Working Through Colonial Collections

Oswald, Margareta von

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Oswald, Margareta.

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During my first days in the Museum in October 2013, I visited Boris Gliesmann’s office. He was responsible for the Museum’s database, MuseumPlus. I wanted to do research on a particular object, III C 14966, a ‘Luba’ stool. I worked with Boris Gliesmann because Paola Ivanov, one of the two curators of the Museum’s Africa collections, had charged me with provenance research for the Humboldt Forum. She intended to research the provenance of a specific group of objects produced by groups identified as ‘Luba’ or objects identified as ‘Luba-ised’, and she asked me to join a study she had initiated with the museum apprentice (Volontärin) Verena Rodatus.1 Paola Ivanov suggested that I was to focus on a group of objects gifted to the Museum in 1902 by the colonial officer Werner von Grawert. Some of these objects now belong to the Museum’s most valuable objects and are part of its acclaimed masterpieces. I was particularly interested in a wooden stool because it had been attributed to a specific group of authors, the ‘Buli workshop’ – in contrast to an overwhelming majority of objects in the collection, whose producers were undocumented and remain anonymous. As to the location of the Buli workshop, the stool had thus most probably been produced in what was then the Congo Free State, the Belgian king Leopold II’s private colony, today’s Democratic Republic of Congo. Paola Ivanov described that the Luba and related peoples ‘regarded [the objects] as the most important objectivisation of the power of kings and chiefs’, embodying ‘the ancestors and the royalty represented by them’ (Junge, Ivanov, & Ethnologisches Museum, 2005, p. 91).2
In Boris Gliesmann’s office, several old exhibition catalogues, books, and historical files lay on different tables, ready to be worked on. Books were aligned on the wall on wooden shelves, next to historical photographs. Unlike other offices in the Museum, Boris Gliesmann’s was rather dark and had a dusty, historical feel to it. Boris Gliesmann and I installed ourselves in front of the computer screen together. The research started by entering the precise object number. An interface with different tabs opened.

The grey, sterile interface of the database suggested objectivity, order, and the uniformity of knowledge. It alluded to completeness. The look of the digital gave the impression of an almost ahistorical neutrality. The different categories seemed to be self-evident, such as the word ‘inventory’, which comes from the Latin word of ‘to find’ or ‘to come upon’. Inventory was, however, the creation rather than the stumbling upon of a certain reality.

What I could observe on-screen were the accumulated results of manifold processes of naming. The processes of naming are at the core of the process of differentiating, and are never innocent, or neutral. Inventory enables groups and categories to be formed and order to be created, which, in turn, include some, but exclude others. As Bowker and Star argue,

> [e]ach standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing – indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous – not bad, but dangerous (Bowker & Star, 1999a, pp. 5–6).

During the period of its foundation, institutionalisation, and professionalisation in the nineteenth century, anthropological category work was an exemplification of this danger: the ideologies that ground these categories were based on the production of differences underlying the colonial project. I refer to what results from these differentiation processes as ‘colonial differences’. These names and categorisation standards still form the core and base of the Museum’s knowledge infrastructure: its database. To work within the grid means to engage with the Museum’s fundamental epistemologies.

The database was part of the Museum’s knowledge infrastructure insofar as it helped museum staff to access, administer, and order the Museum’s collections. The infrastructure thus enabled the inscription and administration of knowledge assembled around the objects and so enabled their maintenance and care. At the same time, the infrastructure itself needed to be maintained, to, as Jörg Niewöhner argues, make invisible the social and ethical priorities and decisions that underly its constructions and developments (Niewöhner, 2014, pp. 343–344). Infrastructure work is characterised...
by invisibility. Database work in particular is invisible when it comes to who is involved, as well as how the daily work of entering, cleaning, and controlling data is accomplished (Nadim, 2016). By describing processes of how knowledge is produced with and via the museum’s database, this chapter attempts to render these processes and people tangible.

This chapter departs from what can be deciphered from this flat, flickering screen. It works through the genealogies of inventorying and cataloguing processes in the Museum and subsequently discusses the ways in which colonial pasts and presents relate. By working through the process of provenance research on this particular object, the chapter is concerned with what constitutes the Museum’s most fundamental knowledge production: the practices of naming, cataloguing, and classifying collections. It scrutinises how remnants from the colonial past reappear within the Museum’s infrastructures and how museum staff relate to them today. How are past ways of conceiving, imagining, and classifying cultures reflected in current ways of working with the collections? Where and how do museum staff identify problems, where do conflicts between past and present arise, and how do museum staff grapple with them? I return to the question of agency within an organisation built on colonial grounds: is it even possible to work outside of categories of colonial difference, and if so, what are the strategies?

I engage with these questions via the analysis of my own process of acquainting myself with the database via the research on a particular object. As I remark on the dependence on and trust in the Museum’s historical sources, I start imagining the objects’ digital counterpart as their avatar. Transformed through the accumulation and removal of data, the avatar delves into the database’s restricted grid. This figure of thought helps to underline the
interdependence of historical and contemporary processes of inventorying, ultimately pointing to the difficulty of troubling the museum’s colonial epistemologies. The ethnography reveals how the Museum’s practices of ordering and classifying allow categories of colonial difference and stereotypes to persist – practices that I describe as *discrimination* in their effect of recognizing and marking something as different and distinct. The chapter demonstrates how historical taxonomies are maintained and continue to be privileged in the definition and interpretation of the Museum’s collections. These historical taxonomies and epistemologies coincide with the foundation of anthropology as a discipline, which worked in complicity with colonial ways of conceiving the world. The database sorts and reflects how the Ethnological Museum produces knowledge, but also determines it itself. This chapter tackles these grounds of knowledge production in the Museum, showing how people grapple with the very names, words, and orders that define the collections. I discuss how, why, and when these epistemologies get challenged but resist.

