Troubling Colonial Epistemologies in Berlin’s Ethnologisches Museum: Provenance Research and the Humboldt Forum

Margareta von Oswald

Engaging with the troubles and troubling of anthropological museums with regard to their colonial legacies, this contribution grapples with how provenance research unfolds in practice.¹ Provenance research troubles, on the one hand, the museum’s commonly recognised status as legitimate owner of collections. Provenance research is troubling, on the other hand, because it shows how difficult attempts to tackle colonial and anthropological epistemologies are. There is, simply put, no easy way out of particular modes of naming, ordering, and categorising collections. Furthermore, such work risks reproducing asymmetries of access, knowledge, and thus, of the interpretative sovereignty between former colonisers and colonised.

This ambivalent status of provenance research offers me ways to work through anthropological categories, orders and inventories, both past and present, in Berlin’s Ethnologisches Museum. The contribution underlines the difficulties of being caught up in the seeming impossibility of not reproducing colonial epistemologies from within the institution. All the while, I try to emphasise the persistent professional efforts of grappling with such epistemologies and the museum staff’s attempt of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2010). How, I ask, are past ways of conceiving, imagining, and classifying cultures reflected in current ways of working with the collections? Where and how do museum staff – and in this chapter, the data base manager and museologist Boris Gliesmann – identify the frictions between these past
and present conceptualisations and understandings, and how do they deal with them?

In the German context, provenance has become a keyword in addressing the nation’s colonial histories. This is closely related to German politics of remembrance more generally speaking and, in particular, to the policies and research regarding Nazi-looted art. These politics have raised awareness of how, for instance, contested museum acquisitions and collections are to be understood and dealt with. This awareness – not least due to long-lasting activist calls for uncovering collection histories (see introduction, this volume) – has been expanded to collections acquired in colonial contexts (see Bodenstein and Howald 2018: 543; Förster, Edenheiser, and Fründt 2018: 13–18; Förster 2019: 80). When provenance research reveals that processes within a chain of ownership raise ethical or moral doubts, this can be politically consequential, especially when used as a prerequisite for claims for restitution (Splettstößer 2019: 124–28). Put differently, the political role and mandate of provenance research has gained in significance, even beyond conventional understandings of provenance as retracing and situating chains of ownership.

In the context of and, as some claim, in reaction to the debates following France’s restitution report in 2018 (Sarr and Savoy 2018), German politics has committed to provenance research regarding “collections from colonial contexts”, manifested in the publication of guidelines, policies, and funding schemes (German Museums Association 2018; Koalitionsvertrag 2018;
This political commitment to provenance research has not only been celebrated but also interpreted as serving as a means for externalising questions of colonial guilt. It is seen by some as relegating these difficult queries into the realm of academia, as well as delaying or preventing political consequential actions, such as restitution or financial reparation (Häntzschel 2018; Zimmerer 2019).

This contribution methodologically addresses how provenance research unfolds in the museum by scrutinising the knowledge infrastructures that embed the object. More specifically, it does so by adopting the narrative of the object biography of one particular object, the so-called “Buli stool”,4 which I researched during my fieldwork (2013-2015) at the Africa Department of the Ethnologisches Museum.5 Produced by groups identified as ‘Luba’ or ‘Luba-ised’, the wooden caryatid stool III C 14966 entered the museum in 1902 as a gift by the colonial officer Werner von Grawert in the then Congo Free State. Later, it was attributed the authorship of the ‘Buli-Workshop’. Paola Ivanov, the department’s co-curator, highlighted the object’s significance in the current exhibition’s catalogue, as she stated that

for the Luba and their related peoples, the stools were regarded as the most important objectivization of the power of kings and chiefs (...) embody[ing] the ancestors and the royalty represented by them (Junge, Ivanov, and Ethnologisches Museum 2005: 91).6

Doing an ethnography of provenance research made me understand over time that I needed to go beyond tracing the histories of colonial entanglement only, as they manifest and materialise in the objects’ biographies. I observed the difficulties of provenance research as it continues to operate in and is limited by established knowledge categories and infrastructures – categories and infrastructures that are themselves the result of and rely on colonial knowledge production.

