CHAPTER THREE

Expanding collection histories: The museum as peopled organisation

With my arrival at the Museum, the search for archival material and, in particular, photographs documenting exhibitions started. My intention to capture the objects’ lives in the Museum required understanding when and how objects moved within and beyond the Museum’s walls. On my quest, I realised that the (photographic) documentation in the Ethnological Museum was dispersed and diverse in its materiality. Different museum staff whom I consulted were not necessarily aware of where to find what. The research guided me through the entire Museum, beginning with the Africa department’s own photo archive, leading to the Museum’s general archive, then the Museum’s photo laboratory, and finally arriving at the ‘Americas’ archive, which stored photographs understood as ‘museum history’ (Museumsgeschichte).

What I found in search of historical documentation was scattered, unsorted, sometimes in bad condition, and usually difficult to identify and attribute to particular events, their dates, or even location. On the computer, single files of images were stored in low resolution in different folders, with names such as ‘general photos historic, unsorted’. Images were not dated. The file names were unspecific (‘Ausstellung Afrika_2.jpg’; ‘EM_Afrika_2.jpg’). The Africa photo archive consisted mainly of photographs that didn’t have any relation to the collections: the object cards as well as all the photographs relating to the collection – such as photographs documenting the ‘field’ – were destroyed by fire during the Second World War. The efforts of Kurt Krieger, the Africa department’s director (1945–1985) and museum director (1970–1985), to document the Africa collections were reflected in laboriously staged, beautiful object photographs. They constituted an incomplete but approximate public inventory of the department’s collections, published in several volumes since the mid-1960s (see figure 3.8; Krieger, 1965; 1969a; 1969b; 1990). It is in the department’s
photographic archive where I found further singled-out exhibition photographs, negatives, and slides, as well as remnants from old exhibitions, such as maps used in exhibitions, which helped to trace the chronology of exhibitions in the Museum (see figure 3.4–3.8). As part of the department of visual anthropology, I watched and recorded films with the help of the anthropologist Ulrike Folie (see figure 3.1–3.2), including those stored in the so-called secret cupboard (Geheimschrank), and I found internal VHS recordings of the Leipzig repatriation (see figure 3.3). In the ‘official’ museum archive, I identified the documentation of more recent exhibition documentation – since the opening of the new building in the 1970s – with a row of folders documenting the different exhibitions in varying detail (see a series of photographs of the archive in the visual introduction, images 5–12). The traffic of collections to the museum’s exterior were precisely documented by loan contracts. The objects’ movement within the Museum was much more difficult to trace, however, because most exhibitions generally lack documentation (exhibition texts, labels, maps, etc.) and lists of the exhibited objects in particular.

Photographs understood as ‘historical’ were shelved in a room located behind the museum storage of the ‘Americas’. Referred to as the Museum’s photographic archive devoted to ‘Museum history’ by museum staff, the cupboard held one folder and a box with numerous envelopes. These included photographs on cardboard of the museum’s first exhibition, glass plates from the late nineteenth century, but also the extensive and detailed documentation of the construction sites of the Ethnological Museum’s building in the 1960s. As in exhibition catalogues, photographic documentation focused on object photography, not exhibition documentation, one of the inhouse museum photographers confirmed.

The diverse kinds of materialities, their dispersed locality, and the different qualities of conservation confirm an unsystematic and hierarchical approach to the documentation and keeping of the Museum’s organisational histories. Some histories seem to be understood and valued as ‘History’ with a capital H in the organisational self-understanding, but the attention and resources devoted to the organisation’s histories post-Second World War, including exhibition histories, are minimal at the time of research.2

The literature on the Museum focused on its early, formative period in the nineteenth century. Entire books are dedicated to the museum’s ‘founders’, such as Adolf Bastian, the museum’s co-founder, and Felix von Luschan, curator for Africa and Oceania from 1885 till 1911 (see, for example, Fischer, Bolz, & Kamel, 2007; Ruggendorfer & Szemethy, 2009). The comprehensive research project on the archives of the Africa department (1873–1919), led by Christiane Stelzig, is a central reference (Stelzig
Two monographs draw in particular on the early histories of the Ethnological Museum: Glenn Penny’s *Objects of culture. Ethnology and ethnographic museums in imperial Germany* (2002) and Andrew Zimmerman’s *Anthropology and antihumanism in imperial Germany* (2001). Documentation of the museum’s recent histories are summarised in museum guides, and particular aspects of this history are touched upon in the museum’s own journal (*Baesseler Archiv*), as well as in the yearly reports of the Foundation Prussian Cultural Heritage (*Jahrbuch*) or in particular articles or book chapters (see, for example, Schindlbeck, 2013; Schorch, 2018). On the recent histories, Friedrich von Bose’s ethnography of the debates around the Humboldt Forum addressed the imaginations and plans of the Stadtschloss (von Bose, 2016). However, the museum’s only comprehensive (self-)documentation is a special issue of the *Baesseler Archiv* from 1973. The issue appeared on the occasion of the museum’s hundredth birthday and traces the history of each department, as well as the museum’s history itself. What is documented, what is taken care of, and how, indicates which histories are given importance and are taken seriously within the organisation.

A museum’s history is not accomplished with the making of a collection. Rather, this history starts to unfold in following the collection’s fate in its making: the exhibition, conservation, storage, inventory, and digitisation, as well as documentation and research. These processes continue within the Ethnological Museum. To document these museum histories meant to work, listen, and be there. Organisational knowledge was scarcely documented, but rather was incorporated by the people working in the Museum, some of them for several decades. It was only by working with museum staff that I was able to comprehend, trace, and document these histories – histories that crucially shape the organisation and its everyday, but which were also subject to rapid change in the context of organisational restructuring. Ways of knowing and being in the Museum were passed on and constructed through personal interaction in the organisation. I needed to find out who knew what and who was interested in sharing.