**Navigating the database**

Knowing how to manipulate the database was a premise for doing research in the Museum. As we sat together in front of the screen, Boris Gliesmann explained that, for any research, three important sources were to be consulted – the object, the person, and the historical files from the archive. We had started with the consultation of the object, III C 14966. As Boris Gliesmann referred to the stool as III C 14966, I use this ethnographic term exclusively here (and not vernacular names), also because I am interested in deciphering its position within the museum’s regime and orders. He navigated quickly and securely in the database. It became obvious that navigating the database was not self-explanatory and required a detailed knowledge and trained practice of its different functions. Boris Gliesmann made parts of it readable to me, but the links, relations, and associations behind each object were not easy to trace. While he already discussed details concerning the object, I was still busy accurately writing down key combinations and ‘translations’ for

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Figure 4.2 Screenshots from MuseumPlus: ‘Burning head’ and ‘Pot with a lid, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
different symbols, such as what he called ‘pot with a lid’, which refers to a link to the archive, or the ‘burning head’, referring to the search functions for images (see figure 4.2).

Boris Gliesmann was responsible for the process of the digitisation and documentation of the collection by himself. He occupied a quasi-monopolistic position when it came to the control, monitoring but also understanding the database’s functioning. He had co-developed the database MuseumPlus. Located in the Museum’s department ‘collections’ (Sammlungen), Boris Gliesmann’s position was referred to as ‘museologist’ (Museologe). He preferred to call himself a ‘documentalist’ (Dokumentar). This designation highlighted his attempts to ‘enrich’ (anreichern) the database with more information, ‘documenting’ it, extracting this information mainly from sources within the Museum’s archives and online research. To my surprise, when I asked him about his everyday work, which, from an outsider’s position like mine, could have been perceived as rather boring, he stated that it was ‘extremely varied’. He described his role as being at the ‘interface’ (Schnittstelle), occupying a ‘pivotal position’ between different departments, such as the collections, the conservation services, and the administration, as well as between regional departments of the Museum. He was one of the few people, he argued, who could get a comprehensive understanding of the Museum. Even though Boris Gliesmann was constantly working with different departments and switching interlocutors – ‘in one day, it can happen that I have to switch from Africa to Oceania, from 1850 to 1979’ – he wasn’t part of a team, but could be considered the node between different teams and individuals. Boris Gliesmann was in his forties and had spent most of his career in the Museum. After an education as a museologist in Berlin, he started to work in the Ethnological Museum in 1998. A loner, he mainly worked by himself, with a discreet passion, not dusty like his office at all.

The interdependence of historical inventories and current digitisation

When we started looking into III C 14966, Boris Gliesmann explained that all research included going back to the historical documentation. The information in the database was based on the historical inventory, which Boris Gliesmann described as the ‘database in a book’. The direct parallel established between the physical paper and digital counterpart mirrored his description of the data set representing an ‘index card on-screen’ (Karteikarte). The process of digitisation had consisted in transferring the historical
information, if available, to the digital system. When III C 14966 arrived in the Museum, it was first recorded in the inventory (Erwerbsbücher), within the bundle in which it arrived. Then, the objects were separated regionally and were recorded one by one (Einzelobjekterfassung) in the ‘main catalogue’ (Hauptkatalog). Around 1900, objects arrived in their thousands in the Museum. I could imagine the difficulty of a consistent and efficient inventory when Boris Gliesmann explained that, to inventory a bundle of two thousand objects at once, which was not improbable at the time, the Museum might need between five and ten years. The process included the risk of losing sight of which object belonged to the bundle and breaking the chronology. As Boris Gliesmann highlighted, ‘in the best case’ in addition to this two-step inventory process, an object card for each object was created and has remained as historical documentation to this day. The cards included measurements of the objects, descriptions of their usage and significance, sometimes even some drawings and bibliography. However, in the case of the Africa collections, the object cards as well as the photographs linked to the collections were destroyed by fire when the museum building was bombed during the Second World War. The only source that remained and is still used today are reproductions of the original negatives of the inventory, printed on sheets of A4 paper and bound as a book.

This source, or rather, its scan in the database, is what we went back to. The list resembled a listing of birthdates: once attributed a name and a number, the thing irrevocably mutated from what it used to be into a museum object. The description as a condensed characterisation of the object situated the object in a Western museum setting. As part of the list, the object was converted into a constitutive part of the Museum and became part of a whole – the collection – with the number 14966.

As we scrutinised the inventory together, Boris Gliesmann stated, ‘That’s it. The whole documentation that we inscribe for the object now departs from the physical collection itself.’ This diverged from other regional collections in the Museum, which relied on the ‘original documentation’. As the inventory showed, the particular object 14966 was filed among a group of objects that had been given to the Museum by Werner von Grawert. On the left of the scan was the object number, the bundle of objects donated by von Grawert as a ‘gift’, starting with the object 14963. A reference to the entry book was given (‘1555/02’), as well as to the collection date, 1902. III C 14966 was described as ‘Chair, carried by two carved figures (man and woman), ‘55 cm high’, ‘Urua’. In this case, the last word referred to a geographical indication of the historical region called ‘Urua’, located on the west side of Lake Tanganyika. Almost disappearing, one could also see ‘v. Sydow’ just next to the description, which referred to an early publication
Figure 4.3 A scan of the inventory book on the page including III C 14966, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Figure 4.4 The entry for the object III C 14966, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
by the art historian and anthropologist Eckart von Sydow (von Sydow, 1923). The ‘Berlin’ stamp above the object’s number indicated that the object had stayed in Berlin during and after the war. The ‘Berlin’ stamp differed from objects stamped ‘Back from C’, indicating Celle (collecting point), and ‘Back from L’, indicating Leipzig. These stamps reveal the history of war booty and relocation of the collection during and after the Second World War. As far as the Africa collections are concerned, the only original sources that remained were this singular entry in the catalogue and the object itself. What I could see on the screen was, however, much more than that. The database indicated and was supposed to incorporate, flattened in singular tabs, the ways in which museum staff wrote, exhibited, and thought about III C 14966, and how this single line from the inventory catalogue had been interpreted and worked with since the stool’s arrival in the Museum. Less visible was that the database was based on and carried along the historical inventory’s modes of denomenating and structuring culture.

