**“Collaborative” provenance research – About the (im)possibility of smashing colonial frameworks**

Summary

This article aims to reflect on the aporias and paradoxes of a postcolonial, collaborative research approach to ethnographic collections dating from colonial times. While, at least in Germany, ‘provenance research’ and ‘collaboration’ have become politically opportune, important questions concerning the possibilities or impossibilities of overcoming colonial categories, epistemologies and imbalances of power remain to be answered. Based on research and collaboration with stakeholders over the course of two projects on the Tanzania collections of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, this article asks how far ‘collaboration’ and ‘decolonization’ risk remaining merely empty, fashionable phrases, if, on the one hand, today’s concern with the colonial context of collections in European museums seems to be to a great extent self-referential and avoiding radical criticism of today’s power asymmetries; and, on the other, the deconstruction of colonial class, gender, race, and ethnic categorizations, and of the resulting representations is hindered – if not made impossible – by the epistemologies implicit in the order of the collections themselves but also by identity politics

*Keywords*: *collaboration, power asymmetries provenance research, decolonization*

**Introduction**

*I have no relationship with you and cannot remember that you ever gave me a pesa or a quarter of a pesa or a needle or a thread. I look for a reason why I should owe you obedience, and can find none. If you wish for friendship, then I am not unwilling, today and for ever, but I cannot be your subject [...]*

Machemba bin Mshame Masaninga to Hermann von Wissmann, undated, probably 1890 or 1891[[1]](#endnote-1)

At the time when the politically influential trader Machemba bin Mshame Masaninga (fig. 1) addressed these words to Hermann von Wissmann, Imperial Commissioner for ‘German East Africa’, the German colonizers had already established themselves in the coastal towns of what is today Tanzania. But they had so far failed to implement their claim to sovereignty in what they referred to dismissively as ‘the hinterlands’. Machemba’s regional influence was wide, extending from the south-eastern coastal region into territories that Portugal had claimed as colonies, and he refused to comply with Germany’s demand that he should submit to its Empire. His refusal was followed by a cat and mouse game that lasted for several years. The Germans threatened to take the war into his territories and tried to capture him; Machemba pretended to agree to their demands, while actually following his own political agenda for trading purposes, which conflicted with (exploitative) German economic interests.

From 1896 onwards, Berlin’s Ethnologisches Museum – then the ‘Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde’ – came into the possession of a number of objects that had allegedly belonged to Machemba. One of these is described in the main catalogue as a ‘walking stick with integrated tobacco box’ (fig. 2). This object, whose significance and function is still not understood, was obtained by the Museum für Völkerkunde in 1896 – a year after Machemba agreed to recognize German sovereignty, although this was an agreement made under threat of war which he seems later to have revoked.

120 years later, in 2016, there started of a new provenance research project ‘Tanzania/Germany: Shared Object Histories?’ at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. The main purpose of the project is to find out how Machemba’s walking stick and other objects obtained in the course of German colonial expansion and rule came to be in the museum’s possession – focusing on the setting in Eastern Africa and on the Africans involved in the context of appropriation. The closely connected ‘Humboldt Lab Tanzania’ (2016-18) based at different locations in Tanzania’s most populous city Dar es Salaam provided a social, artistic, academic and public space to experiment with collaborative formats in provenance research.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The two projects build on the work of political activists and critical researchers (and many researchers are also political activists) who have for years been demanding a public and political ‘reckoning’ with German colonialism, its structures of exploitation and epistemic violence (Bauche et al. 2012, Friedrichs und Jana 2018).[[3]](#endnote-3) These demands stress the need to make the continuities of colonial ideologies, imaginings and racisms visible in German society today. Urban spaces, often containing street names and memorials featuring white ‘colonial heroes’ and especially institutions like ethnological museums that hold countless historically and culturally sensitive objects often become the focus for such demands, with the ultimate aim of ‘decolonizing’ such spaces. The term culturally sensitive is used for objects with a special significance often involving restricted access and specific forms of storing (like grave goods, religious and ceremonial objects, regalia and human remains) whereas historically sensitive refers to the context of acquisition or appropriation ‘involving the use of force and/or highly dependent relationships’ (German Museum Association 2019: 17-18) like in colonial contexts.