While the Museum is certainly centred on its collections, my observations and participation in the museum work led me to see the Museum as a ‘peopled organisation’ (Morse, Rex, & Richardson, 2018, p. 116). Conceiving the museum as peopled means to devote attention to particular people. In this book’s case, I draw mainly on the accounts and knowledge of Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, who was responsible for the reorganisation of the Africa storage, as well as Boris Gliesmann, the Museum’s database manager. The history of digitisation and storing is briefly introduced here and then two chapters are entirely devoted to their contribution to the Museum in the making, focusing on the histories of inventory and taxonomy (chapter
Figures 3.1 – 3.3 Watching films from the Visual Anthropology department, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Margareta von Oswald
Figure 3.4 – 3.8 Different forms of existing documentation of exhibition and objects (object cards, diapositive, negatives, a map from 1926 exhibition, object photographs), Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Margareta von Oswald, except for 3.8, photographer: Anna Lisa Ramella
Working through colonial collections

four) and the history of the making of the East Africa storage (chapter five). Whereas these chapters give space to their personalities and voices, the present chapter serves as an overview to the Museum’s histories, presenting these in chronological order.

In this chapter, I trace the Africa department’s history from its foundation to the present day. I concentrate on the multiple physical relocations and structural changes that were involved in the collection’s movement. Here, I mention the history of the Africa department’s permanent exhibitions only cursorily. Whereas my initial aim was to write and analyse the exhibition history of the department, including the many major exhibition projects taking place outside of the physical Museum itself, I came to realise that this was a task too large to take on at this time. In the following, I give a first impression of the richness of the Museum’s archive and visual material, serving also as an invitation to deepen and work on the many gaps and blind spots in the Museum’s history.

Building and locating a collection: The (Königliches) Museum für Völkerkunde between Mitte and Dahlem (1886–1973)

‘By 1900, Germany’s leading ethnographic museum had descended into chaos.’ This is how historian Glenn Penny opened his book on Berlin’s Ethnological Museum (Penny, 2002, p. 1). The historian Andrew Zimmerman, in turn, foregrounded that the collection had become so large that the situation had begun to ‘escape all control’ by 1886, the year of the museum’s foundation (Zimmerman, 2001, p. 190). Then called Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, the Museum’s collections were housed in a building in Berlin’s Königgrätzer Straße, just next to the Kunstgewerbemuseum, the Museum for Decorative Arts, which today is occupied by the Gropius Bau (see figure 3.9). By 1900, the museum director Adolf Bastian stated that ‘the cases are overfilled so that every instructive arrangement of the collection remains impossible’ (quoted in Zimmerman, 2001, p. 191). In their contemporary reading of the Museum’s history, both historians describe in detail how the museum founders’ mission to represent and research humanity in its completeness had failed. Instead of research, museum staff were forced to concentrate on the management and administration of what was arriving in the Museum. Curators complained about their task being reduced to working ‘like handymen, to take inventory of objects as they came in from every possible part of the earth’ (Fritz Graebner quoted in Zimmerman, 2001, p. 194). Researchers that came specifically to do research on the collections were forbidden access. As outlined in this book’s introduction, European
Figure 3.9 Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, at the corner of Königgrätzerstraße and Prinz-Albrecht-Straße, 1886, wood engraving from the Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung, 1886, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Working through colonial collections enabled an overwhelming quantity of objects to arrive, adding to the already existing collections, some of which had their origins in Berlin’s Royal Kunstkammer. The situation prompted staff to describe the condition of the Museum as ‘untenable’ (Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, p. 29). In 1907, the Museum was threatened with closure by the police, unless corridors and stairs were immediately cleared so that at least two people could pass each other (Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, p. 29). All of the collections were housed within the Museum, with no separation of exhibition and storage spaces (see figures 3.10–3.11). Visitors complained about the apparent chaos. They lamented that the public interest was explicitly neglected by museum staff and demanded repayment of their admission charges (Stelzig, 2004, pp. 40–41). Adolf Bastian’s fervour to represent humanity in its diversity and entirety turned out to be inherently paradoxical: the more objects arrived, the less overview researchers and visitors would get.

For years, museum staff, anthropologists, and politicians in Berlin heatedly discussed what to do with the masses of objects and how and where to construct a new museum building to properly house the collections. This included quarrels over whether to separate ‘display collections’ and ‘study’ or ‘work collections’ (Schau-/Studien-/Arbeitssammlung) as well as whether to build distinct museums representing peoples considered of ‘nature’ and of ‘culture’ (Natur-/Kulturvölker), and, more precisely, whether to separate the ‘Asian’ collections from the ‘ethnological’ ones (Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, pp. 18–30). A first relocation, however, of the collections was only realised in 1906. The collections were moved to a cheaply and rapidly constructed ‘shack’ (Schuppen) in Berlin’s Dahlem suburb, located about twelve kilometres from the Museum. The architect Bruno Paul was commissioned to design an entirely new museum in the same area. The draft, consisting of four buildings representing four different world continents excluding Europe, was approved by the Berlin parliament (Abgeordnetenhaus) in 1912 (see figure 3.12; see also Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, p. 32).