I analyse first how the museum’s practices of ordering and classifying inadvertently sustain colonial differences and stereotypes. I describe these practices as discriminating in their effect of recognising and marking something as different and distinct. I then work through the production of knowledge about the objects. Caught up in this production are differences that I describe as unequal distribution: an imbalance of access, sources, and resources is maintained between the Global North and the Global South. Finally, I analyse the process of valuing the object as art by attributing an author – “Buli” – to a particular group of objects. This process reveals how the construction of this particular difference – inscribing the stool in a system in which
‘art’ opposes ‘culture’ – articulates as appropriation that benefits Western institutions.

The following sections thus explore how the provenance research articulates in an analysis of the Buli stool’s present status and genealogy as museum object, its trajectories before, and after, it entered the museum.

**Struggling with the grids: Taxonomy and the continuity of colonial discrimination**

Provenance research as a means to identify an object’s trajectory includes not only an analysis of the past but also of the present. The present life of an object is shaped and predominated by its status as museum object, a status that situates the object in particular museum orders and regulations. When the object described here arrived in the museum in 1902 – once attributed a name and a number – it irrevocably mutated from what it used to be into a museum object. The stool was first registered in the museum’s inventory (*Erwerbsbuch*), within the bundle of objects with which it arrived, and then given regional allocations, entering the ‘main catalogue’ (*Hauptkatalog*). The resulting list resembles a listing of birth dates. As part of the list, the object is converted into a constitutive part of the museum and becomes part of a whole – the collection – with the number 14966. What figures as roughly organised entries in the inventory list, primarily in order to give a number to a
thing, is mirrored, further classified, and solidified in the museum’s database, *MuseumPlus*.

The museum’s database reflects these museum orders. Past and present practices of naming and categorising are condensed in each particular database entry, which figures and is read by museum staff as a compressed characterisation of the object. The entry, ideally, is supposed to indicate the accumulated knowledge about a particular object. Provenance research thus always starts with looking at the database, provided that an entry of the particular object exists.

The categories ‘Collection’ and ‘Africa’

The first category in the database defines the object’s affiliation to a “collection”, in this case “EM-Afrika”. The database *MuseumPlus* is used in all museums governed by the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK – Foundation Prussian Cultural Heritage). An indication of a particular museum – the Ethnologisches Museum – and a particular collection within the museum – “Africa” – is necessary to locate the object. This particular indication thus situates the object within an even more important grouping of collections, namely, Berlin’s Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB – State Museum Collections). Objects were attributed to particular collections, which define the objects’ primary identity. The primary identity is accompanied by specific value regimes, which establish hierarchical differences between collections. These hierarchies are the result of difference-making through distinction: The ethnological as “the Other to art museums” is neither an art museum, a historical museum, or a decorative arts museum (Bangma 2013: 63).

This hierarchical separation between collections are stabilised through the past and ongoing politics of place on Museum Island in Berlin’s centre, confirming these processes of difference-making. On Museum Island, museums associated with ‘Ancient and Modern Civilizations’ – Islamic, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, as well as nineteenth-century European painting – are situated in opposition to the Humboldt Forum. The Forum, in turn, has been repeatedly presented as a “place for world cultures” integrating the “non-European” collections, both of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Parzinger 2011: 6). As Sharon Macdonald (2016) has argued, this particular “constellation of difference” contributes to an understanding of the ‘European’ which is defined in terms of historic belonging, rather than in geographical terms. It implies the construction of these collections as ‘European’ heritage, which, conversely, serves as a constitutive part
of ‘European’ history. This history is constructed in contrast to the ‘non-Eu-
ropean’, a history which is excluded from the narrative (see also Bose 2013;
2016). The dichotomy is accentuated by the exclusion of the Museum für
Europäische Kulturen in the Forum.

These constellations of difference and their implicit hierarchies are also
sustained within the exhibition spaces of the Ethnologisches Museum in the
Humboldt Forum through their regional division. Each continent is assigned a
separated part in the Forum, which suggests a possible reading of these differ-
ent continents as self-contained and homogeneous, bringing to mind critiques
of colonial imaginations of ‘Africa’ as an isolated continent deprived from
history. Subject to both opposition and celebration, the collection’s particu-
lar inscription among the institutions of Museum Island relates and mirrors
the anthropological modes of classification within its internal technical infra-
structure. IIIC 14966, then, both in the database and via its future exhibition
location in the Humboldt Forum, will continue to be primarily defined by
being ‘ethnological’ and ‘African’, implying an opposing difference to being
both ‘European’, or part of European history, as well as ‘art’.