Thinking with the object’s digital avatar

To think about these relations between past and present knowledge infrastructures – the inventory books, the naming and categorisation processes, the database – I started to imagine the object’s digital counterpart on-screen as its ‘digital avatar’. I first came across the notion in Nicoletta Tiziana Beltrame’s research on the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. The object’s entry in the database was an avatar in the sense that it could be regarded as ‘a variant phrase or version of a continuing basic entity’ (Beltrame, 2015, p. 114). Expanding Boris Gliesmann’s understanding of the object’s digital presence as ‘index cards on screens’, the basic entity seemed to consist of the physical object and its historical inventory. These elements were constitutive of the object’s existence within the Museum. One element hardly functioned without the other.

After spending more time in ethnological museums, I realised that curators usually privileged the interaction with the collection via their database entries, and not in museum storage spaces or exhibition spaces. Interacting with the objects took place via its digital counterpart. The experience of encounter was limited to switching between boxes and tabs, an experience neither sensorially engaging nor visually stimulating. If available, the object was represented by a photograph, usually taken frontally, with a black, white, or grey background, sometimes bordered by measurement instruments. The avatar could be accessed via keywords, which constituted the grid it was made of, such as ‘material’, the ‘collector’, and the ‘geographical
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reference’. Boris Gliesmann thus described the database as ‘relational’, a database ‘where everything is linked’. I pictured how the different kinds of materialities related and linked through the avatar. The avatar allowed the digital object to be lifted off its two-dimensional screen and to render it three-dimensional, to see it as a figure evolving through the adding and taking away of data.

A colleague at the university objected when I mentioned the concept of the avatar to her: avatars, as she had come across them, functioned as digital incorporations of people, not objects.14 But we didn’t know who or what the museum collections consisted of. What kind of encounters did we have when working with the collection? For me, the avatar highlighted that we were possibly working with beings and subjects, and it underlined the collection’s potential subjectionhood and problematised taken-for-granted ontologies in the museum (Salmond, 2012).

Colonial epistemologies and trust

Boris Gliesmann considered the comparison of the inventory books’ scan and the database the crucial entry point to, first, double-check if the historical information had been documented correctly in the database. Second, it was important to understand, in case something had changed, why and how those changes had taken place. What this gesture ultimately showed was the trust invested in the historical sources, clearly structuring the object’s definition and interpretation. This trust was visually encouraged by the smooth digital surface of the database, a surface constituted of a particular taxonomy. Understood in Harold Garfinkel’s terms (2011 [1963]), trust is an emotion that emerges from a sense of shared reality, nurtured over time. Based on the inventory, the ways in which the object was interpreted and understood at its arrival was passed on, carried along, and further stabilised and sublimed throughout its museum and exhibition career. What was trusted, then, was the object’s first recording, which coincided with several developments: the institutionalisation of an anthropology now considered problematic and ‘anti-humanist’ (Zimmerman, 2001); the heyday of German colonialism; and the early days of the Museum, during which chaos reigned due to the arrival of thousands of objects from, among other localities, these very colonies (Zimmerman, 2001, pp. 190–191; Penny, 2002, pp. 163–215). The Museum’s taxonomy, mirrored in the database, incorporated these particular conditions. Trust is an ‘often-unquestioned background whisper of well-being’, only surfacing and brought to deliberation when actions or events doubt it (Broch-Due & Ystanes, 2016, pp. 1–2).
Unravelling the taxonomy meant to infuse suspicion in the familiar grid, ultimately questioning the legitimacy and thus acclaimed superiority of Western science based on colonial grounds.

**Taxonomy and the endurance of colonial discrimination**

The Museum’s database reflected the museum orders. Past and present practices of naming and categorising are condensed in each particular database entry – the avatar – which figured and was read by museum staff as a compressed characterisation of the object. The avatar, ideally, is supposed to indicate the accumulated knowledge of a particular object. In what follows, I will analyse III C 14966 as a constellation of categories that compose it, scrutinising the categories one by one. This analysis reveals how colonial imaginations – which accompanied processes and practices of ordering – were inscribed in present infrastructures and how they prevailed through these infrastructures. Specifically, it shows how the database reproduced colonial conceptions of binary difference – of ‘us’ and ‘them’, reflected in understandings of culture, time, and space – and how these differences shaped and defined the object’s digital counterpart in its essence.

**The category ‘collection’: Reproducing colonial binaries with the ‘ethnological’ and ‘Africa’**

The first category in the database defined the object’s affiliation to a ‘collection’, in this case ‘EM-Afrika’. The database MuseumPlus was used in all museums governed by the SPK. An indication of a particular museum – the Ethnological Museum – and a particular collection within the Museum – ‘Africa’ – was necessary to locate the object. This particular indication thus situated the object within an even more important range of collections, namely Berlin’s SMB. Which collections the objects had been attributed to – between the Museum for Islamic Art, the Museum for Asian Art, the Museum for Decorative Arts, the Ethnological Museum, and many more – defined the objects’ primary identity. This primary identity – as ‘Ethnological’, ‘Islamic’, ‘Egyptian’, ‘Greek’, etc. – was accompanied by particular value regimes and the making of differences. Long before the Museum’s opening, its founder, Adolf Bastian, excluded Europe and Asia from being the subject of ‘ethnology’, and thus from the Museum. He permitted only Asia’s Naturvölker and, for Europe, ‘some exceptions, which fit into a very small cupboard’ to be part of his Museum’s collections. Asia and Europe, he claimed, were to be
treated ‘separately’ from the other continents and, importantly, through the discipline of ‘history’, rather than ‘ethnology’ (Bastian, 1872, p. ix). These orderings are thus the result of making difference through distinction, defining ‘ethnology’ and its museum as devoted to a particular kind of cultural alterity. This kind of distinction confirms colonial dichotomies of nature and culture, culture and art, civilised and primitive. The ethnological as ‘the Other to art museums’ is neither an art museum, a historical museum, or a decorative arts museum (Bangma, 2013, p. 63).

