

A conference on postcolonial provenance research

Introduction to the conference anthology¹

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In the German-speaking world, the term “provenance research” was long used primarily in connection with cultural assets confiscated under National Socialist (Nazi) persecution.² But over the last few years it has also come to be applied to collections and objects from a colonial acquisition context, in keeping with the increasing prominence of the whole issue of “colonial collections” in academic and publicly conducted debates about the legacy of German, and indeed European, colonialism and about questions of repatriation or restitution. For instance, repatriation demands relating to human remains from Namibia, Australia and New Zealand have given the impetus for interdisciplinary research projects, sometimes lasting several years, on the provenance of these remains.³ Likewise, in the debate surrounding Berlin’s Humboldt Forum, the colonial origin of ethnographic objects has become an ever more central topic, prompted by the postcolonial critique levelled at this major project from activist, artistic and academic quarters.⁴

This means that all ethnological museums have increasingly become a target of postcolonial critique.⁵ Granted, their collections are not exclusively *colonial*, and colonial collections are not exclusive to *them*, since they are also held by many other establishments; by historical or natural history museums, for example.⁶ Nevertheless, a majority of ethnographic collections in the German-speaking world were assembled in the era of colonialism and high imperialism – times in which “collectors”, dealers and suppliers of “ethnographic objects” were bolstered by colonial ideologies, infrastructures and asymmetries of power, and frequently enough played a part in cementing them through their collecting and searching, if not, indeed, through dubious or unlawful acquisition practices.⁷

¹ This is the translation of a German article extracted from the anthology of contributions to the conference “*Provenienzforschung in ethnologischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*” [Provenance research on ethnographic collections from the colonial era] held on 7–8 April, 2017, organised by the Working Group on Museums of the German Anthropological Association and the Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich; all references to “this book”, “this anthology” and to specific chapters, sections and articles pertain to the conference anthology edited by Förster et al. 2018.

² In this regard, cf. Hoppe 2016

³ Cf. Stoecker, Winkelmann and Schnalke 2013

⁴ On the earliest activities addressed to this issue, cf. the event “*Der Anti-Humboldt. Eine Veranstaltung zum selektiven Rückbau des Humboldt-Forums*” [The anti-Humboldt. An event supporting the selective demolition of the Humboldt Forum], Berlin, 11.7.2009, viewable online at: <http://www.sophienseaele.com/archiv.php?IDstueck=668undhl=de>, the campaign “No Humboldt21”, viewable at <http://www.no-humboldt21.de>, and Kazeem et al. 2009 (and in that volume, particularly Kravagna 2009), Förster 2010, and most recently, AfricAvenir 2017.

⁵ Cf. Förster and Bose 2015.

⁶ Cf. Förster and Stoecker 2016. For a postcolonial perspective on an art collection, see Binter 2016.

⁷ References e.g. Bergner 1996, Deutsches Historisches Museum 2016, Edenheiser 2017a, b, Förster 2016a, Stelzig 2004, Zimmerer 2015.

Even if the theme of colonialism has repeatedly come to bear in German ethnology since the 1970s – not least because historical accessions research applied to museum objects regularly leads back into the era of colonialism – it is only very recently that ethnological museums in Germany have tried to face up to postcolonial critiques comprehensively and to problematise and disclose the sources not just of individual objects, but of entire lots and collections from the colonial era, as will become clear later in this book.

The conference that paved the way for this anthology came about as a response not only to the debates and developments outlined, but also to preceding conferences. At the 2015 Annual Conference of the German Museums Association (*Deutscher Museumsbund*, DMB), the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters, argued that state (co-)financed provenance research, as already established for the accession period 1933–1945, should also be extended to colonial collections in the near future (Grütters 2015: 8).⁸ In the same year, the Volkswagen Foundation (*VolkswagenStiftung*) hosted a conference which discussed the future of ethnological museums along with virulent issues like provenance and repatriation.⁹ The question as to how provenance research could be intensified in ethnological museums was raised, but answers in terms of proposals for practical implementation were barely forthcoming. Out of these observations, the idea emerged for a conference that resolutely addresses the possibilities, difficulties, desiderata and limitations of deepening and broadening provenance research in ethnographic collections and ethnological museums.¹⁰

An especially appropriate format for this undertaking seemed to be the interim conferences of the German Anthropological Association (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie*, DGSKA, formerly *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde*, DGV), which was why the members' assembly of its Working Group on Museums (*AG Museum*) decided in October 2015 to host a conference on "*Provenienzforschung zu ethnologischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*" (Provenance research on ethnographic collections from the colonial era). The Working Group on Museums views itself as a platform for museum and university ethnologists¹¹ and interested parties from related disciplines to exchange views about current developments in the museum landscape as well as in Museum Studies and Material Culture Studies pertaining to ethnographic collections.¹² In rotation with the main conference of the DGSKA, all DGSKA working groups organise biennial interim conferences. For the last few years those of the Working Group on Museums have increasingly dealt with questions concerning the repositioning and reconfiguration of ethnological museums.¹³ In this way the Working Group on Museums has

