If objects can speak
De-materializing universal heritage in the Africamuseum in Belgium

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Abstract

The underexposed ethnographic collections of Western-European national museums of world cultures are at the forefront of public debate. Most of the ethnographic objects of colonial collections are accessioned more than a century ago in former ethnographic museums, now referred to as museums of world cultures. By unifying their universal claims with relativistic curatorial approaches, museums of world cultures, firstly, aim at building bridges with heritage communities in former metropoles, and in some cases with source communities. Secondly, they play, in light of the growing decolonization debates, into current restitution claims with the development of juridical inspired guidelines for claims of ethnographic objects from colonial collections.

This presentation seeks to outline this twofold practice of national museums of world cultures with a focus on the Royal Museum of Central-Africa, currently known as the Africamuseum. These practices reveal a continuing and underlining object-oriented politics within museums of world cultures. Can this object-driven approach be challenged by current restitution debates?

Beyond new collection taxonomies, digitized collections, long-term loanings, travelling exhibitions, juridical principles on collections, the object-oriented approach in the Africamuseum is challenged by looking at de-materialized heritage production.

Keywords: colonial collections, decoloniality, dematerializing, restitution/return, provenance research, emotion networking, community of practice, immaterial heritage

Introduction

When I started writing down the abstract for this conference paper, I just revisited the renovated exhibition of the Africamuseum and attended a presentation on the principles for the return of cultural objects of the National museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands. First, the amount of information at the Africamuseum blurred possible ethical and moral reflections on stolen cultural objects in the renovation process. I didn't find any controversial stories behind stolen objects in the permanent exposition. Secondly, the strictly juridical engagement concerning restitution of the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands raised questions regarding the ethical and moral reconciliation with their colonial heritage.

It made me question the simple core of these institutions. Namely, the objects. Maybe the least messy display of the collections would be, if the objects could speak for themselves and tell their own biographies to the audience. I learned that the concept of biographies of objects came, thanks to the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff, into the museological practice in the eighties. The biography of an ethnographic object could show us the different performed understandings, from curiosa, trophies to

art objects, during time (Kopytoff, 1986). This encouraged ethnographic museums to historicize their objects. Maarten Couttenier, historian and anthropologist at the Africamuseum reconstructed along the same line the social life of the violently stolen Nkisi-object in a research paper. His research became the subject of a public debate on controversial colonial objects in Belgium (Couttenier, 2018). With future restitution claims in mind, maybe those objects wouldn't stand at the frontline, but their biographies would be central to the permanent exposition. This would help museums, rooted in European imperialism, to not only historicize their objects, but to historicize themselves as political and cultural constructions, by exploiting what the anthropologist Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett calls a 'performing museology'. For this, I will build further on the open-ended concept of "dematerialization of heritage artefacts" (2002).

The past two decades, the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, together with a scope of ethnographic European institutions, has become aware of the need to leave the 19th century museum behind, not only in name but also in practice, and to question the very principles of collecting, so deeply embedded in colonialist thought. The way as knowledge was presented, often in line with evolutionary ideas, has contributed to exoticising 'the other'. This known "malaise" of former ethnographic museums has been processed the last decades with a universal paradigm, plurivocality and shared authority, resulting in cocurated exhibitions with source communities and communities of African diaspora in our multicultural societies (Besterman, 2014). Staging these developments of ethnographic museums in the Belgian context of decolonization and restitution, made me think on de-materialized heritage, collective memory and remembering practices.

I must admit, I still have an outsiders-view on museums of world cultures, but I hope to open up spirits for a historical and museological sensitive discussion on object-oriented display of our colonial past.