The categorisation as ‘EM-Afrika’ in the database extends the perpetuation of differences between ‘European’, ‘Asian’, and the ‘other’ to conceptions of ‘Africa’. Differentiating processes through categorisation within ‘Africa’ become evident in deciphering the object number itself – III C 14966. After the book inventory was compiled, the ‘III C’ was added and indicated an approximate geographical ascription of the object. The ‘III’ refers to the ‘Africa’ collection, compared to other continents such as ‘Asia’ (‘I’) or ‘America’ (‘IV’). In the Museum, Africa itself had been divided into regions, represented by letters. The objects were categorised as originating from East Africa (III E), West Africa (III C), North Africa (III B), and north-east...
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Africa (III A), as well as South Africa (III D) (Stelzig, 2004, pp. 45–46). The initial division of the continent first took place in 1865 and was later corrected. As the former Africa curator and museum director Kurt Krieger noted in 1973, even though the introduction of the categories had somehow facilitated some work processes, it brought ‘above all some substantial difficulties, because the regions had been selected too arbitrarily, so that overlaps couldn’t be avoided’ (Krieger, 1973, p. 105).15

That these categorisations are consequential becomes especially evident for III C 14966. The object was marked as III C (West Africa). The stool was identified as originating in ‘Urua’, a historical region situated today in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Geographically speaking, this region was at the threshold of East and West Africa. Precise information on where the object had been produced was lacking, but it was likely that the object had been acquired in German East Africa.16 That III C 14966 was marked as stemming from West Africa, however, was probably influenced by underlying contemporary collecting conventions and aesthetic value regimes: since around 1900, objects from collections of ‘ethnology’ identified and valued as ‘art’ were mainly associated with West Africa. ‘Art’ in European conventions was synonymous with anthropomorphic and figurative elements, such as what the Luba-ised objects represented (Nooter Roberts & Roberts, 1996, p. 31; Schildkrout & Keim, 1998). Contemporary Western aesthetic values contributed to the Luba-ised objects’ early prominence in Western museums: when III C 14966 arrived in the Museum, the department’s director, Felix von Luschan, succeeded in persuading Werner von Grawert to change the object’s status from a loan to a gift. This change of status was probably motivated by the fact that von Luschan described the delivery as containing ‘beautiful monuments of African art’,17 an exceptional categorisation for African artefacts at the time. Promising an exhibition with the newly acquired pieces, Felix von Luschan offered a reward of a thousand marks to acquire more of those ‘carved art pieces’.18 Attributing this object a ‘III E’ would have contrasted with stereotypical ideas of eastern Africa, a region that was predominantly Muslim, and thus, in conventional conceptions of this region, not representing objects with anthropomorphic features. The categorisation of III C 14966 thus shows how the categorisation system as III C or, conversely, not as III E, discreetly introduced and cemented hierarchies between different objects and within the collection: the regional categorisation perpetuated specific colonial ideas about ‘Africa’ and added symbolic value to certain objects (III C), whereas other objects were devalorised via their association with eastern Africa.19

Apart from the opposition of East versus West Africa, another division was drawn between what was depicted as ‘North Africa’ and the rest of the
continent. This division appeared in the organisation of the departments. In the 1990s, the North Africa collections had been integrated into what used to be called the ‘Islamic Orient’ department (*Islamischer Orient*), which now bears the title ‘North Africa, Western and Central Asia’. There was a rumour in the Museum that the reorganisation of the collections depicted as ‘III’ was the fruit of a personal conflict within the department. Whatever the case, the reorganisation validated and reified common images of the African continent. Stereotypical representations divide the continent into a predominantly Muslim northern part and what is sometimes problematically depicted as ‘sub-Saharan Africa’, or the racialised term of *Schwarzafrika* (Black Africa). These divisions result from the colonial imagination of Africa as consisting of a ‘White’ north, to which European colonial powers granted a certain degree of culture and history, opposed to a southern part, to which the West denied any history and culture (Arndt, 2004; Machnik, 2004; Arndt, 2012, pp. 95–96). This demarcation was legitimised by racial theories, which originated from or were supported by contemporary anthropology. The division additionally presupposes two distinct regional entities that suggest homogeneity in general and religious homogeneity in particular: the ‘North Africa’ collections were integrated into the Museum’s ‘Islamic’ collections. Not only does this classification deny the religious multiplicity within the different, associated regions, as well as the diversity of the collections that are part of the collection. It also contrasts the ‘Islamic’ north with the rest of the continent, implicitly suggesting an absence of Islam and its long histories on the rest of the continent.

In practical terms, the museum staff had problems drawing clear boundaries between the different regions and thus departments: ‘No one managed to determine where sub-Saharan Africa ends’, the storage manager Hans-Joachim Radosuboff wrote in his diary in 1998. For him, III B, North Africa, was part of the collection ‘Islamic Orient’. The clear division between north and south was challenged, however, by what he depicts as ‘mixed regions’ (*Mischregionen*) such as III A (north-east Africa) and the ‘Tuaregs’ associated with III C (West Africa). These are just two of the manifold examples that raised doubts, according to Hans-Joachim Radosuboff.

III C 14966’s avatar constituted a whole that was simultaneously part of many parts. Its primary identity as being labelled as ‘EM-Afrika’ (Ethnological Museum-Africa) included a multiplicity of differentiating processes. These processes were historically situated in colonial and anthropological knowledge production and could be retraced by deciphering the category’s coming into being in the Museum’s history. These categories and the inherent hierarchies were solidified by their continuous reproduction via the object’s digital avatar.
'Geographical reference', Luba as 'ethnic group' and colonial continuations

Similar to what I describe with regard to the category ‘collection’, the category of ‘geographical reference’ (geografischer Bezug) facilitated the continued use of anthropological concepts shaped by colonial modes of thinking. Intended to provide precise territorial indications, the category of ‘geographical reference’ (Geografischer Bezug) sustained colonial notions of temporality and culture. Subsumed under ‘geographical reference’, the subcategories ‘Country’ (Land), ‘Region’, and ‘Ethnic Group’ (Ethnie) compound historical, geographical, and cultural entities. One needed to deal with ‘inaccuracy’, as Boris Gliesmann designated, when disentangling these different levels. The database dehistoricised contemporary and historical 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’, King Leopold II’s private colony. The ‘country’ was indicated as ‘Demokratische Republik Kongo’ (Democratic Republic of the Congo; henceforth, DRC), indicating a particular national constellation, only in place since 1997. The ‘region’ ‘Urua’ referred to a historical entity on the west of Lake Tanganyika, now located in the DRC region of Katanga. Leaving both ‘Urua’ and ‘DRC’ without particular dates or denominations trapped them in what has been famously expressed by Johannes Fabian as an ‘ethnographic present’, denying both historicity to those who had produced the objects in question, as well as contemporaneity to those currently living in the DRC (Fabian, 2014).