Interrupted by the First World War, the construction of the building in Dahlem, which had started in 1914, was left unfinished. It consisted only of two floors without a roof. After the war, the Museum was confronted with major financial problems: it was converted into storage spaces, whose costs were covered by selling parts of the collection itself, namely so-called Doubletten, objects considered doubles of other objects in the collection (Westphal-Hallbusch, 1973, pp. 29–34). As a result, the exhibition spaces stayed in Berlin’s centre, and the storage spaces were moved to Dahlem. The new exhibition suggested a change of paradigm with a ‘singled-out’ arrangement of objects, on 950m². Exhibition and storage would from now on be separate entities. The exhibition was curated by the new department director,
Figures 3.10–3.11 Exhibition title unclear (‘Africa collections’) (before 1926), Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Königgrätzer Straße, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified
Figure 3.12 The planned museum buildings around 1910. View of the northern part, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Alfred Schachtzabel, the former department director, Bernhard Ankermann, and Herman Baumann, whose concept of ‘cultural province’ shaped the exhibition’s organisation into regions (see figures 3.13–3.14; see also Krieger, 1974, pp. 119–122). The exhibitions remained largely untouched until 1941, when the Museum closed due to the Second World War and the increasing danger from air raids.

Already in 1934, the Museum started to prepare the collections in case of war, differentiating the entire collection into ‘irreplaceable’ (unersetzliche) objects (immediate evacuation in case of war), ‘especially valuable’ objects (besonders wertvoll) (to be safely stored), and ‘remaining’ objects (‘left to their fate’, as phrased by Gerd Höpfner) (Höpfner, 1992, p. 157). During the Second World War, the Ethnological Museum set up, as did many other museums in Berlin, the relocation (Auszälerungen) of the collections to the Museum’s cellar, as well as to other spaces considered secure in Berlin and all over Germany. From 1942 till 1946, as the museum database manager Boris Gliesmann told me, ‘we can only speculate where the objects were, as they were pushed wildly all over Germany, depending on where the front was’. The Africa collections were mainly stored in Berlin’s museum cellars, in Wiesbaden, in a castle in Celle, and in a castle in Schräbsdorf. After the war, from the 1950s on, the objects slowly returned, but were moved to Dahlem. On the grounds of the collection’s lack of ‘completeness’ after the war, Kurt Krieger opened the exhibition African Art, despite his dissatisfaction with the exhibition’s focus on ‘art’ (Krieger, 1974, p. 123). The exhibition consisted of an installation in a high-ceilinged, white cube setting with regional organisation. The exhibition lasted from 1957 until 1971, (see figure 3.18–3.19). Shortly after the exhibition opened, Kurt Krieger insisted that the future goals of the Museum für Völkerkunde would be to make the collections accessible in exhibitions of the region’s cultural histories, rejecting the concept of ‘exotic art’ (Krieger, 1963, p. 248). As a result of war damage, the original museum building in the centre of Berlin was demolished in 1961 (see figures 3.15–3.17). Wils Ebert and Fritz Bornemann planned a new museum complex in Dahlem. The Museum für Völkerkunde opened its different permanent exhibitions and new storage spaces in stages from 1970 on.

Three years after the museum’s official vernissage in 1970, paralleling the opening in stages of the Humboldt Forum (Eröffnung in Etappen), Kurt Krieger opened a new permanent exhibition dedicated to ‘Africa’ (see figures 3.20–3.21). Presented without a title, and thus suggesting a generalist view on ‘Africa’ via its material culture, the exhibition was organised in ‘typical geographical and cultural regions’, problematically making a distinction between ‘White’ and ‘Black’ Africa. The exhibition aimed ‘to show the cultural property of the population of each region […] in its entirety and not to
Figure 3.13 Exhibition title unidentified ('Africa collections'), Benin room (1926–WWII), Museum für Völkerkunde, Königgrätzer Straße, curated by Alfred Schachtzabel, Bernhard Ankermann, Herman Baumann, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified
Figure 3.14 Exhibition title unidentified ('Africa collections'), Cameroon Grasslands room (1926–WWII), Museum für Völkerkunde, Königgrätzer Straße, curated by Alfred Schachtzabel, Bernhard Ankermann, Herman Baumann, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified
Figure 3.15 Main entrance of the former Museum für Völkerkunde, Stresemannstraße 110, corner Prinz-Albrecht-Straße 6a, 25 March 1949, F Rep. 290 Nr. 0000920, Landesarchiv Berlin, photographer: Willy Feige
Figure 3.16 Museum für Völkerkunde, undated, atrium with damaged glass ceiling, 25 March 1949, F Rep. 290 Nr. 0000923, Landesarchiv Berlin, photographer Willy Feige
Figure 3.17 Demolishing the Museum für Völkerkunde, 1961, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified
Figure 3.22 'Introduction room' (Einführungsraum), permanent exhibition, Africa department (1973–1999), Museum für Völkerkunde, Dahlem, curated by Kurt Krieger, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Reinhard Friedrich
Figure 3.24 View of ‘Grassland Cameroon’, permanent exhibition, Africa department (1973–1999), Museum für Völkerkunde, Dahlem, curated by Kurt Krieger, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Reinhard Friedrich
Looting looted art? The histories of the Leipzig repatriation

In 1973, after completing an approximate inventory, the curator of African collections and then museum director Kurt Krieger estimated war losses in relation to the Africa collection. The loss was estimated at approximately 50 per cent, with an original inventory of 66,953 objects, 36,656 objects lost in the war, and 30,297 objects remaining in Berlin’s storage spaces (Krieger, 1973, p. 129).