⁸ "*Biografie der Objekte. Provenienzforschung weiter denken*" [Biography of objects. Thinking further in provenance research], annual conference of the German Museums Association (DMB) in cooperation with the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States (*Kulturstiftung der Länder*), Essen, 3.–6.5. 2015. The articles are published in the journal *Museumskunde*, vol. 80, no. 2. See also a more recent follow-up to Grütters' statement: <http://www.dw.com/de/gr%C3%BCtters-will-kolonialismuss-forschung-bundesweit-unterst%C3%BCtzen/a-40367552>

⁹ "Positioning Ethnological Museums in the 21st Century", Volkswagen Foundation in cooperation with the German Museums Association, Hannover, 21.–23.6.2015. The articles are published in the journal *Museumskunde*, vol. 81, no. 1.

¹⁰ Deviating from the original wording of the conference title, references throughout this article to "ethnological museums" denote self-contained ethnological establishments while "ethnographic collections" is used when holdings are part of a larger institution that is not necessarily ethnologically oriented or a museum. Both were dealt with in equal measure at the conference and are therefore usually mentioned in one breath here for the sake of completeness. It is not always possible, however, to draw a sharp distinction between the terms "ethnographic" and "ethnological".

¹¹ German: "*Ethnolog_innen*". The German term "*Ethnologie*" is used as the equivalent of "social/cultural anthropology", while "*Anthropologie*" denotes "bioanthropology/physical anthropology".

¹² See the Working Group on Museums' home page (in German): <http://ag-museum.de/index.php/infos>

¹³ "*Eine alte Institution neu gedacht: Neuaufstellungen ethnologischer Sammlungen in den letzten Jahren*" [An old institution rethought: reconfigurations of ethnological collections in recent years], interim conference of the Working Group on Museums,

been able to play its part in fostering the exchange of ideas, discussion and networking – and hopes to take this a step further with the present conference anthology.

Old wine in new skins? On the term “provenance”

Even if the concept of provenance research seems to have become established in both the public and the academic discourse on ethnological museums, a question raised at the conference was whether the “hype” around the theme was ultimately just old wine in new skins and owed a lot to the media attention economy.¹⁴ Christian Feest also points out in his article for this anthology that ethnological museums have always carried out historical research on the origin and genesis of their collections and objects – if only for the purpose of ascribing artefacts to particular regions and places of origin. To begin with, then, provenance research, in the sense of researching the accession history of objects or the general history of collections, can be understood as a fundamental part of museum-based ethnological work, without which any cultural and historical contextualisation of objects and collections is hardly possible. Thus, historical collections research is possibly even more constitutive for museum-based ethnology than provenance research is for museum-based art history.¹⁵

At the same time, however, a whole series of omissions and desiderata need to be noted. The first is that, as yet, more intensive historical accessions studies have often only been carried out “in response to circumstances”,¹⁶ i.e. when a problematic accession context was already suspected, was mentioned by a third party, or when objects or groups of objects were earmarked for imminent restoration and/or for exhibitions.

Secondly, for the most part provenance research was only done within the limits of the available resources. Quite often this restricted research to individual objects and lots, and to a single institution, ruling out the possibility of making systematic connections with other objects or groups of objects and institutions.

Thirdly, in this process the problematic and, especially, violence-marred contexts, phases and forms of accession that characterise the colonial era were rarely made a subject of study in their own right. Thus the opportunity was missed to research structural connections between the colonial project and the emergence of individual ethnographic collections and museums, to bring to light different conditions and effects of collecting depending on the given colonial domination practices, or to clarify questions of accession or legal ownership systematically. It is only by addressing these themes and questions that the object-biographical approach established in ethnology since the 1990s, which inquires into the transformation in an object’s value and meaning as it passes through the hands of different users, physical and legal owners,¹⁷ can be turned into a postcolonial provenance research project.

Cologne, 29.–30.11.2012 and interim conference of the Working Group on Museums, Vienna, 23.–24.10.2014. The programmes are published on the Working Group on Museums website: www.ag-museum.de

¹⁴ Cf. also Rein 2017: 29

¹⁵ On the concept of provenance in art history, cf. Higgenot 2012.

¹⁶ German: “*anlassbezogen*”. This term is taken from the answer to the Berlin Green Party’s parliamentary question of 28.6.2013 addressed to the Berlin House of Representatives on the postcolonial debate in relation to the Humboldt Forum (*Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin* [Berlin House of Representatives], 17th electoral period, printed paper 12/360).