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: such names were ideologically accompanied by theories of social evolutionism and historical 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, attributions of ‘ethnicity’ continue to be contested (Sneath, 2016; see also Arndt and Hornscheid, 2004; Arndt, 2011). Scholars in anthropology have argued that ‘ethnicity’ and ‘tribe’ can be designated as colonial inventions, part of what the anthropologist Peter Pels called an ‘ontology of spatial discreteness’. Pels argues that this ontology

derives from the imaginary geography of colonial anthropology characterised by the presupposition that human diversity has to be represented in terms of discrete ethnic units that normally occupy equally discrete territories – an imagination based in the cultural presuppositions

These colonial imaginations were closely entangled with and reflected by museum orderings in the metropoles. The Africa department’s curator, Paola Ivanov, for instance, defined the collections as ‘material fiction’, stating that ‘the objects acquired in the nineteenth and early twentieth century can generally be seen as part of the European colonial appropriation of Africa, and the spatial, economic and political restructuring of the continent’ (Ivanov, 2005, p. 42). The collections were used to map, research, commodify, and govern populations within the colony, a politics in which the adoption of culture zones as ‘artistic regions’ is complicit (Fabian, 1998; Schildkrout & Keim, 1998; Bennett et al., 2017). Sarah Van Beurden argues that stylistic analysis in Western museums and academia helped to solidify and naturalise the invented categories and identities. Despite the fact that artistic styles often exceeded colonial borders, which was partly acknowledged by scholars, they were nevertheless understood as unquestionable cultural units. These ‘zones’ were often named after dominant ethnic groups identified and imposed by the colonial power (Van Beurden, 2013, p. 478; see also Kasfir, 1984). The mapping of ‘cultures’ and ‘artistic styles or regions’ continues to be prominently used.24

With reference to III C 14966, the origins of the attribution ‘Luba’ predate colonial governance, but were fixed within the colonial context. Mary Nooter Roberts describes Luba people as ‘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’ (Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 60). It was, however, not until the colonial period in the late nineteenth century that peoples referred to themselves homogeneously 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’ (quoted in Nooter Roberts & Roberts, 1996, p. 20). Based on the historical reputation of the old Kingdom of Luba and the myths of the precolonial Luba ‘empire’, the ‘Luba’ were problematically described as a ‘supertribe’ during the colonial period, as Crawford Young shows. Associated with important intellectual capacities and economic success, notably by Western expatriates, ‘Luba’ were sometimes called the ‘Europeans of Africa’; comparisons sometimes going so far that their physical features were said to resemble those of Europeans (Young quoted in Roberts & Petit, 1996, p. 212). Those connotations had consequences for who decided to call themselves ‘Luba’. Concerning artistic productions, stylistic devices
considered ‘Luba’ were judged as a ‘label of quality’, leading to what has been referred to as ‘Luba-ised’ styles, such as those of the Tabwa and Hemba peoples (Roberts & Petit, 1996, p. 236). Despite the vague definitions and colonial consolidation, the term continues to be prominently 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.

Categories as ‘historically situated artefacts’

The database’s different categories can be understood as ‘historically situated artefacts’, as defined by Bowker and Star (Bowker & Star, 1999b, p. 278). The ‘historically situated’ in this case concerned the categories’ particular genesis in and through colonial systems of governance, reproducing categories of difference that underlie them. As ‘artefacts’, the Museum’s processes of categorising III C 14966 materialised in the inscriptions of classifications and orderings and in the solidification of temporal conceptions and cultural entities.

The categories could be seen as the avatar’s skeleton, parts of the body from which its being emerged. The categories and orderings predefined the avatar. They were consequential for how III C 14966 was understood, perceived, and valued. At the same time, contemporary anthropological imaginations such as of ‘ethnic groups’ continued to be confirmed by the Museum’s knowledge infrastructure and were reflected in the avatar’s structure. Finally, the avatar formed the prerequisite for how information gathered about the object could and would enter the database for present and future research. Conceiving the categories as the avatar’s skeleton, the image of the avatar showed how the object’s understanding and definition was limited by the database’s grid to organise information. The avatar’s room for manoeuvre to develop and grow was thus clearly delimited, a delimitation historically shaped and disciplined.

One was caught in colonial epistemologies through the everyday use of the database. The kind of difference this use entailed appeared to me as a continuation of discriminatory practices. 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. The database not only inscribed past conceptualisations of difference via its present structure. It also provided a limited framework in which present and future (provenance) research would be integrated.
As such, the avatar was not a mere representation of III C 14966, a simple accumulation of data. Rather, the object’s digital embodiment determined the object’s reception, documentation, further production of knowledge, and ultimately, use.

**Manoeuvring within limited infrastructures**

Museum staff, and curators in particular, were aware of the problems and historical genealogy of the Museum’s database. Attempts to circumvent and challenge the categories and their limitations exist and continue to be invented in the Museum. The idea of an avatar emphasises that it could develop a life of its own beyond the Museum’s constraints: avatars, when defined as virtual counterparts of the human being, can be understood as ‘fantasies come to life, individual chances to step outside of one’s usual self’, to transcend the boundaries of one’s own identity’ (Khatib, 2007, p. 70). The object’s avatar offered opportunities to think about the museum object outside of the museum’s powerful frameworks, troubling categories, and contested names. The avatar thus foregrounds how the digital allows the potential disruption of the museum’s given epistemologies. It opened possibilities for new interpretations and understandings of the object itself a priori.

So far, this chapter demonstrated how the object’s avatar comes into being, and how it is composed. Departing from the historically shaped categories of the Museum’s database, the remaining paragraphs of the chapter elaborates the question of what kind of transformation, or reproduction, of the avatar’s identity was de facto taking place within the given framework. Two attempts to change started to be used with regard to the database when I was working in the Museum: the adding of categories and the erasure and replacement of names considered derogatory.