For one or two years it would seem that the activists’ decolonizing demands have gone mainstream. The aims of ‘engaging with colonialism’ (‘Aufarbeitung des Kolonialismus’), a ‘stronger cultural exchange’ (‘staerkerer Kulturaustausch’) with Africa and the need for provenance research on ‘cultural assets from colonial heritage in museums and collections’ are even written into Germany’s 2018 government coalition agreement.[[4]](#endnote-4) In the same year the Federal Government Commissioner of Culture and Media invited representatives from museums and academia to the German Chancellery to discuss the colonial nature of collections, especially in ethnological museums, and the findings and perspectives of provenance research.[[5]](#endnote-5) A topic that was once the preserve of political activists is now seen as the responsibility of institutions (museums, the government) and has become – up to a certain point – a welcome subject of discussion in media scape and political circles. This sudden increase of interest, however, may also give rise to a certain vague sense of unease, since provenance research and collaborations with ‘societies of origin’ are often instrumentalized by public political institutions. They are increasingly viewed as part of the cultural-political agenda, which itself represents an indirect assertion of power by the politically dominant discourse – revoking or reinforcing essentializing ideas and imaginations of continental, national and ethnic identities. This power dynamic has an impact on those who participate in the project.

Taking the two projects as a starting point we – Author 1 as coordinator and Author 2 as research associate of the project – will (self-)critically reflect on paradoxes and (apparent) aporias in the process of trying to implement a postcolonial collaborative research approach with its focus on collaboration. With the words cited at the beginning of this article, Machemba positions himself as a self-confident equal, rather than complying with the colonial image of the subjected, colonized ‘native’ who has no agency. He speaks as Wissmann’s peer – Wissmann being at the time the representative of the German Empire – and introduces the concept of ‘friendship’.[[6]](#endnote-6) He also speaks to Wissmann on a personal level, locating his relationship to the Germans within a context of social interchange based on mutual respect. We have placed this quotation at the beginning of our article, because one goal of our current provenance research project is the fragmented reconstruction of the role/agenda/agency of individual African actors in the context of appropriation – Machemba was one of them who does not fit in the colonial constructions of ahistorical and locally bounded African societies. But we must also recognize that colonial relationships, that is to say their interpretations and the way in which they have been distorted to fit colonial ideology, continue to exert their power today. It goes without saying that collaboration with the makers, users and previous owners of the objects and their descendants today is hardly to be equated with Wissmann’s demand (backed with the threat of military force) that the Africans should subject themselves to (or cooperate with) the German Empire. Yet Machemba’s words give rise to a number of questions that are relevant to our circumstances, too.

A question we’ve been asking ourselves (partly in dialogue with the Tanzanian partners) is how we can avoid that collaboration and decolonization remain empty phrases? Is the term provenance research and the underlying conceptual framework focusing on issues of ownership and circumstances of acquisition per se self-referential, imposing certain perspectives and research agendas on the partners? And, when provenance research projects are carried out in a certain institutional framework and depending on German funds how a power critical perspective is not merely be reflected but also practically implemented? And what about the deconstruction of colonial class, gender, race, and ethnic categorizations, and of the resulting representations that is hindered by a German public debate on colonialism that reinforces dichotomies (colonizers vs. colonized) and tends to essentialize affiliations (continental, ethnic, national) – tendencies that hold also true for the Tanzanian partners involved in the project? And how to deal with the the epistemologies implicit in the order of the collections themselves?

Taking up a critical stance on the dysfunctional aspects of creating cross-cultural spaces and forms of (collaborative) knowledge production in museums is not new nor questioning these approaches in the light of political opportunism. But we think it’s worth to revisit these aspects against the background of provenance research in historical sensitive collections from the former German colonies and the experiences we had amidst a somewhat heated (and simplifying) public debate in Germany that focused so far mainly on ethnological museums and their collections when it comes to the question how to deal critically with the German “colonial past” – that is also the past of the “colonized” societies.