¹⁷ On “biographies of objects” cf. Hoskins 2006, and in the most recent debate, König 2017.

Fourthly, so far questions of provenance have only rarely been made the theme of exhibitions and museum education work.¹⁸ The first examples of new approaches in this area which might sensitise a wider public to the history of the colonial heritage of ethnographic collections, and hence to the overall theme of colonialism, were discussed at the conference (thematic block 4).

In order to address the specified desiderata, in our opinion provenance research must be framed substantially more broadly and systematically. It should aim to understand the genesis of the collection, institution and discipline as a whole, with special consideration of its problematic and violence-marred aspects. This calls for a proactive, systematic comparative assessment of collection holdings from the colonial era or from formerly colonised territories and an equally systematic clarification of their status and their significance in the context of transnational debates about *indigenous cultural heritage*, *cultural property*, repatriation and *shared heritage*. Provenance research of this kind differs very substantially from earlier approaches in accession-historical and object-biographical research, which is why it is deliberately referred to in this book as “postcolonial” provenance research.¹⁹

Furthermore, the appeal for an intensification of postcolonial provenance research in ethnographic museums and collections in the German-speaking world is voiced against the backdrop of broader debates about the decolonisation and repositioning of ethnological museums as a whole, about the socio-political role of museums, the relations between museums and cultural heritage communities or societies of origin, about questions of participation and about ethical standards in museums.²⁰ Beyond museum-specific debates, however, ethnological concepts such as Nick Thomas’s *entangled objects* and Alfred Gell’s *agency* of objects or the debate about the hybridity of spaces and things in *postcolonial studies* have become important starting points for defining the perspectives of more recent historical collections research. In particular, modern colonial and global history with concepts like *histoire croisée*/entangled history, with its focus on forms of anticolonial opposition and resistance and on the *agency* of local actors, offers an important methodological and theoretical frame of reference. The approaches cited facilitate a kind of postcolonial provenance research which is more than the investigation of changes in legal ownership and which is capable of describing the circumstances of accession in ways that transcend dichotomies such as legitimate versus illegitimate ownership, looting versus purchase, etc. Placed in this framework, (post)colonial provenance research can also contribute – both by means of case studies and by systematisation approaches – to the history of global (post)colonial entanglement, to the history of ethnology as a subject and to the history of the formation of the academic disciplines and their collections.

Moving beyond academic debates, ethnological collections are in many respects a crystallisation point for identity and (cultural) policy debates about the relationship between the Global North and South. Questions of the acknowledgement and redressing of wrongs suffered in

¹⁸ This is especially true of permanent exhibitions. Aspects of historical collections research currently only feature to any great extent in the newly opened Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne with its departments “*Welt in der Vitrine*” [World in the showcase] and “*Begegnung und Aneignung: Grenzüberschreitungen*” [Encounter and appropriation: Transgressing boundaries].

¹⁹ Generally the terms “colonial” or “colonial era” provenance research are also used in the same way as the term “Nazi-era provenance research”, to denote the accession period. In our view, however, the programmatic concerns articulated here are better expressed by the adjective “postcolonial. In the ongoing debate, mention is also made of “ethnological provenance research”, which normally means research in ethnological/ethnographic collections using ethnological methods.

²⁰ On the themes mentioned, a wealth of literature is available internationally. At this juncture, to avoid overburdening the article with citations, mention is made only of a few references covering the German-speaking debate about the future of ethnological museums, such as Förster 2013, Kraus and Noack 2015, Humboldt-Lab Dahlem 2015. Cf. also Macdonald, Oswald and Lidchi 2017.

the colonial era and of memorialisation also play into this aspect.²¹ What proceeds from the violent history of colonialism, therefore, is not only the responsibility of museums to have a stance on the colonial traumata that are still in effect and on postcolonial asymmetries of power and knowledge, but also the opportunity – if not the duty – to make a contribution to questions of social reconciliation.

²¹ On this aspect, cf. the conferences of the Research Center for Material Culture in Leiden: “On the Poetics and Politics of Redress”, 12./13.11.2015, and “Reckoning with History”, 30.11.–1.12.2017

The themes of the conference

The conference “*Provenienzforschung in ethnologischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit*” [Provenance research on ethnographic collections from the colonial era] aimed to fathom the possibilities and requirements of systematic postcolonial provenance research and to consider strategies for facilitating its long-term logistical, technical and financial realisation. Four questions seem central to this: the question of prioritising individual collection holdings in the framework of a long-term strategy for the study of collections; the question of (transnational) networking and cooperation between researchers and curators in German institutions with individuals, interest groups and institutions in the countries of origin as well as in the diaspora; the question of networking, storing and giving access to the research results; and finally, the question of anchoring and institutionalising provenance research in museum and university practice. These are discussed in more detail in the following.