The adding of categories could concern the multiplication of categories that already existed, such as adding another ‘geographical reference’ to III C 14966, indicating the colonial political context ‘Congo Free State’. One method for challenging historical epistemologies was the introduction of the subcategory ‘historical depiction’ (historische Bezeichnung) as part of the same category ‘geographical reference’. When I worked at the Museum, the category was notably used to indicate historical descriptions of locations and places. The subcategory helped to nuance and complexify the object’s digital presence and to avoid confounding temporalities, such as indicated in the analysis of the ‘geographical reference’. The adding of sections in the database allowed for more space to record research results: whereas in my time at the Museum, the only option to report particular research
trajectories was the ‘Notes’ field in the database, in 2016, a category devoted to ‘provenance’ was added to the database.\textsuperscript{25}

In 2018, Boris Gliesmann explained during a discussion on the first draft of this chapter that the category of ‘historical depiction’ was also more frequently used to engage in a ‘transfer of categories’ (\textit{Kategorieüberführung}), in which depictions considered derogatory (\textit{abwertend}) and offensive (\textit{an-stößig}) were replaced by depictions considered more neutral.\textsuperscript{26} One of these categories, he explained, was his favourite: ‘magic’ (\textit{Zauber}).

‘Magic’, ‘charm’, ‘holy substance’ [\textit{Zauber}, \textit{Magie}, \textit{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’ [\textit{Zaubersachen}] into ‘medicine things’ [\textit{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’ (\textit{Zaubersack}) that the curators renamed as a ‘bag with objects used in the practice of medicine’ (\textit{Beutel mit medizinischen Objekten}) (Reyels, Ivanov, & Weber-Sinn, 2018, pp. 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’ [\textit{Fetischgerät}]; ‘miraculous impact’ [\textit{wundertätige Wirkung}]; ‘amulet against malicious witchcraft’ [\textit{Amulett gegen bösartige Hexerei}]; ‘hunt charm’ [\textit{Jagdzauber}]; ‘something that has the power to make rain’ [\textit{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 difficult to identify and find if your aim was to change these depictions, systematically, among so many other thousands of objects.

I hear the curators say: ‘Oh, this is a colonial use of language to depict this object, it was only used to depreciate [\textit{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 was 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.

The attention devoted to the Ethnological Museum and its collection in the context of the Humboldt Forum heightened the pressure concerning data work, both in its quality and quantity. Boris Gliesmann explained:

The Humboldt Forum has an enormous number of requests concerning the collections, and of course, in particular concerning objects which might have a problematic provenance, or a particular role. People are queuing up like at the doctor’s for these kinds of data! And sometimes, the names considered problematic are communicated to the public, when there are specific demands on objects. Then, people turn up and complain that the Museum hasn’t overcome its obsolete spirit [*altzeitlichen Geist überwunden*].

Another side effect of the preparations concerning the Humboldt Forum exhibitions was that activity around the database had grown significantly. Objects needed to enter the data system to be communicated to the exhibition designers. I smiled in surprise when Boris Gliesmann said that ‘the work has accelerated, which is actually not so good’. He recounted how there were approximately five hundred new entries per week, with sixty people having access to the database.27 However, for documenting the collections, Boris Gliesmann explained, one needed time, accuracy, and care. He took on the role of what he framed as ‘data police’.

I adopt the role of a traffic policeman. I take care that no one crosses the street when it’s red and that pedestrians and cyclists have their rights, too. And that no one rides their bikes on the sidewalk, you know?

As an example, he pointed to the useful, but dangerous function of copy and paste within the database. One could copy data sets, indicating which
categories, such as the material or the location, should be repeated for the following object. This could be useful, such as when it came to the inventory of the manifold weapons in a collection. Some curators, as he noticed, just pressed the ‘yes’ button to duplicate categories and produced a lot of ‘nonsense’ by not examining the details of the objects. More data entries turned into more training, more data control, more ‘traffic policing’ for him. ‘I see the mistakes immediately. There are gaps, discrepancies, questionable assignments.’

In view of the pressure to document and inventory as many objects as possible, the risks of naming didn’t only appear with reference to object depictions considered offensive. At a workshop with museum staff, Boris Gliesmann described the slippery terrain in which one navigates when labelling objects. Boris Gliesmann characterised the database’s category ‘notion’ as the object’s ‘business card’ (Visitenkarte). It needed to be as precise as possible, ideally deduced directly from the collection’s historical documentation. He gave ‘wooden bowl’ as an example. A wooden bowl could simply be described as a ‘container’ (Behälter) or a ‘vessel’ (Gefäß) but would lose meaning through either of these terms. By not being precise enough, one risked, he warned, turning a religious or spiritual object into a profane one. This would erase all meaning from it. As a lot of the collections were unknown to museum staff, one needed to be especially careful. With a single careless entry in the database, spirits could literally be deleted, taken away from the object and silenced. The avatars were reproduced, steadily, but deformed, recalling the situation evoked by Goethe’s ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’, in which an army of avatars created disorder, instead of its desired contrary.

Additionally, the database was not a sufficient tool to record the information available. The Museum’s present and emerging knowledge could not be accurately reflected in its documentation systems. Even the new field of ‘provenance’ was judged insufficient by museum staff: it didn’t leave the opportunity to integrate the complex itineraries, agents, and questions that accompany provenance research, or the debates and discussions that accompany it. With the transfer from MuseumPlus to the new database management system RIA, Boris Gliesmann aimed at creating more spaces within the database where free text could be added. He hoped to ‘take the chance to break open gridlocked pathways, to rethink the system, to realise new requirements and wishes. […] The system needs to become more flexible [beweglicher].’ This allowed for, in theory, the chance to transcend the rigid grids and templates imposed by the database’s framework, but the pragmatic outcome was uncertain at the time of the conversation.
'It would be nice to have a system in how we document the collections, but we don’t have one’, Boris Gliesmann stated. The different attempts to circumvent the database’s limitations and shortcomings were thus judged necessary, but insufficient, and sometimes even problematic, by museum staff, notably because of this lack of system. The current practices of making data stood as a continuation of the Museum inventory’s history, as subjective, fragmentary, and selective. Some names considered racist or derogatory were changed, while other names were kept in their historical version. As an example, Boris Gliesmann said that ‘sandal’ (Sandale) didn’t constitute a problem, but ‘shoes of broads’, a derogatory term for women (Weiberschuhe) did; ‘magic figure’ (Zauberfigur) was changed, but ‘magician’ (Zauberer) wasn’t.