**The projects**

The name of the project Tanzania/Germany: Shared object histories? was deliberately formulated as a question. This was not simply because of the general uncertainty that characterizes postcolonial informed provenance research. Instead, it points to a very specific context: because insufficient financial resources were available in the first phase of the project, Tanzanian researchers and experts were not involved in designing its purpose and programme. Initially, therefore, the project itself – and the question of what ‘provenance research’ actually means when we are dealing with what are often called ‘ethnographic objects’ - was rather self-referential, based mainly on museum’s inventories, colonial archival material and journals, ethnographic monographs, travelogues as well as secondary literature in order to reveal fragments of the context of appropriation (political, economic, social) in Eastern Africa, and therefore to de-centre the German/European collectors in favour of identifiable African users, owners and producers of the objects. Since the specific circumstances of the acquisition or appropriation are rarely mentioned in the written sources, contextual research in local and regional economic, political and social contexts are indispensable. This is all the more true as most of the objects from Tanzania cannot be assigned to individuals. A residency programme was then set up with additional funds (raised in connection with the future Humboldt Forum in Berlin) which took the form of visits by three curators from the National Museum of Tanzania, each lasting several weeks. These visits facilitated an intensive exchange about the historically sensitive collections held at the museum in Berlin and possible perspectives that could result from collaborative forms of provenance research. The sensitivity of the collections not only refers to the often violent context of acquisition/appropriation but also to the grievous processes of discussing and interpreting German colonialism through the objects. The objects, defined by the Ethnologists and others as ethnographic, as well as archaeological objects might have been gifted, purchased, exchanged or traded but they could also have been acquired through blackmail, theft, robbery or looting. So, the processes of appropriation were as complex as the colonial situation itself. The objects triggered emotions in the Tanzanian colleagues and the German team alike. The visits were also a catalyst for discussions about potential forms of (re)presentation and ways of thematically embedding selected objects from Tanzania housed in the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and appropriated in the era of Germany’s violent colonial expansion and colonial rule between the late 1880s and the beginning of the First World War.

Alongside the provenance research project in Berlin a team of German and Tanzanian researchers set up the ‘Humboldt Lab Tanzania’ at different locations, namely the Nafasi Art Space, an art centre with studios and exhibition spaces, and the National Museum and House of Culture, in Dar es Salaam, offering the opportunity to try out new forms of working collaboratively (fig. 3).[[7]](#endnote-7)

The Humboldt Lab brought researchers and artists together; participants discussed fragments that could help compile object biographies from a “Tanzanian” point of view, which especially highlighted the aspect of anti-colonial resistance; at the same time, the associated contexts of colonial rule and exploitation were reflected, while looking at their continuing implications and significance in the present. What meanings do we assign to colonialism today, and how does it continue to affect us? The programme included workshops in Berlin and Dar es Salaam, short field trips to places where certain objects came from, and a travelling exhibition that toured to numerous museums including the National Museum and House of Culture in Dar es Salaam and the Maji Maji Memorial Museum in Songea, presenting the first findings of the research project along with artists’ responses (fig. 4, 5).

At around the same time as the provenance research project and the work of the Humboldt Lab were getting under way in 2016, we began to see a significant increase of media and public interest in the history of objects from former colonies. More and more often, people were beginning to ask how such objects had come to be in the possession of German and other European museums. These objects – often referred to in public discourse in Germany as ‘Raubkunst’, or ‘stolen art’, a term which refers back to the countless artworks expropriated and stolen by the Nazis in the Third Reich – have come to be a catalyst for a broader public interest that recognises a need to engage with the structures of German colonialism and German exploitation of its colonial territories. Such a public debate would require German society as a whole to recognise issues that have long been denied or deliberately ignored as an important part of ‘German’ history, a history which must be viewed within the context of an entangled history; and – in a further, more difficult step that is seldom mentioned in these discussions – it would also mean recognising the continuities between German colonialism, with its self-legitimising ideologies, imaginations and racisms, and society today. Continuities that probe deeply into the working process, the formulation of research questions and the atmosphere of our aforementioned projects.