In addition to those divisions, the Humboldt Forum’s strong architec-
tural frames posed difficulties for productive criticality among those work-
ing within the museum. One interlocutor aptly summarised this unresolved
question amidst preparations to move the exhibitions:

When you enter the reconstructed Royal Palace, situated opposite of the
museums of ‘the Great Civilisations’, pass its foyer with an overwhelm-
ing display styled like a chamber of curiosity, learn about the glories of
Western science and explorers, move up several floors until you find the
exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum – what room to manoeuvre
does one have to challenge all of these framings?

The category ‘Geographical Reference’

Similar to what I describe with regard to the category “collection”, the cat-
egory of “geographical reference” (geografischer Bezug) facilitated the contin-
ued use of anthropological concepts shaped by colonial modes of thinking.
Intended to provide precise territorial indications, this part of the database’s
grid and its sub-categories “Country” (Land), “Region”, and “Ethnic Group”
(Ethnie) compounded temporal, geographical, and cultural entities. The data-
base de-historicised contemporary and historic contexts, and finally omitted
the most dominant political context of the time of the object’s acquisition,
namely, the colonial governance of the “Congo Free State”. The “country” is indicated as “Demokratische Republik Kongo” (DRC), indicating a particular national constellation, only in place since 1997. The “region” “Urua” referred to a historic entity, on the west side of Lake Tanganyika, which is now located in the DRC’s region of Katanga. Leaving “Urua” and “DRC” both without particular dates or denominations trapped them in what has been famously phrased by Johannes Fabian (2014) as an “ethnographic present”, denying historicity both to the those who had produced the objects in question, as well as contemporaneity to those currently living in the DRC.

Equally part of the “geographical reference”, “Luba” was referenced in the category “Ethnie”, which can be translated as “ethnic group”. The attribution of names to societies in the context of European colonialism has been subject to critique: They were ideologically accompanied by theories of social evolutionism and historic progress, and sometimes complicit with colonial governance. Similar to the notion of “tribe”, which “is now commonly considered an ethnographic, rather than an analytical term” (Sneath 2016), attributions of “ethnicity” continue to be contested (see also Arndt and Hornscheid 2004; Arndt 2011). The origins of the attribution “Luba” predate colonial governance, but were fixed within the colonial context. Mary Nooter Roberts (1998: 60) describes Luba people as a “a wash of myriad clan and lineage groupings that were more or less consolidated as a kingdom from approximately the seventeenth to late nineteenth century”. It was, however, not until the colonial period in the late nineteenth century that peoples referred to themselves homogenously as ‘Luba’, when Arab traders and European explorers and travellers started to name them that way. As Pierre Petit notes, “‘Luba’ is a most ambiguous category that may refer to five thousand or five million people, depending upon its particular, situationally defined application” (Petit cited in M. N. Roberts and Roberts 1996: 20). Despite the vague definitions and colonial consolidation, the term continues to be used, within and outside the museum context, including by people who identify as Luba today. This renders its use, or the search for alternatives, ever more complex.

Troubling categories

Museum staff, and curators in particular, were aware of the problems and historical genealogy of the museum’s database and its discriminatory character. Attempts to circumvent and challenge the categories and their limitations exist and continue to be invented in the museum. These include adding categories to the object description, or erasing and replacing names
considered derogatory. One method for challenging historical epistemologies was the introduction of the sub-category “historical depiction” (historische Bezeichnung) as part of the category “geographical reference”. When I worked at the museum, the category was notably used to indicate historical descriptions of locations and places, such as, in this case, “Congo Free State”. The sub-category helped to nuance and render more complex the object’s digital presence and to avoid confounding temporalities. The adding of sections in the database allowed for more space to record research results. In my time at the museum, by contrast, the only option to report particular research trajectories was the “Notes” field in the database. Later, in 2016, a category devoted to “provenance” was added to the database.

In 2018, Boris Gliesmann explained during a discussion of the first draft of this chapter that the category of “historical depiction” was also more frequently used to engage in a “transfer of categories” (Kategorieüberführung), in which depictions considered “derogatory” (abwertend) and “offensive” (anstößig) were replaced by depictions considered more neutral. His favourite depiction was “magic” (Zauber):

“Magic”, “charm”, “holy substance” (Zauber, Magie, heilige Substanz) – these are the categories we are now pushing into the subfield of “historical depiction”. One method we pursue is to transform all of the “magic things” (Zaubersachen) into “medicine things” (Medizinsachen).