Characteristic of infrastructure work, the process of making data – the transfer from historical to digital inventory, the addition, erasure, and adjustment of information – became unmarked through the database’s functioning. The information entered in the database was not systematically referenced; object descriptions were made without source; some categories changed with time, others didn’t. Inconsistencies, spelling mistakes, synonyms for similar objects, inaccuracies flourished. Defects and bugs appeared, reshaping the avatar to unexpected, and sometimes, undiscovered ends. Once entered in the database, the data was objectified, confirmed by Boris Gliesmann’s image of the ‘index card on-screen’ and the avatar’s ordered surface. Despite the database being rather scattered, the progressively naturalised data was used in the museum context, cited, and passed on. Infrequently, I came across visible traces of doubt in the database – such as question marks after dates or names of people – which, however, shape the coming into being of its data. Layers of time, people, and their work overlapped, without being clearly traceable on the seemingly neutral screen. As the database smoothed doubts, it maintained trust in the data’s accuracy.

The lack of system spanned the different activities to counter the database’s drawbacks and was reflected by Boris Gliesmann’s claim to have situated himself ‘at the periphery’ of the Humboldt Forum developments. That the collection’s inventory, digitisation, and documentation was not defined as a priority, but rather treated as ‘peripheral’, was significant. The lack of resources devoted to collection management, as well as the restricted access policy, implied a particular understanding of the Museum’s role and mission. This understanding of the Museum’s role prioritised representation over the museum’s other task, neglecting research, collection care, and management (see also chapter four).
Conclusion

The deconstruction of different categories and imaginations in past and present knowledge infrastructures shows how their unstable, provisory, and fragile character was continually solidified, materialised, and perpetuated within the database, and, more broadly speaking, the Museum’s infrastructure. Whereas my interlocutors struggled with these categories and names stemming from colonial thought, they nevertheless form the differentiating and discriminatory grid and order which organised the Museum. The ethnography reveals how those knowledge systems persisted and how deeply the epistemological practices were engrained in the museum’s everyday – both in the past and today.

The avatar as a metaphor for the object’s digital counterpart illustrates the interdependence of its historical genealogy and the object’s current definition and interpretation, and emphasises how the database’s grid’s determines the knowledge produced within the Museum. Disciplined, the avatar emerged and was defined by the Museum’s historical inventory and sources, which served as the primary reference point for how III C 14066 was understood, perceived, and valued, and how it could exist within the Museum. The different categories constituted the avatar’s limbs, defining its condition and form. Similar to human’s digital counterpart, ‘avatars are not merely representations of bodies but forms of embodiment’ (Boellstorff, 2011, p. 504). The avatar doesn’t only include material (‘object, inventory documents’) and immaterial elements (‘categories’), but also integrates practices, and processes (‘naming’, ‘cleaning’, ‘enriching’). The avatar assembles and links these materialities and practices, which emerge in close relation to the museum’s particular ecology. The avatar thus contrasted with the objectified character of the inventory, questioning the naturalising process of objectifying itself.刚 as the material object might have changed status, form, and substance during its life within and beyond the Museum (see chapter seven), the avatar was equally yet differently multiple, instable, and mutable. However, the avatar could only dwell within the Museum’s particular ecology, and was defined by the grids, frames, and work procedures of the Museum’s knowledge infrastructure. Beyond being a vessel incorporating data, however, the avatar determines how this data is perceived, managed, and worked with. The avatar thus manoeuvres within particular boundaries, boundaries which were both challenged and confirmed by the museum staff through their daily work. The different attempts to extend the avatar, to adapt its form to today’s anthropological understandings of culture and to respond to expectations raised by critical museum and heritage studies proved difficult to achieve, in an infrastructure shaped by colonial
thought. Possessing limiting and liberating capacities, the avatar is characterised by both enabling and detaining processes.

Using the avatar as a figure to picture the object’s digital counterpart not only shows the continuities of historical categories and practices. Apart from restrictions, the figure allowed me to conceive the avatar’s potential to reinvent and transcend these very categories. Conventionally, avatars are understood as a ‘digital you’. Khatib describes them as ‘a type of transcendent alterity which is both created and controlled by the self’ (Khatib, 2007, p. 70; my emphasis). The virtual manifestation of the object, however, opened the possibility to extend the right to create, shape, and compose itself to multiple and diverse authors. The call for ‘multiperspectivity’ has been voiced frequently in relationship to ethnological collections, and has been a constitutive part of the Humboldt Forum’s concept and communication strategy (von Bose, 2017b, pp. 415–416). In contrast to the practical difficulty of having access to the material collections themselves, the digital offered the potential to liberate the avatar from its constraints in order to attend to a more diverse multivocality.

The potential of the object’s digital counterpart to become ‘otherwise’ lay beyond the adding of categories, a process which can be interpreted as extending colonial logics of ordering itself. Other ways of administering and ordering collections digitally were possible in the attempt to attend to multivocality, and ultimately, to repatriate, or, in more humble terms, to ‘e-patriate’ knowledge (Boast & Enote 2013). Examples existed, and one of them had been developed within the Ethnological Museum itself (Scholz, 2017). Fundamental in these alternative database systems has been the attempt to take into account different ways of organising and naming fields of knowledge, with the aim of establishing a base for collaborative relationships. This concerns, for example, the attempt to introduce a general flexibility and multiplicity, instead of a rigidity and singularity, in the denomination of objects, the restricted access to particular objects which were not made to be viewed and used by all (Geismar & Mohns, 2011). It includes to work with images instead of text in order not to privilege one language over another when formalising object-related attributes (Scholz, 2017) or to incorporate other data, such as audio, to contribute to linguistic revitalisation efforts (Glass, Berman, & Hatoum, 2017; see also Srinivasan et al., 2010). Other measures consist in suggestions for facilitating access, such as by the digitisation and release of the museum’s complete inventory catalogues and information on the objects (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). To my knowledge, no European ethnological museum has published their entire inventory, but calls to do so have gained recent public and academic attention (Öffnet die Inventare!, 2019).
Inviting doubts and contradictions, some of which the research itself allowed, stood in for what Walther Mignolo has framed as ‘epistemic disobedience’ in his call for decoloniality (Mignolo, 2011, p. 9). Extending the database’s grid with sub-categories didn’t allow for these doubts to flourish and for disobedience to take place, revealing the endurance and persistence of the infrastructure’s coloniality. The avatar still offered the possibility to imagine the database’s subversive potential. Put differently, rethinking the digital storing of collections offers the means to transcend and challenge the museum’s knowledge infrastructures and epistemologies, and thus to redefine the collections themselves.
Notes

1. In November 2013, I joined Verena Rodatus in the research on the object group. Rodatus was the museum apprentice (Volontärin) in the Africa department and Humboldt Lab Dahlem from May 2013.