Systematisation and prioritisation

Ethnological museums house collections and objects that are extremely heterogeneous, not just with regard to their origin, their contexts of use, meanings and previous owners, but also with regard to material, working techniques and the resultant possibilities and requirements for conservation. Moreover, generally there are far fewer written sources in existence on ethnographic collections, and often also very much less historiographical literature on the context than is the case for objects of European origin. And finally, the colonial collecting mania around 1900 led to a rapid accumulation of holdings which in some cases have not been uniformly retro-catalogued and researched to date.

Considering these prior circumstances, it may rightly be doubted whether the holdings of ethnographic collections can ever be queried exhaustively and with itemised rigour to establish their exact provenance and circumstances of acquisition. While on the one hand, conceptualising provenance research as a systematic undertaking means thinking about a long-term research strategy, on the other hand – pragmatically and paradoxically – it means concentrating initially, or perhaps even permanently, on individual sections of the collection.

An obvious approach would be to prioritise holdings from the former German colonies, thereby honouring a “special responsibility” of the kind conceded on a general political level by the Federal Republic of Germany to Namibia, the former colony of German South West Africa, in 1989.²² Such a focus on former German colonies has been chosen by the current research projects at the Übersee-Museum Bremen and the Linden-Museum Stuttgart, which are introduced in thematic block 2 (see the articles by Christian Jarling and Gesa Grimme).

(Ill. 1) Illustration by Johannes Heuer from the project “*Nomadic Artefacts. Objektgeschichten aus der Mongolei*” (Object histories from Mongolia), see www.nomadicartefacts.net and Lang 2016, 16–17

A further possibility might be to concentrate on objects originating from relevant contexts known to be problematic or violence-marred, such as from colonial wars and “punitive expeditions”. These include the items plundered from the Royal Palace of Benin during a British “punitive expedition” in 1897 or the “spoils of war” from the Maji-Maji War (1905–1907) in the then colony of German East Africa; collections from both of these historical contexts are found in

²² For a fuller treatment of this aspect, see: Kößler and Melber 2017, 45–53, and German Bundestag, printed paper no. 11/4205 of 15.3.1989.

several ethnological museums. That would mean focusing first and foremost on holdings of particular historical sensitivity, leaving less sensitive objects to be investigated later.²³ Pioneering work is being done in this area by the project “*Tansania – Deutschland: geteilte Objektgeschichten?*” (Tanzania-Germany: Shared object histories?) at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (see the article by Paola Ivanov and Kristin Weber-Sinn).

Another approach that would tie in closely would be a systematisation of provenance research according to known cases of restitution demands and loan requests – not only within one’s own museum but also referring to current international expertise. For artefacts of indigenous societies from Australia or the USA/Canada, European museums could then take guidance from (research) programmes, protocols and guidelines for handling ethnographic collections that have been drawn up over a period of up to three decades in those countries’ museums. This would be particularly desirable for culturally sensitive objects or items.

On the other hand it seems advisable to prioritise investigation of the provenance of objects and classes of objects that are subject to high public exposure or held to be of special cultural significance in their countries of origin.

Finally, a targeted deepening and expansion of provenance research would be worthwhile wherever intellectual and/or institutional connections with countries and societies of origin already exist, so that provenance studies strengthen transnational networks and could be linked with the other fields of museum work, such as collaborative exhibition projects.

As a final thought, a “converse” approach is also conceivable, which primarily takes one’s own institution and its connections with local colonial actors, businesses and institutions as the point of departure.

Over and above these six approaches, numerous other strategies for prioritisation or selective appraisal are conceivable.²⁴ Ideally, such studies would relate to several collections from the very start, thereby taking into account the interrelationships between ethnological museums in various cities that have come into being through so-called duplicate exchanges or through the formerly common practice of distributing larger lots across several often rival institutions. In the background it would be necessary to carry out basic research, for instance on the trading companies and shipping lines that were involved in the shipment of goods and objects, on the activities of mission societies, which not infrequently also took part in collecting, or on scientific expeditions into the colonial territories.

Cooperation and networking of actors and institutions

From what has been said above, it is already clear that the development of a long-term working strategy must go hand in hand with considerations about meaningful constellations and forms of cooperation. The provenance research projects established at some ethnological museums in the past two years initially relied on cooperation between museums and universities – in the form of third-party-financed research projects, within which overarching questions were addressed to a sometimes greater and sometimes lesser extent (see thematic block 2). At times, ethnologists and historians worked jointly on collections and themes so that provenance research could also be addressed from an interdisciplinary perspective.