This was, for example, the case for a research and exhibition project in Tanzania, which featured one important object formerly depicted as “magic bag” (Zaubersack) that the curators renamed as a “bag with objects used in the practice of medicine” (Beutel mit medizinischen Objekten) (Reyels, Ivanov, and Weber-Sinn 2018: 84, 202).

If you type anything with magic, or anything with witchcraft into the search machine, there are several hundred things which appear. “Fetish device” (Fetischgerät); “miraculous impact” (wundertätige Wirkung); “amulet against malicious witchcraft” (Amulett gegen bösartige Hexerei); “hunt charm” (Jagdzauber); something that has “the power to make rain” (die Kraft, Regen zu machen).

Boris Gliesmann explained that it was not only difficult to replace these names with others considered more appropriate. The numerous depictions related to “magic” were also difficult to identify if your aim was to change these depictions, systematically, among thousands of objects in the database.
I hear the curators say: “Oh, this is a colonial use of language to depict this object, it was only used to depreciate (*abwerten*) those from who it was collected!” I know the debates and, of course, we are working on it. But pragmatically, it is difficult to tackle them, it needs a lot of time, thought, research, and expertise. And also, we cannot record the discussions in the database!

Similar problems arose with the category of *Ethnie*, which Boris Gliesmann depicted as the next “construction site” (*Baustelle*) he and the curators were dealing with in particular in relation to the Africa Department.

There are so many ethnic groups in Africa, more than 300 in the Congo collections alone I believe! “Hottentots” (*Hottentotten*) are just one example, but there are so many more. We cannot continue to use some of these depictions, as they are malicious (*bösartig*). We have different categories which we use, such as “external designation” (*Fremdbezeichnung*) or “ethnic subgroup” (*Ethnie Untergruppe*), but all of them carry their own problems.

**Categories as historically situated artefacts**

The database’s different categories analysed can be understood as “historically situated artefacts”, as defined by Bowker and Star (1999: 278). “Historically situated”, in this case, concerns the categories’ particular genesis in and through colonial systems of governance and anthropological knowledge orders, reproducing particular categories of difference which underlie them. As “artefacts”, the museum’s processes of categorising IIIIC 14966 materialised in a particular politics of place, specific inscriptions of classifications and orderings, and in the solidification of temporal conceptions and cultural and geographical entities. This ‘being caught’ in colonial epistemologies through the everyday use of the database permit the argument to understand colonial difference-making as *discriminating*. I use ‘discriminating’ in the sense that it distinguishes different entities from one another, charged however with particular value regimes and hierarchies that rely on convictions of Western superiority and colonial modes of ordering the world. Current museum infrastructures rely on historical orderings and names. Discriminating is therefore used in the present tense here: The data base not only inscribes *past* conceptualisation of difference via its *present* structure. It also provides a limited framework in which *present* and *future* (provenance) research would be integrated.
Troubling access: The asymmetries in writing histories of provenance

Beyond an analysis of the object’s present status and the genealogy of the categories which inform and shape this status, provenance research is also associated with retracing the object’s itineraries before it entered the museum. This research focus implies the identification, situating and analysis of historic sources. Among her different interests and projects, the curator Paola Ivanov asked me to join her research project in order to find out how IIC 14966 had circulated between its likely location of production in Central Africa, its acquisition by the collector Werner von Grawert, and its arrival in Germany. Introducing me to this part of provenance research in the museum, Boris Gliesmann told me how he approached this “documentation of collections”.

This is my favourite thing to do, the documentation of the collection. In other words: the documentation of the collectors! The people. To enrich the database with information on them, this is my passion, my playground. But it is extremely time-consuming!

Being “time-consuming” indicates that the museum’s collections are characterised by a significant lack of documentation, already lamented when the first items of the collection arrived around 1900 (Adolf Bastian, discussed and cited in Zimmerman 2001: 190). Despite the effort and recurrent requests on behalf of museum staff to document the incoming objects, colonial staff rarely provided information about what they sent to Berlin’s museum. This lack of accompanying information indicate that Berlin’s Africa collections were above all the result of colonial collecting; such practice contrasts notably with scientific collecting, which focused not only on owning but also on knowing the people by the means of their material culture.9 The Africa Department’s collection consists substantially of objects acquired by colonial staff during Germany’s colonial rule in what were then called Togo, Cameroun, German East Africa, and German South West Africa. It can be estimated that about 64 percent of today’s Africa collections, comprising approximately 75,000 objects, stem from what has been defined as “colonial contexts”, be they governed by German or other European colonial powers (German Museums Association 2018: 16–23).10 In the museum’s Africa Department, the lack of sources was further compounded, for the object cards and photographs related to the objects burned, and were thus destroyed, during the Second World War.
Source work in the archive and the library