This estimated amount changed drastically, when, in 1990, it was publicly revealed that Leipzig’s Museum für Völkerkunde had kept 45,000 of the Ethnological Museum’s objects as a state secret, with significant numbers of objects associated with the African continent. How many objects were actually lost due to wartime relocation remains unclear to date. No systematic inventory of Berlin’s collections has been done yet. In his personal notes, Boris Gliesmann made the following calculation, in which he added different numbers of objects to identify the number lost through the war. Repatriation from Leipzig (18,627 objects), repatriation from Celle (30,500 objects), repatriation from Wiesbaden (2,000 objects), objects stored in Berlin (1,000), unnumbered objects (1,688): in all, there are 53,815 objects, which would mean a war loss of approximately 12,000 objects.12 This confirms estimations by the curator Hans-Joachim Koloss of around 10,000 objects (Radosuboff, 2021, p. 10). After the revelation, it was decided to return the objects to Berlin (Feest, 1991; Höpfner, 1992). The Leipzig Hall (Leipzighalle), a storage room, was constructed to house and store the objects intermediately. The objects were then inventoried and assigned to the Museum’s different departments, and stored in different locations in Berlin (see figures 3.28–3.30).13

What had happened to the collection was only slowly reconstructed – a reconstruction that has not necessarily come to an end. Some questions remain unanswered. The collections in question were presumably first relocated from Berlin to Schräbsdorf, a town located in Lower Silesia in today’s Poland. Given the region’s occupation by the Red Army in 1945–1946, it is...
likely those collections that were taken as war booty to Leningrad, and possibly to other places in the Soviet Union. In 1975, the GDR government was approached by the Soviet Union to receive the collection. The anthropologist Philipp Schorch describes how the GDR government accepted this ‘return’ on German territory, ‘thus metamorphosing from victory trophy over Nazi Germany to material symbol and marker of friendship between brother states in order to stabilize the Cold War’ (Schorch, 2018, p. 177). With 44,561 ethnographic objects packed in 610 boxes, the transport from 1977 to 1979 to Leipzig turned out to be extremely complicated. It had taken two years to unpack and repack several hundred boxes and large and small packages in Leningrad, which were delivered in twelve truckloads to Leipzig. What complicated the mission, however, was the fact that it was a clandestine transport, which museum staff in Berlin recounted as a ‘cloak-and-dagger operation’ (eine Nacht­und­Nebel­Aktion). The objects were installed in a temporary exhibition space in Leipzig, which served as objects were covered up and the exhibition space closed as a secret storage space.

Up to the present, museum staff grapple with the remnants and consequences of these histories of relocation, theft, and looting on a daily basis, often referred to as the collection’s ‘odyssey’ (Haas, 2002, p. 21). The storage manager of the Africa collections, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, took the Leipzig repatriation as an occasion to reorder the entire Africa museum storages and to separate the collections into ‘East Africa’, located in the Museum’s cellar, and ‘West Africa’, located on the same building’s top floor. Whereas chapter five is dedicated to this history of the making of a new storage system, the following concentrates on the inventory and digitisation of the collection after the Leipzig repatriation. In the Africa department’s case, the remaining objects to be inventoried laid stored in banana boxes (Bananenkisten) on top of the storage facility cupboards. In a conversation with museum staff, one storage manager remarked that, ‘it is difficult to work if you know that it is impossible to do the job. Inventorying 30,000 objects in a few years all alone, this is completely impossible’.

It is the Africa curator Hans-Joachim Koloss who accompanied the Leipzig repatriation, which might be one of the reasons why he only inaugurated ‘his’ permanent exhibition in 1999, despite the fact that he had already taken up the post in 1985 (following Kurt Krieger). Africa: Art and Culture was exhibited in a light-flooded space, with objects arranged in glass and metal-framed display cases, partly in a cultural or regional organisation (‘Makonde in Mozambique’; ‘Cameroon Grasslands’), and partly in a thematic organisation (‘primitivism’; ‘Elements of Design in African Art’) (1999–2005) (see figures 3.25–3.26).
Figure 3.27 Construction of the so-called Leipzighalle, autumn 1990, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Dietrich Graf
Figure 3.28 Press conference in the ‘Leipzighalle’ of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Dahlem, undated, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Dietrich Graf
Figure 3.29 Outside the Hohenschönhausen hall, used as interim storage, 7 December 1992, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Dietrich Graf
Figure 3.30 Inside the Hohenschönhausen hall used as interim storage, 7 December 1992, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Dietrich Graf
After Leipzig: The history of the collection’s inventory and digitisation (1990–2000s)

Due to the arrival of these tens of thousands of objects, the digitisation of the collections in the Ethnological Museum started rather early at the beginning of the 1990s, compared to other museums in Berlin (see figure 3.31). The Africa department in particular occupied a pioneering role in the collection’s digital documentation. This was not only because it was ‘recorded positively’, meaning that everything that was on-site was recorded, in contrast to documenting everything listed in the books, including lost objects. It mainly concerned the digitisation process, which was to serve as a ‘pilot project for the immature GOS programme’, the Museum’s still-to-be-installed database, which was later (1998/1999) transferred to the Museum’s current database, MuseumPlus. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff had been unsatisfied with the inventory of the Leipzig objects. He characterised the process as ‘insufficient’ and ‘rough’ (grob). He subsequently developed a ‘pilot project’ within the Museum (Radosuboff, 2019, p. 32). Klaus Helfrich, then museum director, put him in charge of the digitisation process, in a context in which, as Hans-Joachim Radosuboff framed it, everyone reacted to the new PCs ‘as if the Black Death had just broken out’.