Provenance research, collaboration, participation, exchange and transparency are all words – one might almost say, buzzwords – that are now regularly cited in public discourse, for example by journalists and representatives of political institutions, as supposedly offering solutions when it comes to dealing with colonialism, (epistemic) violence and the resulting power asymmetries still in effect today and even, ideally, bringing about a process of ‘decolonization’. It should be noted that those who make such claims hardly ever define what they mean by ‘decolonization’, and rarely acknowledge the complexity and potential radicalism of such a process, nor the length of time it would necessarily entail. This is nothing new. Museums have long been construed in mainstream academic discourse as ‘contact zones’ or dialogic spaces for meetings, exchanges, transactions, cultural negotiations and mutual influencing against a backdrop of specific ‘histories of dominance, hierarchy resistance, and mobilization’ (Clifford 1997: 213; cf. also Pratt 1991, Boast 2011). We might say that a construction of ‘the museum as contact zone’ has become constitutive for museums with ethnographic collections – at least in theory. In former colonies such as the USA, Canada, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, museums, like the societies they are part of, have had to face up to these challenges as part of their own history. German museums have a lot of catching up to do in this respect. A self-critical perspective should be a fundamental part of the transforming processes. To quote Robin Boast, ‘I raise a serious concern that the neocolonial nature of the contact zones could destroy the very nature of empowerment that it is meant to engender.’ (Boast \*/2011: 57)

Collaborations with what in German are often termed *Herkunftsgesellschaften*, or ‘societies of origin’ – itself a phrase with problematic essentialist implications – and attempts to include them as equal partners in a politicized and emotional debate, can easily become empty gestures if we do not integrate an awareness of power dynamics and asymmetric power relationships into postcolonial museum theory and practice (Boast 2011). If adopted, such an awareness would inevitably lead to a radical questioning and transformation of established museum structures – of administrative procedures, internal institutional hierarchies, systems of classification and organisation, forms of representation and knowledge production, and the epistemologies and ontologies that inform all of these. It is difficult for these institutions to bring about such a transformation from within. This means that in practice, collaborations, however well-meaning, tend to end up having a merely ornamental function that replicates and legitimizes neocolonial perspectives.

In order to deconstruct the colonial ideology of comprehensive, sovereign rule and control over a colonized people (that is, practices of colonial rule in a specific territory as well as forms of symbolic appropriation), we must uncover the dysfunctional aspects of the knowledge/power nexus. The focus in our project on the (historical) agency of East African makers, users and previous owners of the objects is one way of doing this. Furthermore, the collecting mania of Berlin’s ethnologists in the colonial period led to the museum being swamped with objects that curators no longer had the time to catalogue or inventorize properly (Zimmerman 2001, Penny 2002). Their meanings and functions therefore often remained unknown; all we have are labels assigning objects to supposed ‘ethnic’ or geographical categories. The lack of knowledge here itself represents a form of epistemic violence – although one can also read it as a form of resistance. Like their makers, users and previous owners, these objects have never been fully amenable to objectification for the purposes of colonial or subsequent (European) knowledge production.

**Collections as materializations of colonial epistemologies and ontologies**

The public attention for and the political interest in collaborations with African colleagues often goes hand in hand with a highly stereotypical, mainly “ethnic” (“tribal”) image of Africa, scarcely informed by knowledge in the continent’s complex history. This brings us to a further major point of our (self)critical discussion, namely the fact that the ontology and the epistemologies originating in colonialism are still perpetuated through the ordering of collections in museums. Machemba bin Mshame’s biography and the objects attributed to him and his followers are again a good example countering stereotypes – one among many others which we encountered in the course of our research.[[8]](#endnote-8) Machemba’s origins can be traced to the Makanjila Yao in the vicinity of Lake Nyasa, but he had lived since early childhood in Kilwa Kisiwani, a centuries-old Swahili trading town on the Southern coast of today’s mainland Tanzania. He was well integrated into Muslim coastal society (whose members are generally called the ‘Swahili’), and he controlled the caravan routes from Makanjila in today’s eastern Malawi, on the Mozambique border, to the coast. His biography reflects the extreme pace of economic, political and cultural change in the course of a period when global capitalistic markets were fast penetrating into Africa’s interior. This resulted in the emergence of new political and social structures as well as in the development of far-reaching forms of exchange. Simultaneously, Machemba’s biography is characteristic for the patterns of open, changeable and not mutually exclusive identity formation that were common in East Africa and especially characteristic of Swahili coastal society.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Studies in African history and anthropology have made clear since several decades that, in fact, the dividing-up of Africa’s population into bounded, unchanging ‘ethnic’ groups was a construct of colonialism, developed on the ground by the colonial administrators in interaction with local actors who followed their own agendas and interests (Ranger 1983, 1993). Back in the (European) metropolis, through the classification of objects in the collections in terms of their alleged ‘ethnic’ origin ethnological museums played their own part in constructing and implementing the ideological framework for colonialism, as this classification resulted in the construction of supposedly natural, homogenous and ahistoric – i.e., unchanging – ethnic groups which were now to become the object of colonial dominance and economic exploitation.[[10]](#endnote-10)

