. This ambivalent feeling and attitude stayed with me throughout the session. On the one hand, I was thrilled to see the objects come to life as L. K. Moko was reacting to them and sharing his thoughts and feelings. I could grasp the value of the interaction at play and encouraged that exchange further by asking him many questions. On the other

hand, I felt tense around the object handling moments and above all guilty to be the person enacting and imposing the norms of a powerful institution in that moment. I sometimes wonder if that feeling would have been any different had there been a discussion and an agreement upon the rules of object handling prior to the session, namely that our guest could handle the objects in whichever way felt right to him, prioritising this above the prevailing norms of the museum.

Looking back into this experience makes me bring into question the nature of our institution and the way in which cooperation/collaborative projects take place. Be it the endless walking through the building complex, the confrontation to the various gatekeepers leading to the collections, or the sensitivities around the act of handling – all these elements tell us something about ourselves. If collections carry their own histories whilst being encompassed within a broader institutional system, similarly do our conservation practices, which embody western structures and signify the museum as a powerful institution. Thus if handling sessions are an important part of today's agenda, one ought to ask what effects our institutional frameworks and conservation practices have on their implementation. And to what extent would we need to adapt them so as to make collections even more accessible and open to be experienced according to a variety of sensitivities and worldviews.

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