Boris Gliesmann described the transfer from this old documentation system GOS in 2003 to MuseumPlus as a ‘milestone’ in his career and the Museum’s history. The process of transfer to a new database was monitored and developed together with a working group of the SMB. Boris Gliesmann accompanied this digitisation process and decided to take over Hans-Joachim Radosuboff’s foundation (Grundstock) of subject groups (Sachgruppen), even though it had been designed for the collections from the African continent. For Boris Gliesmann, ‘the vocabulary worked for about 70 or 80 per cent of the museum’s collections: all collections have arrows, calabash, spears, cooking pots’. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff’s attempt to order the Leipzig repatriation collections thus ultimately became formalised, generalised, and inscribed in the Museum’s database.

Using MuseumPlus as the reference database didn’t translate into a uniform and systematic digitisation process in the Museum. The process can rather be described as fragmentary, selective, and subjective. The digitisation process was selective, because it was mainly through external research projects that the collection was digitised, such as a European project on the inventory of musical instruments or a research project on the Africa collection’s archival files. The digitisation was fragmentary, because the objects had been digitised at different times and with different technical support and expertise. Not all the objects were integrated in the database. Those
Figure 3.31 Inventory of 'Leipzig Repatriation', ca. 1990–1992, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer unidentified
that were digitised varied greatly in their detail, some missing photographs, measurements, or descriptions. The digitisation was subjective, because the collections’ capture (Erfassung) and the detail of the indexation (Erschließung) depended on the personal engagement and interest of each regional department’s employees. Put differently and somewhat provocatively, the objects which the museum staff considered important were privileged in their inventory. As a result, some parts of the Museum’s collections were almost entirely available via the database while other parts of the collections were absent.25

Boris Gliesmann’s personal effort consisted in transforming the database – which he referred to the as the ‘documentation system’ – into a handy working tool. The most important change from GOS to MuseumPlus, he argued, was from a ‘hierarchical’ to a ‘relational’ documentation system. Research on the objects could start from different points of departure, depending on the researcher’s interest – the object, the person, the region, the material, etc. All of the data was related and included information on the transactions linked to the collections: the restoration and condition reports (Zustandsprotokoll), the loan procedures, the location management (Standortverwaltung). Establishing these relations from 2004 on had been ‘manual work, work of sweat and tears’ (Schweißarbeit). It consisted of cleaning the data (Bereinigung), erasing doubles, and checking the spelling of people and things. ‘We had three or four Adolf Bastians [the museum’s founder] in the system, and we needed to merge the information into one single data set.’

Conversing with Boris Gliesmann in 2016, a transfer of MuseumPlus to a new database management system, Rich Internet Application (RIA), was envisioned to be accomplished in 2019.26 The entity of the SMB were part of this process in order to develop the new database ‘in conversation with the different museums’. In several workshops on the different aspects of the database – ‘persons/cooperate bodies’ (Personen/Körperschaften), ‘loans’ (Leihverkehr), etc. – they developed the core structure of the database togeth-er. Whereas there was a wish within the working group to keep the database ‘neutral’ to be of use for all museums, the particularity of the Ethnological Museum’s database, with its ‘ethnic groups’ (Ethnien), would transform into population groups (Bevölkerungsgruppe) and faith or religious community (Glaubensgemeinschaft). The structural changes within the organisational documentation mode have not been accessible to those outside it. The publicly accessible database, SMB Digital, only shows a fraction of the existing digitised collections and of the available information. Despite the relative immobility of the physical collections in Dahlem, not only has their digiti-sation gone through several generations of technology but also the larger organisational frameworks and responsibilities have shifted significantly between the end of the 1990s and today.
In ethnological museums, it is regional departments that continue to predominate the museum’s internal organisation. Ordered geographically, the respective collections are, in turn, managed and directed by curators. In 1963, the Africa curator Kurt Krieger recalled the coming into being and functioning of the departments within the larger Museum für Völkerkunde.

At the beginning of this century (1904/1905), the mass of the collections made it necessary to divide them into independent departments, which since then have led a distinct life of their own, albeit in a changing administrative composition. Each of these eight departments [...] is a closed whole within the wider framework of the Museum für Völkerkunde. (Krieger, 1963, p. 245)27

Until 1999, the different ‘closed wholes’ – the departments – worked as comparatively separate entities alongside one another in a ‘very decentralised’ manner, as the former Africa curator Peter Junge described it.28 The department’s curator was provided with a storage manager, one to two restorers, and a secretary, who together guaranteed the departments’ autonomous functioning. In 1999, the museum’s director Klaus Helfrich (1985–2000) suggested a structural reform. The reform, also publicly visible because of the museum’s name change from Museum für Völkerkunde to Ethnologisches Museum, consisted of a reshuffling of the internal structure to break with the powerful curatorial authority over the collections. Helfrich, museum staff reported, had perceived it as ‘impossible’ to direct the Museum with such powerful curators. He dissolved the different regional departments (Abteilungen) and suggested an organisation around the new departments of ‘Direction’, ‘Collections’, ‘Restoration’, ‘Communication’, ‘Centralised Services’, and ‘Science and Research’.29 The curators’ status changed from that of director of an autonomous study collection (Abteilungsleiter) to that of a managerial position in a scientific area within the ‘Research and Science’ department (Fachreferatsleiter). Some curators perceived the consequences of the reform as a ‘downgrade’ and as a ‘disempowerment’. In practice, some refused to accept the newly imposed hierarchies.30 In particular, curators lamented the loss of each department’s secretary, as it is ‘so much more convenient to arrive at work and the coffee is waiting for you on your desk. And to say: “Please write this down.” And it’s a done job’.31

In 2000, Viola König replaced Klaus Helfrich as the new director. Some curators expected her to withdraw Helfrich’s reform, which she refused to
Viola König rather arrived with the mission to develop a concept for the Humboldt Forum, to be realised together with the new Africa curator Peter Junge.