In contrast, little headway has yet been made with research that is interinstitutionally networked from its inception, which takes all the collection holdings in German museums and

²³ On the term “sensitive” cf. Berner, Hoffmann and Lange 2011 as well as Brandstetter and Hierholzer 2018.

²⁴ On the systematisation of provenance research, particularly into human remains, cf.: Fründt 2017.

universities relevant to a particular theme or line of inquiry into consideration at once. Yet only this would make it possible to restore the relationships between the often convoluted and geographically divergent routes taken by objects that were originally acquired in the same historical context and, indeed, often in the same historical situation. Such “concerted” provenance research could and should include not only ethnological museums but also natural history, technology, art, applied arts and (local) history museums which preserve not only objects with close historical associations but quite often also other relevant archival material. It will have to reach out to museums and collections in other European countries because in the era of colonialism both collectors’ and academic circles were already intensively networked across European national borders, which meant that collected objects were not solely taken to the “mother country” of a colony – in the same way as German colonialism as a whole can only be understood in the context of European colonial dynamics.

What seems most important, however, is the question of how postcolonial provenance research can be given transnational perspectives from the outset, i.e., how collections can be researched in cooperation with individuals, initiatives and institutions from the countries and societies of origin. A first step in this regard is certainly that of making contact with the diaspora from the countries of origin. It is also indispensable, however, to build networks involving institutions in the countries of origin themselves, not least because the national museums of postcolonial nation states in the global South normally also house ethnographic collections, sometimes even obtained from the same colonial actors whose names crop up in the documentation of collections in this country. Likewise the national archives – and possibly private archives – in the countries of origin containing archival material from the colonial era must be consulted. And finally, local (academic) debates on and experience with relevant collections and collection contexts quite often exist within museums and universities in the countries of origin, and need to be considered if any object research is not to remain one-dimensional and Eurocentric. Direct cooperation with local communities which consider themselves descendants of the original producers is another important desideratum – although the relevant questions here are not merely about extending the scientific perspective, but rather about fundamentally broadening access to the collections and objects, about sharing interpretative sovereignty and scientific and curatorial authority. For that very reason, cooperation in the long term must not be restricted to furnishing the study with local expertise – such as knowledge passed down through the oral tradition – but should be aimed at the development of joint research agendas. Only on this basis does it become possible to formulate historical questions about provenance collaboratively and work together to generate historical knowledge about provenances. The first panel of the conference should provide inspiration for such cooperations, for the relevant research projects presented here from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Namibia and Finland have pursued such collaborative approaches over years and sometimes even decades, and have built up infrastructures for the systematisation of provenance research accordingly.

Networking and digitalisation of data and results

This last-mentioned point leads directly to a further important desideratum: collecting research data more or less centrally and making it accessible, as is already practised in Nazi-era provenance research through the Lost Art database and projects like the website dedicated to the Jewish gallery owner, Alfred Flechtheim.²⁵ Although historical collection and object research was

²⁵ <http://www.lostart.de/Webs/EN/Datenbank/Index.html> and <http://alfredflechtheim.com/en/home>

carried out in the past at most ethnological museums, the results were often only published – if at all – in the German language and in specialist media or museum publications with a rather low international circulation. However, if the special nature of postcolonial and ethnological provenance research is accepted, together with the necessity of involving international partners at the earliest possible stage, it seems advisable to develop methods and tools for gathering research results centrally and making the complete and accurate findings externally accessible as far as possible – in a form that enables the continuous addition of further data, information and perspectives on the collections. Digital systems are an obvious solution because unlike printed publications they can be edited and amended and – at least theoretically – made accessible worldwide at any time.

A systematic pooling of information has several practical advantages: first, objects which were collected together originally but distributed across various institutions subsequently can be reassembled, at least virtually, and researched as a single lot. Secondly, it is often this and only this that makes it possible to cross-reference the information already on hand in a meaningful way and fit together individual pieces of the provenance research puzzle. It is often unknown at the start of a project which colleagues have already worked on particular collectors or lots and could therefore help with answers to questions; or sometimes lots are being researched by two different parties simultaneously – each unaware of the other. Establishing links between people, institutions and data can therefore be extremely helpful, as can the complete digitalisation of existing holdings of objects or archives. Since provenance research often only yields provisional results due to gaps in the documentation and the historical record, it is desirable for museums and collections to make their results accessible to third parties in order to facilitate the discovery of further information in other institutions and archives.²⁶ An approach that might prove exemplary in this regard is the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN) on collections from the north-west coast of Canada and the USA, which is described and reflected in the first thematic block of the present anthology, by Susan Rowley from an institutional point of view and by Trevor Isaac from a community perspective.