Apart from the lack of sources, however, Boris Gliesmann’s quote points to a seemingly natural mechanism current in provenance research. In lacking other kinds of indications, the object is above all defined by the person who had collected it, not the person who had produced, owned, or used it. Provenance research was shaped by the presence of particular sources produced within, for, and in dialogue with the colony. This contrasted with the significant absence of local subjects, their voices, and perspectives in the museum’s archives. To retrace the object’s trajectory then means to identify sources retracing the coloniser’s trajectories. In the case of IIIC 14966, this primarily meant the correspondence of the collector Werner von Grawert. Several files in relation to Werner von Grawert exist. In contrast to the historic inventory available as scans, the complete historic records are only physically accessible and stored in the museum’s archive.¹¹

In the archive, information on von Grawert was minimal regarding our research focus on the object’s trajectories.¹² The correspondence only reveals that IIIC 14966 had been part of an important shipment of 108 objects that
arrived in Berlin in 1902 and 1903. Research on the collector indicated that he had probably not acquired the objects on the location of production, because he had not left German East Africa during his term in office.

The research in yet another of the museum’s locations – the library with its primary and secondary sources – also led to insufficient evidence. When we consulted historians and anthropologists based in universities and museums, they confirmed Paola Ivanov’s hypothesis that the object may have circulated via Swahili trade caravans or as diplomatic gifts or trophies, but none of them had come across specific sources that could confirm it. The archival fragments we identified, thanks to exchanges with other researchers, consisted of an image of a caravan which carried an “idol” (Cameron 1877, cited in Volper 2010), providing traces of how European colonial staff exchanged objects among themselves (Mayer 1913, cited in Plankensteiner 1998), as well as research on the circulation of artistic expertise and ideas within the region (Roberts 2013). The sources were from various times and places, however, and could only hint at possibilities rather than substantiate claims.

The research thus involved bringing together sources that were spatially dispersed and materially diverse, locating them in their historicity. We physically and virtually moved through offices, on computer screens, the archive, and the library. These movements enabled different encounters with the materials available: historic documents in their fragility; scans of the historic inventory, flattened on screens; digitally assembled information; printed scans of historic originals which turned into ‘originals’ themselves via the stamps and notes added to them. The time-consuming research process left us with archive transcriptions, a collection of publications, e-mail correspondence with external experts. We manoeuvred in the boundaries of the restricted sources and resources that the museum provided.

Access and gaps

These research results echo Arlette Farge’s descriptions of what defines archival research, namely, as being “forever incomplete” (Farge 2013: 55). The archives were incomplete with regard to local voices in particular. This absence pointed to the denial of the locals’ agency, presence, and even existence, as well as the omission of the function, production, or transaction of IIIC 14966. By contrast, what was documented were traces of a colonial apparatus of extracting the colonies from their material culture, which was logistically sophisticated and financially well equipped. The (minimal) documentation of shipping, transport costs, and the department director’s
appraisal and request for more objects shows the entanglement of colonialism with museums and academia. This documentation reflects the contemporary department director Felix von Luschan’s ambitions to “systematically” collect, in order “to raise an inventory, as it were, of the complete cultural heritage” (Ankermann and Luschan 1914: 9).

For Farge, “today, to use the archives is to translate this incompleteness into a question” (ibid.). However, the search for such alternative interpretations is difficult when the Ethnologisches Museum’s collections and archives remain largely inaccessible to outsiders. Only a small portion of the approximately 495,000 datasets that have been inventoried are freely accessible online, to be precise, only 71,500 of them (2019). Moreover, crucial information is missing in the openly accessible database, including the date and mode of acquisition and, sometimes, the collector. Being available only in German, access is reduced to German speakers only. Whereas the archives are freely accessible on location, the access to the museum’s complete database, and thus its collections, are reserved to museum staff. Functioning as gatekeepers, the museum curators’ responsibility – among an overwhelming amount of other tasks – is to respond to requests addressed to the museum. The fact that the curators’ names and contacts are not identifiable on the museum’s website further restricts access. An updated inventory catalogue, or a simple listing of the museum’s collection does not exist. Access to the collection remains therefore reserved to those who already have or succeed to acquire the financial and symbolic capital to access the collections from within the museum.