But how would it be relevant today, and what consequences would it have, merely to note that Machemba was ‘a Yao’ and therefore the objects in the museum that belonged to him and his followers should simply be classified and inventorised as ‘Yao objects’? Social research has shown that identity is always situative, positional and variable.[[11]](#endnote-11) Specifically with regard to East Africa, before colonial conquest no homogenous ‘ethnic’ groups with a homogenous culture that completely differentiated them from their neighbours can be discerned. Swahili culture was about to spread far into the interior as a result of the ever-increasing expansion of trade relations; new political entities (such as the communities that grew up around powerful traders like Machemba) had already emerged due to the political and economic dynamics, and an ongoing process of cultural transformation and hybridization was now given additional impetus (Iliffe 1979; Glassman 1995; Pizzo 2007). Machemba was a significant historical actor in the shared history of the region, which included a diverse range of interactions between the ‘colonizers’ and the ‘colonized’ and, of course, among the colonized people themselves. This shared history is clearly shown by our reconstructions of object biographies and trajectories – that is, the routes taken by these objects in the course of their existence.[[12]](#endnote-12) But this micro-history of interactions and its relational dynamics are obliterated, or at best obscured, when one employs an ‘ethnic’ classification. The ‘denial of coevalness’ (Fabian 1983), which was the formative element not only of anthropology, but generally of the colonial construction of Africa, is only further legitimized through the continued use of such museum classification systems.

A second question connected to the colonial order of power concerns today’s political boundaries in Africa. In our projects, the focus on Tanzania resulted from the fact that our work required us to operate on a day to day basis within the context of today’s modern state, as the relevant political entity. However, the colonial origin of national boundaries in Africa must always be kept in mind. In the context of our example, one needs to question how meaningful would be to focus exclusively on the fact that Machemba lived, and interacted with Germans, in today’s mainland Tanzania, given that his area of influence and action extended across territories that are now part of Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi? Moreover, when Machemba correctly anticipated the threat posed to him by the Germans, he withdrew to territories that were then under Portuguese colonial rule (today’s Mozambique) to escape capture. If we would restrict the historical perspective to mainland Tanzania, then we would continue to write history from a German colonial perspective.

An obstinate adherence to the use of national ‘containers’ in historiographical practices is especially misleading in terms of Africa before colonization, but is also unhelpful when it comes to understanding the colonial and postcolonial era. Again, the reconstruction of object biographies and trajectories, as done in our research contributes to dismantle the national ‘container’ in provenance research, in accordance with major trends in academia towards the elaboration of a relational global history (Bayly 2004, Freitag und Oppen 2010) .

Machemba’s biography and the collections attributed to him and his followers are only one example of how European colonial epistemologies are perpetuated through the ordering of collections in museums, and show why a system that continues to classify objects in terms of colonial borders (and their replication in postcolonial nation-building in Africa) is problematic. But today, when national institutions in African states are often (rightly) the preferred partners for politically approved collaborations, and, moreover, even the essentially emancipatory restitution discourse frequently focuses more on the alleged ethnic ‘roots’ rather than the supra-ethnic and translocal ‘routes’ of objects (Clifford 1997), we may be at risk of replicating colonial power structures in a double sense. Firstly, such an approach reflects, in the final analyses, colonial borders; and secondly, it also echoes the colonial ethicizing view of Africans as ‘primitive’ members of unchanging, ‘natural’ ethnic groups. We see this tendency notably in (German) public discourse in the use of the highly problematic phrase, ‘society of origin’ (*Herkunftsgesellschaft*), which homogenizes a whole society as quasi natural single ‘author’ of a cultural item and obscures, among others, regional and transregional entanglements as well as social, gender and generation differences within one society.