Institutionalisation

To deepen and systematise provenance research, not just more research but above all more continuity and coordination is required. In recent years, some ethnological museums (e.g. in Munich, Berlin, Leipzig/Dresden and Cologne) have taken the step of designating contact persons or staff members for provenance research who coordinate internal and external enquiries and activities on the theme.

The necessity of raising awareness within the museum landscape about the theme of provenance research has also been recognised by the German Museums Association (DMB). Back in 2013 the DMB had already published “Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections” – with an emphasis on human remains of colonial origin (DMB 2013).²⁷ Currently a DMB working group, once again under the leadership of Wiebke Ahrndt, is working on “Guidelines for the Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts”, which should also encourage smaller museums and collections (of all kinds) to engage more closely with objects from a colonial context and research their provenances.²⁸ Ultimately, however, the question that remains is how

²⁶ In this connection, the art historian Bénédicte Savoy has drawn attention to the possibilities of Cloud research.

²⁷ On this, see also Förster and Fründt 2016.

²⁸ Cf. Grütters 2016.

postcolonial provenance research of the systematic kind can be anchored in museums in the longer term, how its special challenges can be reflected, how expertise can be exchanged, how cooperations can be initiated and how necessities and needs can be communicated externally.²⁹ A concern of the conference and the conference anthology was therefore, drawing on the example of Nazi-era provenance research and the history of its institutionalisation, to inquire into possible avenues for setting postcolonial provenance research on equally stable footings, particularly through the initiative and self-organisation of the researching individuals and institutions (on this, see thematic block 5). In addition to long-term networking of research activities and results, it also requires continuous exchange about problems and difficulties in the everyday practice of provenance research. For this reason, an informal group of (museum) ethnologists came together after the conference and intends to develop further steps towards systematisation, networking and institutionalisation.³⁰ Initial thought is being given to formalising this working group under the umbrella of the pre-existing Provenance Research Association (*Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V.*), which has just revised its statutes to enable it to work with a wider historical and disciplinary remit.

For successful and sustainable institutionalisation, however, the universities are also called upon – on the one hand to ensure an academic grounding and reflection of methods and results, and on the other hand to train students in approaches and methods for collection history. The field of Nazi-era provenance research is now being taught across Germany by four (junior) professors³¹ – and it is desirable and necessary to extend this to ethnology, i.e. by establishing such posts for postcolonial provenance research.

The book

The present book³² owes its existence to the need to document and make accessible the knowledge about current approaches, projects and developments that was brought together at the conference, along with resultant, sometimes contentious, discussions and reflections – not only for an expert readership but also for a wider public (including non-ethnologists). The e-book format was born of the concern to make a timely contribution to the increasingly public debate since 2015 about provenance research in ethnological museums.

The book's structure is aligned with the panel structure of the conference, with minor changes to the sequencing of panels and contributors. Every panel, i.e. every thematic block, begins with an introduction outlining the theme and the articles and concluding with a brief summary of the ensuing discussions. There follow the abstracts of the conference papers delivered, from which the individual articles derive. If the substantial content of papers has already been published elsewhere, the relevant publication is cited at the end of the respective abstract. Some articles could not be written up in time to be included in the publication. After the five thematic blocks

²⁹ Cf. Förster 2016b.

³⁰ So far three meetings of this informal working group have taken place, namely at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage/Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin and the Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig. Others interested in collaborating are welcome to contact the Working Group on Museums or the anthology editors.

³¹ More precisely: in the art-historical institutes of the Universities of Hamburg, Munich and Bonn. A continuing education programme in provenance research is offered at the Freie Universität Berlin and a Masters programme that includes provenance research at the University of Würzburg. Both already embrace a broader understanding of provenance research and do not concentrate exclusively on the National Socialist period.

³² Cf. Förster et al. (2018).

comes the *Discussion* section, which is based on the public discussion event “Provenance research: challenges and discussions” on the first evening of the conference.

The first thematic block, *International Perspectives: Challenges and Opportunities for Systematic Provenance Research*, subsumes the contributions of the international conference guests, who have already gathered experience in their institutions with longer-term and systematic programmes on postcolonial provenance research, and have already developed and tested digital tools in some cases for networking and cooperative research work.³³ This facilitates both an international comparison and an insight into how meaningful it can be for the descendants of earlier producers, users and owners of objects to receive more precise information about the origins of “their” things. Both dimensions make it clear that provenance research on objects from the colonial era is ultimately concerned with social relationships in the present day. This panel was the opening session of the conference, with a view to emphasising from the very start what conference guest Wayne Modest aptly referred to elsewhere as a “horizon of possibilities”.³⁴

The second thematic block is dedicated to the introduction of ongoing provenance research projects in German-speaking countries. Current developments are set in relation to earlier approaches to historical collections research. What emerges clearly is the spectrum of strategies for accessing and investigating collections. Questions about the prioritisation of certain collection holdings, or about the development of suitable project formats – e.g. for cooperation with experts from countries of origin – are discussed here, in some cases as pilot approaches. Beyond this, topics of discussion are the many and varied challenges and difficulties in the everyday work of provenance researchers.