Universal claims and multivocal approaches

Museums have been advocating a universal framework in order to separate themselves from a classical representation of 'the other'. A new political construct of museums representing world cultures, following concepts as world music and world art, saw daylight with the 2002 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums'. The debates that arose from the declaration brought the issue of legitimacy of speaking for 'the other' to the fore. James Cuno, president of the Paul Getty Fund took a radical stand against the restitution of cultural goods. Nationalist interpretations of heritage fundamentally run counter to the universalist principle of world heritage (Cuno, 2006, 17-18). However, according to Kwame Opoku, a strong advocate for restitution of cultural objects, the universal claim could not serve as a pretext for an imperialist ideology. In the declaration, the idea of a single world in which the West gives shelter to these objects was received with dismay on the African continent. The neutral ground of a universal shared heritage hides the unbalance of heritage partition between former colonies and metropoles (Opoku, 2010).

Museums of world cultures continue to evolve with this universal principle, striving to be places of dialogue where multiple voices can be heard. The 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of the Universal Museums' fell on the background, but wasn't redressed within the broader western museumscape. Some museums moved towards world art, while other chose to be historical or interdisciplinary. A general shift, however, is the inclusive politics within museums of world cultures. In

other words, opening up to those world cultures their representing. In doing so, many curators see it as their mission to involve communities and those living in the diaspora in their collections. Paradoxically, the involvement, inclusion and collaboration with source communities and those living in the diaspora legitimizes Western museums of world cultures to house and show world heritage (Besterman 2014). It seems to me, that curatorial relativistic approaches are nowadays portrayed by source communities or people from the diaspora, within universal interests.

In Belgium, the Africamuseum deliberately chose the term "forum" to present the permanent exhibition. The idea of a forum evokes the involvement of African source communities and diaspora in Belgium. This is made visible in key spaces Afropea and Africatube. The Afropea space pays attention to family histories of people in the diaspora of Belgium and aspects as refugee resettlement in the nineties are present. Africatube is a temporary multimedia project in which African youtubers, vloggers and other influencers speak. In the middle of Afropea, a large round table with built-in multimedia would serve as an invitation to conversation, playing into contemporary digital trends and globalized youth culture. On the one hand, Afropea and Africatube vaguely evoke involvement of African diaspora and communities. From a museological perspective, on the other hand, visitors are overwhelmed by the factual information shown in these spaces. The lack of priority of their completion reveals the difficulties to keep up with the idea of a forum. Most importantly, this is expressed by the African diaspora in Belgium. They deplore the way they were involved in the renovation process. Even before the Africamuseum opened, the renovation was questioned and criticized by insiders and outsiders. The Belgian Congolese association focusing on restitution, BAMCO-Cran requested a moratorium of the opening. Several actors involved in the renovation, as for the journalist and activist Anne Wetsi Mpoma and Billy Kalonji, the former chairman of COMRAF, the African diaspora advice committee of the museum, rebuked the lack of inclusion during the renovations (Vallet, 2018; Mpoma, 2019). Former curator Toma Luntumbue of the famous CongoExitCongo exhibition, that opened the pathway towards a radical rethinking of the collections in the Africamuseum in 2001, openly denounced the transformation of the museum as a "non-event" (Wastiau, 2001; Debrouwer, 2018). This shows how these practices of involvement are still subject to an object-driven approach in the Africamuseum. However, after Macron's celebrated commitment to restitute stolen colonial objects in 2017, questions on return were raised in Western-Europe. The scenery of the former ethnographic museums moved once again.

Is it all about the collections?

Return or at least digital repatriation of ethnographic objects became seen as a decisive step for decolonization (Ribeiro & Ribeiro, 2018). Since 2019 museums of world cultures have been responding to a renewed legal ethics regarding the restitution debate. Germany published a code of conduct in handling colonial-era artefacts and in the Netherlands the National Museum of World Cultures published the principles for the return of colonial objects. Museums with ethnographic collections are thus commissioned to carry out research into provenance of their collections. In 2004, ICOM (International Council of Museums), the International Council of Museums, already started an innovative approach to the inalienable right to collections of states in the Code of Ethics for Museums. Since then, museums have been obliged not only to recognize and involve source communities in the interpretation and treatment of the material they have produced, but also to hold them accountable for the restitution and restitution of objects from the collections. The guideline stressed that requests