Apart from underlining the museum’s historical entanglement with colonialism, analysing this process of provenance research shows an unequal distribution concerning where and how knowledge about the object is and can be produced. In other words, conditions for producing knowledge depend on where the resources (financial, personnel) and sources (library, archives, collections) are concentrated. In view of the lack or limited (digital) access to both collections and archives, the disparity of access not only shows a difference but also an inequality, even injustice, of these politics of concentration. Pointing to unequal distribution here, I do not aim to question the validity of expertise in Western institutions, nor to reduce their position to their sole geographical location. Rather, I want to indicate the ongoing disparity of who is consulted, given voice, access and, thus, the right and possibility to write these histories and to own the resulting knowledge. The dissemination, accessibility, and sustainability of provenance research results was further challenged by the insufficiency of the museum’s database system to record the available information.
at the time. Concerning the investigation into IIIC 14966, the research ultimately resulted in a paper folder, securely stored in the curator’s office.

**Disturbing attributions: The paradoxes of naming and colonial appropriation**

Complementary to the research concerned with IIIC14966’s trajectories before entering the museum, and its coming into being and present status as museum object in the museum, a final step of provenance research addressed its reception history.

Generally speaking, those who produced the objects remain anonymous in ethnological collections. Implicit in the lack of the contemporary documenting of producers, and individuals more generally speaking, was a denial of individual creativity in societies considered localised, collective, and isolated as cultural entities. A progressively established reaction to the anonymity has been the retroactive identification of “masters”, “workshops”, or simply “artists” – a practice which can be interpreted as a resistance to colonial modes of ordering and perceiving the world. III C 14966 was proof of one particular attempt to counter colonial epistemologies, as the data base’s category “producer” (“Buli workshop”) testified.

**Anonymity, identity, and authorship**

IIIC 14966 reflected the attempt to counter anonymity. The stool belonged to a group of objects, to which the Belgian anthropologist Frans M. Olbrechts had attributed a particular author since the 1930s, the “master of the long-faced style”, also known as the “Buli Master”. The author was named after the village where two sculptures were acquired (Vogel 1980: 133; Nooter Roberts 1998: 61). The naming practice therefore has its origins during colonial times, but continues to be used prominently, and progressively, in the ongoing ‘invention’ of ‘masters’. Such and similar processes of naming have had complex, and even paradox, consequences. Mary Nooter Roberts describes the politics of naming as “both an appropriation of identity and an imposition of it. To withhold a person’s identity may be a form of protection or of subjugation. To impose a name may be a form of repression or of elevation” (Nooter Roberts 1998: 56). This paradox of naming was reflected in the reception history of IIIC 14966.
On the one hand, challenging the alleged anonymity of African artists and showing an interest in the artist’s style and characteristics reflected a political standpoint. Frans M. Olbrechts built his reflection on anthropologist Franz Boas’ concept of culture areas and his conviction of racial equality, a conviction which rejected evolutionist theories dominant at the time. This approach was paired with art historical methods aimed at identifying artist’s “hands”, such as established by the art historian Giovanni Morelli in the nineteenth century (Petridis 2001). The Buli Master was the first individual artist retroactively to be assigned to a group of African objects, followed by the invention of a number other ‘masters’, such as the Master of the Cascade Headdress or the Warua Master, all put forward by Western scholars, dealers, and collectors (Nooter Roberts 1998: 61). The recognition of an individual author contributed to counter dominant Western ideas of Africa, as well as recognise individual creativity and artistic genius within African cultures.

On the other hand, the reassessment of anonymous works as authored and singular pieces of art contributed to transform the museum’s collection to “another exceptional resource of the colony” (Van Beurden 2013: 483). Objects identified as “Buli”, and IIIC 14966 in particular, have been outstanding examples of processes of the production of value via the interlinked resource production of the museum, the market, and academia. The museum’s historic publication and photo archives confirmed its exceptional reception. This reception started with its denomination as ‘art’ upon its arrival in the museum in 1902 and continued with a prominent international publication and exhibition history. The subsequent symbolic value encouraged the object’s commodification and translated into financial value. The perceived rarity, both of the object and of the occasion to acquire such an object, is reflected in the record prices which caryatid stools associated with “Buli” reached on the auction market. In 1979, one object was sold for 249,000 GBP (Sotheby’s 1979); in 2010, a similar stool attained at 5.4 million euros at auction (Sotheby’s 2010).