The third section, *Provenienz (un)geklärt – und was dann?* [Provenance (un-)clarified – what next?], inquires into the consequences of provenance research and how provenance research relates to questions of repatriation. In this area different dimensions are addressed: legal and ethical frameworks, the opportunities and pitfalls of repatriations, and collaborative approaches and dialogue-based approaches to dealing with disputed cultural assets in ethnographic collections. Since the conference was based on the premise that provenance research must be undertaken irrespective of restitution demands, however, this chapter sheds light on just a few aspects of the complex thematic field.³⁵

Following that is the fourth thematic block, *An der Schnittstelle zur Öffentlichkeit: Provenienzforschung im Ausstellungsbetrieb* [At the public interface: provenance research in exhibition practice]. The question posed here is how the concerns and results of provenance research can be communicated to a wider public in museum-based forms of presentation. What are appropriate strategies for exhibiting objects from violent contexts or accessioned in a period overshadowed by historical power disparities? The articles show the specific curatorial answers that have been given to these questions in some recent ethnological and (cultural) historical exhibitions.

The fifth thematic block, *Die Institutionalisierung und Vernetzung von Provenienzforschung zu unterschiedlichen historischen Kontexten* [The institutionalisation and networking of provenance research from different historical contexts], rounds off the thematic chapters. Here once again, as in the case of the international perspectives in the first thematic block, the concern is to learn from the experience of colleagues working in related areas. In this case, however, it is less about

³³ The article by Susan Rowley, Nickolas Jacobson and Ryan Wallace was only requested subsequently for the publication.

³⁴ Cf. Schasiépen (2017).

³⁵ Furthermore, the schedules of two panel participants made it impossible for them to contribute to the present book.

transnational and far more about interdisciplinary exchange, i.e. the exchange between postcolonial provenance research, Nazi-era provenance research and provenance research on expropriations in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the German Democratic Republic. Commonalities and disparities between the different historical contexts and how they are studied were contentiously discussed at the conference. The introduction to the thematic block and one comment from the Provenance Research Association (*Arbeitskreis für Provenienzforschung e.V.*) both refer explicitly to this debate.

The anthology concludes with the thematic block *Diskussion* [Discussion], with individual statements on challenges and perspectives of provenance research, either as presented by the individuals themselves at the conference or formulated subsequently as a response to the discussions during the conference.³⁶ The different standpoints underline the broad spectrum of positions on the theme and hence also the need for further discussion.

Outlook: the “long summer of provenance”

In the summer of 2017 the theme of provenance hit the headlines in Germany. The catalyst for this was the departure of the art historian, Bénédicte Savoy, from the International Expert Team of the Humboldt Forum. Savoy reproached the Humboldt Forum for neglecting to clarify the provenances of the objects and collections to be exhibited.³⁷ The reproach was taken up in numerous arts and cultural columns, press statements and podium discussions and backed by critics of the Humboldt Forum, while those responsible tried to rebut it.³⁸

In the subsequent debate, examples of current provenance research in Berlin and German museums³⁹ were presented, as were the perspectives, demands and objections of actors from the source countries of objects in the Berlin collections and from the diaspora.⁴⁰ The many parallel developments, including other conferences,⁴¹ have generated a momentum which, it is to be hoped, will carry forward the deepening and broadening of provenance research in ethnographic collections. Prerequisites for this have been created in the form of the DMB working group already mentioned and the informal network of ethnological provenance researchers that was an outcome of the conference. With a recently announced programme for ethnological museums by the German Federal Cultural Foundation (*Kulturstiftung des Bundes*), which will likewise incorporate provenance research, the first *concerted* activities are coming into view. The announcement by the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (*Stiftung*

³⁶ Wayne Modest's input to the discussion could not be reproduced here for scheduling reasons but cf. the conference reports by Schasiepen (2107) and Rein (2017).

³⁷ Süddeutsche Zeitung, 20.7.2017 (in German): <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/benedicte-savoy-ueber-das-humboldt-forum-das-humboldt-forum-ist-wie-tschernobyl-1.3596423?reduced=true>

³⁸ For a small selection of contributions to the debate, see the statement by the *Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss* dated 21.6.2017, and the commentaries and interviews by and with Jürgen Zimmerer (2017), and from the ethnological standpoint, Larissa Förster, Viola König, Karl-Heinz Kohl (all 2017) and Katharina Schramm (<http://www.taz.de/15452183>). Natural history and archaeology museums and exhibits were also raised successively as themes in the debate; see Stoecker 2017 and Brusius 2017.

