Chapter Six

Researching provenance: The politics of writing history

I only realised how little the Museum knew about its own collections when I started working there. ‘This museum focused on collecting, but little research has been done’, the then Africa curator Peter Junge stated during a conversation.¹ In the Africa department alone, out of the 80,200 objects identified, only 54,000 were inventoried in the database, which the Museum’s database manager Boris Gliesmann reported in 2019.² ‘No time’ was allocated to engage in research about the collections.³

Provenance research has always figured as one of the museum curators’ prominent tasks. Provenance is commonly understood as the reconstruction of the former use and significance of an object, as well as identifying the chain of ownership related to the object (Förster, 2019, pp. 80–81). As soon as provenance research reveals that processes within the chain of ownership raise ethical or moral doubts, however, it can be politically consequential, as it can lead to claims for restitution. In the context of mounting critique against the Humboldt Forum, provenance research gained additional political signification. The focus shifted towards the objects’ modes of acquisition and the contextualisation within colonial modes of governance in light of claims for ‘the disclosure of ownership’ (No Humboldt 21!, 2013), relating provenance to restitution.

Throughout my fieldwork in the Museum, ‘provenance research’ became a key term in the Ethnological Museum’s engagement with its colonial histories. Whereas ‘restitution’ was still a concept used mainly by to activists between 2013 and 2015, the commitment to provenance research had been repeatedly communicated by SPK representatives as well as by Monika Grütters, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media: in 2015, she stated that the SPK collections shouldn’t own collections ‘unlawfully acquired’ (unrechtmäßig erworben), research on provenance was to be ‘made transparent’ (Deutscher Bundestag, 2015, pp. 2–3). Provenance research became the prerequisite for objects to be displayed and, ultimately, to be kept in the collections.⁴ This concerned approximately seven thousand
Working through colonial collections

Working through colonial collections

200 objects from the Ethnological Museum, with almost 1,500 objects from the Africa department. The museum’s data base manager Boris Gliesmann considered the ‘simple documentation’ of the objects to be exhibited in the Humboldt Forum as an ‘ambitious goal to achieve’. He estimated that only 10 per cent of the entire collection was ‘well documented’ (dokumentiert) (2016). Proving rightful acquisition, in addition, aimed even higher and was, at the time, a responsibility carried on the shoulders of the then present museum staff alone.

In the midst of activist claims, political promises, and structural limitations imposed by the lack of staff and time, this chapter takes a step back and scrutinises how provenance research unfolded in the Museum. How did the attempt to document object histories articulate? What did the process of research reveal about the politics of producing knowledge and writing histories?

The chapter departs from a provenance research project initiated by Paola Ivanov. She asked me to join the project that she had been working on with the museum apprentice Verena Rodatus. A precursor to disclosing the museum’s colonial entanglements (Ivanov, 2005; Ivanov, 2007), Paola Ivanov’s worked on the new permanent exhibition for the Humboldt Forum. The exhibition was planned to prominently address the collection’s colonial provenance, and the research was to ground her approach. The research focused on objects produced by a group referred to as ‘Luba’, located in today’s Democratic Republic of Congo (see chapter four); these objects were part of the Africa department’s most exhibited and valuable pieces. Paola Ivanov’s research hypothesis departed from the observation that the distance between the objects’ assumed location of production and of acquisition was important. Paola Ivanov suggested that the circulation of objects, people, and ideas must have taken place before the objects were sent from German East Africa to Berlin. Accompanied by Boris Gliesmann, the database manager, we found out more about the provenance of one particular object, IIIC 14966. This stool, commonly described as a ‘caryatid stool’ in the Museum, was supposedly produced in the workshop of the Master of Buli. It entered the Museum as a gift by the German military officer Werner von Grawert in 1902 as part of a group of objects. This chapter follows the research journey throughout the Museum – its archive, library, and networks of experts.

In this chapter, I elaborate on a prominent paradox of provenance research of colonial collections. The unravelling and production of a provenance for each object is a prerequisite to situate the Museum’s embedding in and dependence on colonial systems of governance. Provenance research also creates value; it produces further knowledge about the object. This value ultimately served the organisation that possesses the object. The access to,
exchange and ownership of knowledge about the collections continued to be centralised in the Ethnological Museum itself. Many research projects, including in the Ethnological Museum, have modified the conditions of knowledge production about collection provenance ever since. However, if the conditions of knowledge production remain as they were at the time, provenance research risks contributing to the structural inequity between the Global North and the Global South, beyond questions related to ownership.

Of presences and absences in the Museum’s archive

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

During our initial training session, Boris Gliessmann told me how he approached ‘the documentation of collections’. Boris Gliessmann’s priority was to identify people individually, to give them a profile, a character, a face. He was engaged in the lengthy process of humanising the collection – and objectifying the human. The process consisted of pinning down key information, such as researching birthdates or locations. Practically speaking, the research comprised the consultation, transcription, and analysis of the Museum’s historical files, information that was subsequently expanded by bibliographical and online research. Boris Gliessmann’s approach also pointed to a seemingly natural mechanism omnipresent in provenance research in ethnological collections: for lack of other kinds of indications, the object is above all defined by the person who had collected it, not the person who had produced, owned, or used it.

Boris Gliessmann distinguished between a ‘collector’ (Sammler) and a ‘transferer’ (Veräußerer). For him, a collector was not a gallerist with commercial intentions, nor ‘Miss Erna from Steglitz’ (a district in Berlin) who gives three objects to the Museum. His understanding of a collector was someone who went on expeditions, someone usually employed by the colonial system. It implied understandings of the collection as disciplined, and possibly ‘complete’, reflecting scientific conventions of collecting in the nineteenth century, suggested by the Museum’s ‘Instructions for Ethnographic Observing and Collecting’ (von Luschan, 1904; Ankermann & von Luschan, 1914).