Disputes over “Buli” have been ongoing. They concern the particularity of the artistic identity – Is it one artist, a workshop, a generation? – but also which object is considered to be “Buli”, and thus exceptionally valuable or not.16 The number of “Buli” objects has continuously risen from twelve objects identified by Olbrechts in the 1930s to twenty-nine being under scrutiny in 2011 (LaGamma 2012: 263). The disputes are also ongoing because naming as a practice is valuable in itself: The acknowledgement of an individual author accentuates the absence of an identified individual – an absence, Sarah Van Beurden argues, which was subsequently occupied by either the
collector, scholar, or dealer who had ‘discovered’ the master, or the museum in charge of keeping it.

Naming and valuing

Beyond the value generated by and for Western institutions, assigning an individual artist to IIIC 14966 contradicts Luba definitions of authorship. The attribution reveals, on the contrary, a modernist Western understanding about the status of art. Mary Nooter Roberts, in her fieldwork about the Luba in the then Republic of Zaire, never came across court historians who mentioned individual artists (1998: 56). She demonstrates that during the conception and production of a sculpture, the Luba concept of remembrance was at play, which integrated several people and spirits. In contrast to the individual artist, Nooter Roberts refers to how Luba artists participate in a “transpersonal identity”, that is, “the phenomenon whereby artists become subsumed by the larger network of relationships – both social and spiritual – of which they are part” (Nooter Roberts 1998: 67). As James Clifford (1988) noted, the Western understanding of individual artistry cannot simply be imposed upon non-Western cultures, as definitions of originality, authenticity, and authorship differ. He stated that “‘culture’ and ‘art’ can no longer be simply extended to non-Western peoples and things. They can at worst be imposed, at best translated – both historically and politically contingent operations” (ibidem: 236).

Understanding the naming of Buli as such form of imposition, the processes of naming and valuing can be considered colonial difference-making as appropriation. As Benoît De L’Estoile (2008) has argued, “colonial relations, often stamped by domination and violence, are however more aptly characterised by a multifarious process of appropriation than by the sheer negation of the colonised” (ibidem: 268). Whereas naming can be interpreted as an attempt to repair and engage in the nuanced and complex character of colonial relations, the appropriation seems to also result here in a second expropriation, since the generated symbolic and financial value ultimately continue to serve Western institutions.

Concluding discussion

Provenance research has been an important aspect of how decolonisation is discussed and practised in Germany. However, provenance research is
complex, time-consuming, and limited. It also risks posing more questions than it answers. This chapter underscores the struggles that accompany working with infrastructures and epistemologies stemming from and relying on past colonial practices and knowledge production.

My account shows how my interlocutors in the museum and, in this regard, especially Boris Gliesmann, not only identify but also try to change the museum’s epistemologies. These, as the deciphering of genealogy of the museum’s inventory and ordering systems show, are the result of the historical complicity between colonial systems of appropriation and the discipline of anthropology. Museum staff engage with these epistemologies on a daily basis. They commit to provenance research with a number of consequences and intentions, which include rendering the museum’s colonial entanglement transparent; adding categories to the database grids in order to nuance the object’s categorisation; or changing the depictions of objects to avoid the further inscription and reproduction of the colonial epistemic violence, as reflected in the ways in which objects were documented, as well as described. While calls for the opening of inventories have been voiced publicly (Öffnet die Inventare! 2019), efforts to render the collections’ histories transparent and accessible have been pushed further since my departure from the museum in 2015.17

At the same time, the deconstruction of different anthropological categories and imaginations in past and present knowledge infrastructures shows how their unstable, provisory, and fragile character continues to be solidified, materialised, and perpetuated within the database and, more broadly speaking, the museum’s infrastructure. Whereas my interlocutors struggle with these categories and names stemming from colonial thought, they nevertheless form the differentiating and discriminatory grid and order which organise the museum. The ethnography of the research processes further points to the symbolic geographies and hierarchies of knowledge production that are sustained between the Global North and South, perpetuated through the imbalance of access to sources and resources available to research, analyse, and write provenance histories today. Problematising the paradoxes of naming finally shows how even the explicit search for alternatives to colonial modes of ordering the world risks faltering. The ethnography discusses how those systems of knowledge and value systems persist and how deeply the epistemological practices are engrained in the museum – both in the past and today.