Despite the long envisioned move of the Ethnological Museum’s collections to the Humboldt Forum, no structural decision had been taken about the relationship between the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum when I arrived in the Museum in 2013. At the time, no official representative of the Humboldt Forum was yet in place, but rather, different people took on this role on different occasions, while other potential candidates decided not to do so. In the Museum, the protagonists linking the Museum with the Humboldt Forum consisted first of its director Viola König and her team. The Swiss cultural manager Martin Heller was commissioned in 2010 to lay out a concept for the ‘Agora’ – the Humboldt Forum’s programme – as well as several temporary exhibition spaces. He was also named the Humboldt Lab Dahlem’s artistic director (2012–2015). The Humboldt Lab Dahlem, equipped with 4,125 million euros by the Federal Cultural Heritage Foundation (Kulturstiftung des Bundes), had been set up to ‘provide impulses for the exhibition planning [...] for the future Humboldt Forum’ (Humboldt Lab Project Archive–Humboldt-Forum, 2015). Finally, Hermann Parzinger, president of the SPK, had taken on the role of speaking in the name of the Humboldt Forum in public. The director of the SMB, Michael Eissenhauer (since 2008), however, stayed in the background of debates related to the Humboldt Forum. When the conservative politician Monika Grütters took office as the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media in 2013, she adopted the Humboldt Forum as her central political project. In a grand coalition of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, Monika Grütters aimed to make the Humboldt Forum ‘a house out of one mold’ (ein Haus aus einem Guss) and the ‘nation’s business card’ (Visitenkarte der Nation). This would include organisation building and deciding on central recruitments (Richter & Abel, 2017; Mangold & Timm, 2018). In what follows, I chronicle the central developments concerning the Ethnological Museum and the Humboldt Forum – most of which were accompanied by controversies.

Monika Grütters was invested in building the Humboldt Forum as an independent organisation. Her first important intervention in the Humboldt Forum’s organisational structure was to nominate the founding directorship (Gründungsintendanz) in April 2015. The founding directorship would be the first official representatives of the Humboldt Forum employed to develop its ‘common vision’, bringing together the Humboldt Forum’s different players, consisting since early 2015 of the Site Museum (Museum des
Ortes), Humboldt University, the ‘non-European’ collections, and, in place of the Central Library, an exhibition about Berlin. The directorship consisted of Hermann Parzinger, representing the SPK; the art historian Horst Bredekamp, representing the Humboldt University; and Neil MacGregor. The nomination of Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum, was celebrated as a diplomatic coup by the press, as ‘Chancellor Merkel’s preferred candidate’ (dpa, 2015). This positioning justified that he took the lead in what was often referred to as ‘the triumvirate’ (dpa, 2015). The Ethnological Museum’s exhibition plans were in their final stage at the time of the founding directorship’s nomination. Neil MacGregor’s intervention in the exhibition plans were pronounced and logistically supported and financially realised by the company Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH (2016–2018), a firm created explicitly for the purpose. In December 2017, the founding directorship was replaced when the organisational and administrative structure of the Humboldt Forum was introduced. Monika Grütters created and appointed two further leadership positions: the director of collections (Sammlungsdirektor), merging the directorship of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, and the general director (Generalintendant). Both described as ‘managers’ rather than ‘creatives’ in the press, the recruitments were internal – the new director of collections, Lars-Christian Koch, was formerly curator and interim director at the Ethnological Museum; the general director, Hartmut Dorgerloh, was the former director of the Prussian Palaces and Gardens. Their recruitment was interpreted as an emergency solution to the Humboldt Forum’s organisational constellation, which was repeatedly characterised by museum staff and the press as ‘lacking in transparency’, ‘hierarchical’, or ‘paralysed’ (Häntzschel, 2017a; 2017b; 2018a).

The Humboldt Forum was not going to become a museum as conventionally understood. As Monika Grütters stated in 2017, ‘we don’t want to do museum work, but rather use the items from the collections as a point of departure to work interdisciplinarily’. Despite the central position attributed to the ‘non-European collections’ and recurrent comparison with other grand national organisations such as the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, the British Museum, or the Centre Pompidou (Parzinger, 2011, pp. 6–7), the Humboldt Forum’s concept and organisation were arguably different from museum organisations, notably in relation to budget distribution. In Paris, the restructuration of the museum landscape related to ethnological collections implied the inventory, digitisation, restoration, and new storage of its collections. In Berlin, resources were only marginally devoted to the museums involved but rather to the Humboldt Forum itself. The building’s overall construction costs were originally planned to amount to 480 million euros, and were continually adjusted, for example
to 595 million euros in 2015, and were finally predicted at a total sum of 680 million euros in 2021 (Bundesregierung, 2019, p. 2; Schönball, 2019; APA, 2021). Additional resources were distributed to the programming, exhibition, and event sector of the Forum, with an estimated yearly budget of 50 million euros (Fahrun, 2016). 39

In Dahlem, the Museum closed in January 2017. The last exhibition of the Africa department to be presented in Dahlem before the Museum’s closure was *Art from Africa*, a black-cube exhibition using brightly lit pedestals and showcases to present the objects according to their attributed status as ‘art’ (2005–2016, curated by Peter Junge with Paola Ivanov).40 *Art from Africa* was organised in four different categories: ‘Art History’, ‘Figural Plastic’, ‘Performance’, and ‘Design’. Contrasting a geographical partition, this organisation emphasised its ambition to align itself with Western art history. The exhibition was controversial. For the exhibition’s critics, the exhibition evoked references to Africa as ‘the dark continent’, bringing up associations of the primitive and the savage (Dean, 2010, p. 83; von Bose, 2016).