³⁹ On this, see for instance the public podium discussion: <https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/event-detail/news/2017/09/20/gehört-provenienzforschung-zur-dna-des-humboldt-forums.html>. Cf. also the research project launched soon afterwards, “Translocations” by Bénédicte Savoy, which appears to have some crossover points with ethnographic collections: http://www.kuk.tu-berlin.de/menue/forschung/einzelne_forschungsprojekte/translocations.

⁴⁰ Cf. the panel discussion of the German Anthropological Association (DGSKA) on 6.10.2017: <https://tagung2017.dgv-net.de/de/project/panel-discussion-humboldt-forum>, and the conference on “Prussian Colonial Heritage”, organised by *Berlin Postkolonial*, Berlin, 14./15.10.2017.

⁴¹ Such as the conference “*Provenienzforschung zu ostasiatischer Kunst. Herausforderungen und Desiderata*” [Provenance research on East Asian art. Challenges and desiderata], *Technische Universität Berlin*, 13./14.10.2017.

Preußischer Kulturbesitz, SPK) that a “central institute for provenance research” is to be set up within the foundation (Tagesspiegel 2018) and his exhortation to work towards an “international agreement” for the colonial heritage of museums, on the model of the Washington Principles which gave such clear direction to Nazi-era provenance research (Parzinger 2018), and finally a relevant clause in the Coalition Agreement between Germany’s CDU, CSU and SPD parties⁴² indicate – along with the “pro-restitution speech” of the French President Emmanuel Macron in Ouagadougou in November 2017 – that postcolonial provenance research will be an ever-present theme over the next few years if not decades.

The long summer of provenance makes both the conference and this anthology appear even more important in retrospect. For the particularities of provenance research in ethnological collections and with ethnological methods are the very aspects that have been greatly neglected in this debate. Whilst these are talked about in the second block of themes in this anthology, they would certainly merit a conference of their own.⁴³

Thanks

The conference on which this anthology is based could only be realised thanks to the generous financing of the Volkswagen Foundation, which provided backup and support to the project from the ideas stage onwards in the person of Adelheid Wessler. Another pivotal component was the offer of cooperation from the Museum Fünf Kontinente in Munich: its late director, Christine Kron, who herself published a relevant work on the history of the Africa collection at Berlin’s Ethnologisches Museum (Stelzig 2004), brought the conference to her institution. Consequently it not only took place in a local and institutional context that is already characterised by plentiful engagement in the field of Nazi-era as well as postcolonial provenance research, but could also reap the benefits of the museological setting and, on the content side, impulses deriving from the venue’s museum work.⁴⁴ We deeply regret that Christine Kron did not live to see the conference or this conference anthology. The museum’s curators, Stefan Eisenhofer and Hilke Thode-Arora, were equally involved in developing the conference content and, together with the museum team, supported the organisation and logistics of the conference on site. We take this opportunity to thank them for their partnerly cooperation with the Working Group on Museums. Thanks also go to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage at the Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin for facilitating and supporting the work on this anthology.⁴⁵

In conclusion, we would like to express enormous gratitude to our authors, moderators and commentators for their verbal and written contributions. Our aim was to publish the book within a year of the end of the conference, which meant that all contributors had to agree to an extraordinarily tight schedule. Only thanks to the authors’ willingness to rework their

⁴² <https://www.cdu.de/koalitionsvertrag-2018>, p. 170.

⁴³ On this aspect, see also Förster 2017 and the audio stream of the panel on “Provenance” at the “Otherwise” conference, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 27./28.7.2017: <https://hearthis.at/carmah-hu>

⁴⁴ On this aspect, cf. the research and exhibition project by Hilke Thode-Arora, which is also elucidated in the present anthology, and the dissertation by Anne Spletstösser (2015), which was consulted for Stefan Eisenhofer’s article. In the field of Nazi-era provenance research, the Bavarian State Paintings Collection (see the article by Johanna Poltermann) and the *Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte* (ZI, independent art-historical research institute) in Munich – the latter hosting one of four newly instituted (junior) professorships in Germany – are engaged in relevant work.

⁴⁵ In this connection, we especially thank Margareta von Oswald for her critical reading of this Introduction.

manuscripts so promptly was it possible to present a conference anthology of such current relevance.

Special thanks are extended to our co-editor, Heike Hartmann, for her inspirational contribution to developing the concept and layout for the book; for the critical eye informed by cultural studies and colonial history with which she oversaw and enriched this book; and not least, for her unfailing grip on the editorial strands, without which the realisation of the book in such a short time would have been impossible.

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