Thus, the question must be posed whether public and political discourses really want to recognize Africans as equal participants in a shared global history, given that this would also necessarily mean recognizing that this global history is fundamentally relational, not something that is ‘made’ by Europeans. Are museum classification systems, which literally embody a colonial separation of the world into ‘the West and the Rest’ (Hall 1992), really likely to be interrogated in the context of such discourses today? And will this separation itself be questioned and its epistemological and structural violence recognized? The exaggerated fixation on nation and identity mentioned above risks losing what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, 1996) describes as a necessary tension between a ‘strategic essentialism’ (which in an imbalanced power system can offer a way for subaltern groups to gain legitimacy and a voice) and the deconstruction of hegemonial classifications. If this tension is lost through the concentration only on ‘ethnic’ groups and the nation states, it may no longer be possible to question the ‘coloniality of power’ (Quijano 2000) and its continuity in the postcolonial condition.

In Africa, the implementation of ethnic classification systems went hand-in-hand with the economic exploitation and taxation of African peoples and with their subjection to structures of wage labour. This was inherently linked to gender-specific classifications, which excluded women from exercising economic and political power (a power that, for example, objects belonging to female chiefs in the Berlin collection still testify). If one does lose sight of the tension between strategic essentialism and deconstruction, then one may risk involuntary conformity with the (re)essentialising tendencies that are currently gaining strength in global politics, and may even find him- or herself unwillingly complicit in right-wing identity politics. As stated above, ‘identity’ is always context-specific, subject to change and constructed – but this reality is something that is easily lost in a public and, sometimes, academic discourse unfamiliar with Africa’s history. And a similar oblivion risks to concern, too, the dynamic of history and the (political) agency of African actors, including those – and there were many – who moved between the world of the ‘colonizers’ and the world of the ‘colonized’. Forgetting or ignoring these realities leaves discourse trapped in the racist dichotomy between the ‘white’ powerful agents and ‘black’ powerless victims.

But the question of the colonial construction of knowledge has further ramifications, as there is still a strong need to recover African epistemologies and ontologies. For example, academic discourse has failed to pursue alternative ontologies for Africa in the way that it has done for other regions of the world, particularly with the concept of Amerindian perspectivism (Viveiros Castro, 1998), or with the concept of the ‘distributed person’ for Oceania (Strathern 1988, Gell 1998; see also Henare et al, 2007). Research on economic patterns and specifically, concepts of property and exchange in relation to objects, is central to a deeper understanding of ethnographic objects and their collection contexts, and generally of the transaction patterns in the regions where the objects came from. But such research is still only in its infancy. In summary, more detailed research on the micro-history of objects and more collaboration are still needed grasp and historicize the relationship between people and their social and material environment. Otherwise, colonial categories and interpretive patterns would continue to inform collaborative partnerships via the classification systems used in museums, even in the plans for new interactive databases which, on the long run, should be developed to make ethnographic objects accessible in Africa and elsewhere. The risk that today’s public interest in African objects from colonial context could still involve a highly compliant euronormativity, untouched by any deconstructivist reflectivity, should be kept in mind.