In 2013–2015, the Museum’s official plan was to move the collections to an external storage system in Berlin’s Friedrichshagen suburb by 2017, located some twenty-five kilometres from the Humboldt Forum. The site was described as providing ideal storage conditions, conservation conditions, and, importantly, enough space to host the collections. However, as museum staff stated in 2013, the SPK didn’t seem to have engaged in seriously planning Friedrichshagen. The time, staff, and financial resources that were needed for the construction and move of the collections were not only unknown to museum staff, but the necessary planning didn’t seem to be a priority to the SPK at the time. At a debate in the Berlin parliament in December 2013, the SPK’s president, Hermann Parzinger, provided only vague answers with regard to questions concerning the future of the museum complex in Dahlem. As his answers suggested, the research, storage, and conservation of the collections were shaped by a lack of general planning, but substantially, by a lack of financial planning (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2013b, pp. 32–37). Information on these precise aspects of museum work were difficult to obtain during my stay at the Museum, and also afterwards. To my knowledge, official publications on the matter don’t exist, and the information presented here is based on the accounts of those working in the Museum.

In 2017, the plan to move the collections to Friedrichshagen was abandoned. Its financing had not been secured. Museum staff had long lived with doubts about whether the move would actually take place, and finally the plans concerning Friedrichshagen were officially suspended. Instead, the idea of a ‘research campus’ (*Forschungscampus*) was suggested. This would entail the collections mostly staying in Dahlem, and a cooperation with the
Freie Universität, the museum’s neighbour, would be set up. The research collections would be distributed across the entire Museum, including in the former exhibition halls (Ossowski, 2017). In July 2019, the results of a ‘potential assessment’ (Potenzialanalyse) were published by an architectural firm and partly made public, announcing the anthropologist Alexis von Poser as the Museum’s deputy director at the same time (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2019). As with plans announced for Friedrichshagen, however, the future of the project, and thus of the collection, remained uncertain, because the financial realisation was not guaranteed. In 2021, the research campus has its own sub-website as part of the SMB’s website and is described as ‘a new kind of research and presentation location emerging under the name of the Forschungscampus Dahlem’.41 In the Humboldt Forum’s shadow, the collection’s fate remains uncertain.

Conclusion

Working through colonial collections articulates in this chapter in my desire to understand how the collection formed and circulated. To research these histories, this chapter makes an argument for ethnography. Given the difficulties to trace internal work processes and the shifts and turns of things via written documentation, the chapter also builds on accounts of people who have worked in the Museum, indicating not only where to find and identify archival sources and literature but also how to document the employees’ own histories of engagement with the collections.

The stories that gradually appear when opening boxes and folders when starting to talk to people show a profoundly instable and changing collection story. These were shaped first and foremost by the collection’s constitution in colonial times. With the overwhelming quantity of objects that arrived in Berlin, the predominant question, which resonates to this day, has been, very practically: how and where to store them? What to do with all these objects, of which the large majority remains inaccessible in museum storage? And finally, with which legitimacy can they be stored here in Berlin? The history starts in the nineteenth century with a museum building in the city’s centre, only a few kilometres from today’s Humboldt Forum, which was already too small to house the collections at the Museum’s opening in 1873. Moving towards Berlin’s periphery, the First World War interrupted the ambitious plans to build a larger museum complex in Dahlem. Collections were, between the two World Wars, divided between the city’s centre and Dahlem. Collections were relocated all over Germany, for their protection, before and during the Second World War. A new museum building opened
from 1970 on in Berlin-Dahlem, extending the historical buildings. The objects being repatriated from the former GDR disrupted the existing museum structures. The collection’s arrival in Dahlem incited the making of new museum storage spaces, quick digitisation, and new inventory systems. After an internal restructuring in the 1990s, the move of the museum’s exhibitions to the Humboldt Forum focused the debate once more on the question of periphery and centre. These histories show how profoundly the collections were touched by the central political regimes and developments of the twentieth century, affecting their movement significantly.
Notes

1. The photographs stored in the Africa photo department consist mainly of donations from the Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte. Many of these are photo albums from individuals and their travels.

2. At the time of writing, what exists of the exhibition history is inventoried and scanned, and a list documenting the exhibition history of the Africa department exists. The hierarchy of museum histories, however, is reflected in a major recent research and digitisation project, in which archival files until 1947 are digitised to be publicly accessible, but anything after this period is not documented, 'Digitalisierung des historischen Archivs im Ethnologischen Museum – 1830–1947', https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammelnforschen/bibliothek-und-archiv.html, consulted 2 February 2019

3. Königgrätzer Straße was renamed Stresemannstraße in 1930.

4. My translation from the German: 'In 1907 sollte das Gebäude in der Königgrätzer Straße polizeilich geschlossen werden, falls nicht sofort Gänge und Treppe so weit geräumt wurden, dass wenigstens zwei Leute aneinander vorbeikommen konnten.'

5. The distinction of four continents was based on conversations with the directors of the museum’s departments for Near Eastern and Indian collections (Vorderasiatisch und Indisch), East Asia, Africa and Oceania, and the Americas. These departments were founded after the death of the museum director Bastian in 1905.

6. Baumann claimed that particular cultures could be associated with particular geographical regions. He was convinced that environment, culture, and particular groups formed entities, which could be distinguished one from the other.


8. Meeting with Boris Gliesmann, 21 December 2015, my translation from the German: ‘Die Sammlungen wurden wild durch’s Land geschoben, je nachdem, wo die Front war.’