for restitution should be treated with respect and sensitivity. While the guidelines and principles show the moral and ethical involvement of museums of world cultures, the juridical content dismisses the African voices in the negotiations on shared heritage. The euphoria of restitution after Macron celebrated speech in Ouagadougou in 2017 can be doubted. It clearly created a knock-on effect among museum professionals and policy makers in Western-Europe. Nevertheless, museum professionals continue to plead against restitution as a campaign for emptying the museums of world cultures, but put it mostly as processes to enhance cultural dialogue. The restitution debate in the public arena urges museum of world cultures to discuss the origins and spectre of meanings of these objects. In the case of the Africamuseum, the director Guido Gryseels declared to be open to claims and to commit to a case by case policy. Therefore, a rethinking of the current collection rationale is necessary.

More than a decade ago, the Africamuseum developed their collection plan in 2005, answering to higher demands of their audiences and the need of rationalizing obsolete parts of their collections. The collection plan consisted of an overview of the collections, on the one hand, and the collection management of the Africamuseum, on the other. The objective was to restrict acquisitions to research and exhibition projects, to have a more transparent accessioning policy and to define core collections. The staff of the museum emphasized the outdatedness of this plan and refers to a more recent plan for public services. This public-oriented plan was developed in 2014 and focused on a timeframe of 5 years, starting from 2016 until 2021 (Verbergt, 2014). The baseline of this plan, namely 'It's all about the collections!', shows how an object-oriented management prevailed. Access to the collections should suggest a certain degree of democratization in determining what is important and valuable, and therefore preserved and made accessible to 'interested parties'. This group of 'interested parties' includes both museum visitors and scientists, both the' Belgian 'and the international public, and in particular the Africans who, because of the origin of the collections, can rightly claim a certain connection with the setting. Collections are nowadays presented as shared heritage, but not yet in a clearcut de-accessioning policy. A de-accessioning policy grounded in provenance research stays a sensible, yet urgent challenge for museums of world cultures nowadays (Brokerhof, Ankersmit en Ligterink, 2017).

Conclusion: Dematerializing the universal

The reconfiguring of the permanent collection of the Africamuseum seems to reproduce the former taxonomies of the museum. The current collections are thematically managed as they were in the past, while museologists in the Africamuseum attempt to use a more decolonized gaze. This shows that the Africamuseum seemingly opens up to the possibility of return in its collection management. Since the museum applies a 'work in progress'-approach to the permanent collection, but decided to work co-creatively on the colonial past, maybe, it's in the interest of the conservation staff to put the museum itself on display. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett offers a threefold argument for de-materializing heritage. First, she explains how heritage is part of our cultural production and how this production evolves during time into new forms. Secondly, she acclaims new value to material artefacts in the information society. Thirdly, she underlines the remediations of objects (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 2002). In the context of the Africamuseum this offers a new gaze away from object-oriented display. Through the process of return something new can be created as museums recognize their own role in the creation of the past. The Africamuseum is endlessly interpreted as a political and cultural construct, but yet didn't rethink the classic object-driven paradigm within museum practice and didn't put it's own

history on display for discussion. In another vein Holocaust museums rethink the ethics of representation since the late nineties. Although objects make strong connections to the past, remembering relies less on objects, than on emotions (example Multimedia Learning Centre of the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance (Los Angeles). Holocaust scholars argue that the core of material culture in Holocaust Museums estranges audiences of the actual events, and moves them towards the symbolic and abstract. Looking at coming generations, museums are than seen as the coproducers of collective memory in society. This brings museums to plurivocal and emotional practices of remembering and the deployment of digital displays that engage audiences (Carden-Coyen, 2011).

The changing relationships between former colonies and metropoles, decolonization debates and claims for restitution offers us the possibility to create new forms of cultural production. What if this cultural production can become immaterial? What if objects could speak and these stories, not the objects, would be on the foreground for the performance of our shared and divided collective memories? Beyond reconfiguring our ways of organizing, categorizing and historicizing these objects, I invite you to imagine the museums own performance in a non-object-oriented way, which relies less on cultural objects, than emotions and stories and engaging remembrance practices.

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