It should be noted that in many cases the problematic issues that we have described in connection with collections in German museums also apply to collections in African museums, which were mainly founded from the 1920s on, that is, at a period when the majority of African countries were still ruled by colonial powers (although Germany no longer held colonial territories by this time). For this reason, it was extremely important to our partners from the National Museum of Tanzania and the University of Dar es Salaam to extend a critical decolonial approach to the collecting practices, provenances and socio-political contexts of collections held in the National Museum and the House of Culture in Dar es Salaam, and, in the future, to compare findings with the research on the Ethnologisches Museum’s collection of objects from the region known today as Tanzania.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Collaborative work on ethnographic collections from colonial times is a long lasting process. However, at this point we can draw some preliminary conclusions. We believe that it is necessary to be even more rigorous in challenging colonial categories through research, and to scrutinize practice with even more radical consistency, if we want to find out what a true decolonization of ethnographical collections would actually entail. We believe that ‘decolonization’ in this context cannot ever be achieved through desperate attempts to push through ‘collaborative exhibitions’ for museums in the countries of former colonial powers, unless such collaborations – in their design and implementation – are created in the context of a relationship with our partners based on long-term reciprocity, and which respects and integrates their agendas.[[14]](#endnote-14) These are the absolute prerequisites for a relationship that is non-colonial in both theory and practice. We must also beware of political opportunism, which in practice means a superficial appropriation of the discourses of political activism and critical research,[[15]](#endnote-15) leading to the replication and further embedding of stereotypes, dichotomies, imaginations and racisms which are fundamentally derived from colonialism. The subversive moment that should be inherent in any radical critique of colonialism and its effects must not be lost or exhausted in empty phrases. And such a critique should not be circumscribed to cultural institutions. This would only have the effect of containing and taming its radical implications, at a time when, due to Europe’s repressive ‘refugee policy’, thousands of refugees (from African countries, among others) continue to die in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

We would like to close with another quotation:

*There is no black mission; there is no white burden.*

*[…]*

*The black man is not. No more than the white man.*

*Both have to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born.*

(Fanon, 2008: 203, 206)

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1. Bundesarchiv R 1001/473. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Zanzibar archipelago, which builds a semi-autonomous part of today’s Tanzania, was not subject to German colonial rule; instead, it became a British protectorate in 1890. For this reason, the collections from Zanzibar were not included in our research projects. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Postcolonial groups have been founded. in major cities in Germany since the start of the new millenium, like Berlin Postkolonial in 2007. In the course of the campaign ‘125 Jahre Berliner-Afrika Konferenz’ initiated and coordinated by Berlin Postkolonial a group of five historians established the project *Kolonialismus im Kasten?* in 2009 in order to deal critically with and challenge the (re-) presentation of German colonialism in the Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin: The result is an audio guide tour (2013) as an independent intervention in the permanent exhibition: <https://www.kolonialismusimkasten.de/>, accessed 07.10.2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In March 2018 the coalition agreement of the German was signed by the governing parties CDU, CSU and SPD ‘Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa – eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland – Ein neue Zusammenghang für unser Land’ (<https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2018/kw11-koalitionsvertrag-546976>, accessed 27 September 2019) One year later the Minister of Cultural Affairs of the Länder (states), representatives of the federal Government and local authority associations agreed on a ‘Key Issue Paper on the Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts’, <https://www.kmk.org/aktuelles/artikelansicht/eckpunkte-zum-umgang-mit-sammlungsgut-aus-kolonialen-kontexten.html>, accessed 27 September 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The meeting took place at the Bundeskanzleramt (Federal Chancellery) in Berlin, May 2018. Part of the project team ‘Tanzania/Germany: Shared object histories?’ was also invited. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. As Machemba’s words are only available in a German translation of the Swahili dating from 1890 or 1891, we cannot check the accuracy of the translation. ‘Urafiki’ means ‘friendship’ in Kiswahili. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The project (2016-18) was initiated by the Ethnologisches Museum (Names Authors, among others) and realized with following cooperation partners: Bookstop Sanaa: Visual Art Library & Creative Learning Space in Dar es Salaam; University of Dar es Salaam, Department of History, Department of Fine and Performing Arts, Department of Archaeology; National Museum and House of Culture, Dar es Salaam; Antiquities Department, Dar es Salaam/Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism, Goethe-Institut Tanzania. Cf. Authors et al. 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For more detail, cf. Authors 2018a, 2018b. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See, among others, Fair 2001; Glassman 1991, 1995, Author 2017, Parkin 1989, Willis 1993. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. for example Author 2005:42-44; Kasfir 1984. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For a recent assessment, with regard to Africa, cf. Richard and MacDonald 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. also Authors 2018a; for a comprehensive discussion Zimmerman 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This three-year partnership project delivered by the Department of History of the University of Dar es Salaam, the National Museum and House of Culture, the Ethnologisches Museum und the Seminar for Africa Studies at the Humboldt University Berlin is funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. We would like to thank the Foundation for its support [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Schorch and McCarthy 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For a profound discussion of this “strategic reflexivity” cf. Bose 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)