2. My translation from the German.

3. If not indicated otherwise, the quotations and observations stem from field notes of the training session with Boris Gliesmann, 24 October 2013.

4. For the constitution of an ‘anthropological difference’ in relation to colonialism, and in particular in relation to visual culture, see Leeb (2016).

5. The department was created in 1998 after a general reform of the museum’s structure, which oversaw the administration of collections. On Gliesmann’s public LinkedIn profile, he described his tasks as collection and archive management, programme administration, documentation system (database), data management (editing and correction), as well as project management (data recording, digitisation, online presentation), https://de.linkedin.com/in/boris-gliesmann-64503638, consulted 13 September 2017.

6. Boris Gliesmann studied museology at the Fachhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft in West Berlin, a novelty at the time. A particular education for museology had only been offered in the GDR, not in West Germany.

7. The inventory book within the Museum started in 1880 and stopped in 2003. Since 2003, the inventory has only been done online in the database. Before 1880, it was the entry books (Eingangsbücher) of Berlin’s cabinet of curiosities (Kunstkammer) that served to document the object entries.

8. This two-stage process is not always the case, and in a lot of museums, Gliesmann explains, the digital main catalogue is the same as the entry catalogue.

9. During the Second World War, all the specific index cards (Karteikarten), as well as the photographs linked to and of the objects, were hidden away in a spot considered particularly safe by the contemporary Africa curator. When the building in Königsgrätzer Straße was bombed, all those documents were destroyed. The detailed information about each object disappeared and had not been recorded elsewhere.

10. In other departments of the Museum, those cards still exist. However, the inventory books were photographed on microfilm in the 1940s and the negatives were stored elsewhere. Those microfilms were discovered only recently and by accident. For the Africa department, in contrast to other regional departments, all of these catalogues have been scanned and are accessible by museum employees. The inventory book that covered the collection entries until 1880 was deemed destroyed during the war, but was found in 1994 by accident: a researcher in the East Asia department found photocopies of the inventory book in the bin and alerted the department’s curator.

11. My translation from the German: ‘Stuhl, von 2 geschnitzten Figuren (Mann und Frau) getragen’.


13. The definition of an avatar, following the Merriam-Webster online dictionary: (1) the incarnation of a Hindu deity (such as Vishnu), (2a) an incarnation in human form, (2b) an embodiment (as of a concept or philosophy) often in a person, (3) a variant phase or version of a continuing basic entity, (4) an electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user in a virtual space (as in a computer game or an online shopping site) and that interacts with other objects in the space, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/avatar, consulted 30 September 2017.

14. Discussion with Tahani Nadim of an earlier version of this text.
15. See the original phrasing in German: ‘Die Neuerung brachte in der Folgezeit neben einigen Arbeitserleichterungen auch erhebliche Schwierigkeiten mit sich, da die Regionen zu willkürlich gewählt waren, so dass sich Überschneidungen nicht immer vermeiden ließen’ (Krieger & Koch, 1973, p. 105).

16. The object was given to the Museum by the colonial officer Werner von Grawert based in German East Africa, who reportedly had not travelled outside the colony.

17. ‘... schöne Denkmäler afrikanischer Kunst’, E 1494/02.

18. E 1555/1902; E 1494/1902.

19. This asymmetry and hierarchy between East and West is confirmed in the Africa department’s history and in the history of Western museums more generally speaking. Few exhibitions and little research have been devoted to East Africa compared to West Africa, reflected, for example, in the curators’ expertise in the department, which clearly concentrated on West Africa.

20. For more discussion of racist terminology in the German language, see Arndt and Ofuatey-Alazard (2011); on the concepts of Schwarzafrica and Schwarzer Kontinent, see Arndt et al. (2004, pp. 204–208).


22. Quotations from Radosuboff’s diary entry for 2 January 1998, formerly accessible online, which he sent to me.

23. After the Berlin Conference in 1884/1885, King Leopold II of Belgium was allowed by other Western powers to take charge of the territory that today is approximately synonymous with the DRC. From 1885 to 1908, he was the sovereign of the corporate state known as the Congo Free State, which he privately controlled through the non-governmental association Internationale Africaine. In contrast to propaganda about ‘civilising’ the region, Leopold’s reign was eventually and internationally dismissed as an infamous barbarity. Public and diplomatic pressure led to the annexation of the colony to the Belgian state by 1908, when it became known as the Belgian Congo. The formation of the Belgian Congo involved the annexation of the former German-governed states of Burundi and Rwanda.


25. Interview with Boris Gliesmann, 8 November 2016.


27. Gliesmann explained the situation to his colleagues at a workshop, 4 November 2013.

28. This workshop took place on 4 November 2013. Boris Gliesmann initiated the workshop himself. At the time, curators and other staff were not necessarily familiar with the database, but expertise was needed because of the museum’s preparation for the Humboldt Forum. He aimed to ensure ‘correct data entry’.

29. Internal workshop at the Ethnological Museum with museum staff, 9 November 2017.

30. Interview with Boris Gliesmann, 8 November 2016.

31. Each entry was authored by a particular person and amendments would be marked (for example, ‘amendments made by B. Gliesmann on a specific date’). It was not clear, however, what exactly had been amended.

32. Whereas some museums, such as Paris’s Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, make their entire collections available online, they usually only give access to particular, and limited, information on the objects.