Troubling the museum’s coloniality, then, goes beyond telling the museum’s histories, even beyond the possible restitution of particular artefacts. It encompasses dealing with the very words, categories, and place-making which name, order, and differentiate museums and collections.
Reconceptualising the storing, ordering, and digital documentation of collections offers the means to find new ways to engage the museum’s knowledge infrastructures and epistemologies and, thus, to redefine the collections themselves.

**Notes**

1. The image on p. 106 is Figure 2.1 Boris Griesmann working in the archive. Photograph by Marion Benoit, © Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

2. I would like to thank Paola Ivanov for introducing me to the Ethnologisches Museum as a research fellow. Without her, this research would not have been possible. I am grateful for her continued feedback on drafts of my written-up work. Among other museum staff, I would like to thank Boris Griesmann in particular for reading several versions of this text, and for always providing me with more fascinating details about the field and his work. Both my supervisors Sharon Macdonald and Béatrice Fraenkel, as well as Sophie Houdart, have been guiding and shaping my work consistently, and productively. Sharon Macdonald has continuously contributed to getting this text into shape, for which I am very grateful. I would also like to thank Magda Buchzyk, Duane Jethro, Tahani Nadim, Katarzyna Puzon and Jonas Tinius for commenting earlier versions of this text. I take responsibility for any remaining errors or misinterpretations.

3. The research that led to this piece was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation as part of my research fellowship and the research award for Sharon Macdonald’s Alexander von Humboldt Professorship.

4. Object biographies have gained in popularity and have been widely discussed since *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986), in disciplines such as archeology (Gosden and Marshall 1999; Joy 2009), museum studies and anthropology (Hirschauer and Doering 1997; Förster and Stoecker 2016; Basu 2017), or the history of science (Daston 2000). For an overview, see Hoskins (2006).

5. In November 2013, I joined the museum apprentice Verena Rodatus in the provenance research on one object group, which the Africa department’s co-curator Paola Ivanov had initiated. Verena Rodatus was the museum apprentice (‘Volontärin’) in the Africa Department and Humboldt Lab Dahlem since May 2013; Paola Ivanov had been employed as the department’s co-curator since 2012. The three of us regularly met to exchange results of the research, and Paola Ivanov instructed us on how, who, and what to consult to trace the object’s past trajectories.
6. All translations from German to English by the author.
7. Interview with Boris Gliesmann, 8 November 2016.
8. Notes from a conversation with Boris Gliesmann, 16 April 2018.
9. This distinction is not an exclusive one, but French museums for example, different to Berlin’s Africa Department, acquired a significant part of their collections via scientific expeditions. For details on the different modes of acquisition concerning the *Musée de l’Homme*, see Sarr and Savoy (2018: 42–52).
10. The statistical estimation of 64 percent stems from the following calculation: Between 1884 and 1914 (German colonial rule), the African collections grew from 7,388 objects to 55,079 objects (Krieger and Koch 1973: 106). Given that today’s Africa collection is estimated at 75,000 objects, the difference constitutes approx. 64 percent. Website Ethnologisches Museum, https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/sammlung.html (last accessed 16 April 2019).
11. In the long run, this will change as the museum will scan and make publicly available all of its archival files up until 1947, https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/bibliothek-und-archiv.html (last accessed 02 February 2019).
12. The information on Werner von Grawert in the archives is limited to the archival files E 1555/1902; E 1494/1902.
14. The curators are obliged to answer all requests, as they are the keepers of a public collection, but can *de facto* ignore requests just like any working professional can ignore emails.
15. In an interview with the art consultant and expert in the art market for African art Bruno Claessens, he confirmed the explosion of ‘masters’ in the last two decades, notably in relation to the auction market, Antwerp, November 2015. For scholarly explorations of the market of African art, see Steiner (1994) and Corbey (2000).
17. Among other developments, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz opened four positions explicitly devoted to provenance research in 2019, a research group devoted to “colonial provenance” across German-speaking countries has formed since 2017 (‘Arbeitsgruppe Koloniale Provenienzen’), cross-university teaching on provenance has been advertised in Berlin, and several collaborative research and exhibition projects have been put in place, all of which include the research on the objects’ trajectories, including with researchers and curators in the former German colonies Tanzania and Namibia.
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