9. The stamps in the inventory book 'Zurück aus W', 'Zurück aus C' (Back from W, Back from C), indicate the objects’ trajectories as they slowly returned to Berlin (see chapter four for more detail on inventory processes).

10. Exhibition texts of the exhibition from the archive of the Ethnological Museum. The exhibition only showed exhibits from what was depicted as 'Northern and Western Africa'.


12. Meeting with Boris Gliesmann, 21 December 2015

13. The Leipzighalle served as a storage room for exhibition furniture at the time of my research.

14. Figures stem from Philipp Schorch's article, which also lists 727 wooden boxes, 505 large packages, and 293 individual packages that were repacked in Leningrad.

16. Little information on the repatriation is available. It is mentioned and discussed in publications authored by curators and staff of the Ethnological Museum themselves, such as in Höpfner (1992); Sanner and Bolz (1999, pp. 45-49); Bolz (2003, p. 200); Haas (2002), or from external commentators and researchers such as Feest (1991); Schade (1991); Schorch (2018).

17. Field notes from 7 November 2014. The storage manager was thinking in particular of a deadline at that time. This time frame would consist of exactly three years until the collections would have to move to the external storage spaces in Friedrichshagen in 2017 after the museum’s closure, still scheduled as such in 2014.

18. Interview with Boris Gliessmann, 21 December 2015.


22. The quotations in the next three paragraphs related to Boris Gliessmann stem from fieldnotes of a training session with Boris Gliessmann, 24 October 2013.

23. The project Musical Instrument Museums Online was financed by the European Commission and ran from 2009 till 2011. The project’s aim was to create a large database of public collections of musical instruments, http://www.mimo-international.com/MIMO/accueil-ermes.aspx, consulted 2 October 2017.

24. In the database, short summaries of each archival file were available, thanks to a research project that had inventoried all the files from the Africa department from 1873 until 1919. The archives were documented on microfilm. The research project, funded by the Volkswagen-Stiftung, was led by Christine Stelzig, whose PhD dissertation resulted from this research, see Stelzig and Röhm (2000); Stelzig (2004).

25. This observation is confirmed by the digitisation strategy of the SPK (Digitalisierungsstrategie der Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz – inhaltliche Prioritäten der Einrichtungen der SPK 2011–2015), released in 2010 (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2010). The strategy doesn’t suggest a systematic and general approach, but rather a strategy of ‘priorities’ and ‘foci’.

26. Interview with Boris Gliessmann, 8 November 2016.

27. Translated from the German: ‘Anfang dieses Jahrhunderts machte die Masse der gesammelten Bestände die Aufteilung in selbstständige Abteilungen notwendig, die seither ein ausgeprägtes Eigenleben, wenn auch in wechselnder verwaltungstechnischer Zusammensetzung, geführt haben. Jede einzelne dieser acht Abteilungen, die im folgenden in ihrer heutigen Form dargestellt sind, ist ein geschlossener Ganzes innerhalb des weiteren Rahmens des Museums für Völkerkunde.’


29. The two minor departments of Visual Anthropology and Music Ethnology existed as separate departments.

30. The quotations stem from interviews with the former storage manager, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff (7 January 2015), and a conversation and an interview with the former Africa curator, Peter Junge (8 September 2017, 19 January 2021).


32. During my fieldwork at the Museum (2013–2015), the Konzeptgruppe (concept group) consisted of the museum’s director, Viola König, and Peter Junge, co-curator for the African collections (replaced by Monika Zessnik at his retirement in late 2014), and Markus Schindlbeck, curator for the Oceanic collections. The concept group was responsible for reporting and communicating the museum’s developments to the SPK and the SMB.

33. That Hermann Parzinger adopted this role is testified, for example, by the publications he authored in its name (Flierl & Parzinger, 2009; Parzinger, 2011)
34. Paul Spies, former director of the Amsterdam Museum, was responsible for the Berlin exhibition for the Humboldt Forum and became the director of the Stiftung Stadtmuseum from September 2015 (Brockschmidt, 2015; City Museum Foundation). Gorch Pieken artistically directed the Humboldt University exhibition from April 2018 on, temporarily employed to create the first exhibition for the Humboldt Forum’s opening (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2018).

35. About one-third of the plans for the Ethnological Museum and Museum for Asian Art changed: permanent exhibitions were transformed into temporary ones, allowing Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH to release funds, exercise control, and provide expertise (Häntzschel, 2017b; 2018a). The company, with its newly recruited staff, would integrate the future owner and operator of the Schloss, the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss (Humboldt Forum in Berlin’s City Palace Foundation), in early 2019.


37. Translated from the German: ‘Wir möchten nicht museal arbeiten, die Sammlungsgegenstände sollen vielmehr der Anlass für eine interdisziplinäre Herangehensweise sein’ (quoted in Häntzschel (2017b)).

38. See, for example, Nicoletta Tiziana Beltrame’s ethnography of the process (Beltrame, 2012; 2015).

39. In 2018, it was communicated that 350 people would be temporarily employed until the Humboldt Forum’s opening (Kuhn, 2018a). These posts would, however, be made permanent on 1 January 2019, when the subsidiary Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH was integrated into the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss. In contrast, it was communicated that forty additional temporary recruitments were devoted to the museums (Ethnological Museum and Museum for Asian Art), mostly corresponding to the immediate need to restore and prepare objects for the move to the Forum (Kuhn, 2018a).

40. Behind the Art from Africa exhibition, other singled-out rooms and smaller exhibitions followed, including a room on Africa in Berlin, a section on Bamum: Tradition and Innovation in the Cameroun Grassland, and a permanent exhibition on Benin, entitled Benin: History of a Western Kingdom, which all opened in 2009.