The provenance research was thus shaped by the presence of particular sources – produced within, for, and in dialogue with the colony – contrasted
by the significant absence of local subjects, their voices, and perspectives. To retrace the object’s trajectory meant identifying sources retracing the coloniser’s trajectories. Then, in the case of III C 14966, this primarily translated as understanding the trajectories and life of Werner von Grawert. Here, we departed from basic information provided in the database. Werner von Grawert (1867–1918) had been colonial commander of the town of Ujiji in 1898/1899. Ujiji was then located in the administrative district on Lake Tanganyika, now part of western Tanzania. Known for the fact that Henry Morton Stanley ‘discovered’ Dr Livingstone there in 1871, Ujiji had been a trading hub in the region since the 1820s (Roberts, 2013, p. 203; Sheriff, 1987). Von Grawert then moved to become colonial commander of ‘Station Usambara’ (from 1898 to 1902 and from 1904 to 1907), a town now located in the northeast of Tanzania. Several historical files (Akte) in relation to Werner von Grawert exist. In contrast to the historical inventory, which is available as scans, the historical records are only accessible physically and stored in the Museum’s archive.

Archival encounters

We changed location from Boris Gliesmann’s office, walking through the labyrinth of the Museum to reach the archive, still located within the Museum. This was exceptional then and is currently changing, because most museum archives had been transferred to the SMB’s Central Archive. The transfer to the Central Archive, some museum staff hoped, would finally put the files in ‘ideal’, standard conservation conditions.

When I looked around, I saw that the archive had been a cosy workplace for some of the Museum’s employees once: even though not in use any more, personal items, such as a radio and ashtrays were lying around. It was obvious that people had worked in and with the archive intensively, taking their time. Some museum staff described the conditions in the archive as ‘dilettante’ (dilettantisch), as unprofessional and amateurish: the files were stored in wooden cupboards, with significant air and light exposure because of the old wooden windows. The archive was located in two rooms, roughly separated by chronological order. The majority of ‘old’ files (up to 1947) were stored in one room with five different cupboards, which reflected four continents as well as ‘museum history’. The absence of ‘Europe’ as a continent, and thus a particular cupboard, exemplified the historical self-understanding of the Museum as being about ‘others’ (see a series of photographs of the archive in the visual introduction, images 5–12).
As Boris Gliesmann highlighted, III C 14966 was collected during ‘Prussian rule’, which implied, in his understanding, an accurate documentation of the Museum’s activities. In 1906, responsibility for documenting the collection’s traffic and growth had been transferred to the regional departments, which thereby gained in power and independence. Whereas this shift of responsibility didn’t change the accuracy of the documentation at the time, the documentation became fragmentary after the Second World War. The systematic approach was replaced by the curator’s individual responsibility to document their own work, and thus depended on personality and will. Even though physically separated, the collections of objects and historical files reflected each other. The files related to III C 14966 were recorded and bundled chronologically as well as regionally: like the collection inventory, the system followed the same two-step sequence (inventory followed by regional attribution; see chapter four).

Several archival files were registered under von Grawert’s name, of which some were directly linked to the objects. Boris Gliesmann helped read the files’ content. Through his reading, not only was the writing made easier to decipher thanks to his trained eye, he also explained and disentangled the colonial and administrative apparatus behind the delivery. He located the different people who signed the reports and letters in the colony (Dar es Salaam), as well as in Berlin, rendering the process more comprehensible. Boris Gliesmann knew and imagined the people. His anecdotes about the Museum’s employees in Berlin, illustrating their personal characteristics, were followed by detailed accounts of the colonial administrative system in German East Africa. By spending several years of his life within the archive, Boris Gliesmann seemed to navigate the archive via a kind of cartography of objects, people, networks, and processes. ‘Sometimes, it’s like a crime novel here!’ Boris Gliesmann liked to exclaim. When I learned to work with the archival files myself, I realised how some people’s shape appeared more clearly, and others less so. The form and style of the handwriting, the choice of words, the order of paragraphs made me project the person’s characteristics (‘sloppy’, ‘condescending’, ‘neat’). It was a trigger for the imagination during a lengthy and tedious work process. It also provoked emotional reactions, more or less welcome. Sometimes I giggled when encountering the people’s eccentricities. Or I remained in shock or disgust when coming across traces or even detailed descriptions of colonial violence.

The file linked to Werner von Grawert contained drafts of letters from Felix von Luschan to the collector, as well as a report on the arrival of the objects, object lists, and calculations of transportation costs. Werner von Grawert’s letters to the Museum were not documented in the file. III C 14966 had been part of an important shipment of 108 objects that arrived in Berlin
in 1902 and 1903, but no information about the object’s circulation and mode of acquisition on-site was identifiable. With few results on the object’s circulation, we reached out to external experts and secondary literature.

The research in yet another of the museum’s locations – the library, with its primary and secondary sources – also led to insufficient evidence. Within the research team, we consulted primary sources in the library to find traces of von Grawert, such as the German *Kolonialblatt*, which reported on missions in the colonies, that were archived in the library. Given that no reports on any mission were available, we assumed that von Grawert didn’t travel westwards, which is where the objects that had entered the collections had probably been produced. The information available on Werner von Grawert in relation to our research request was thus minimal, even though several letters existed. We still didn’t know where the object had been acquired and how.

**Reading the archive along the grain**

These research results echo Arlette Farge’s descriptions of what defines archival research, namely as ‘forever incomplete’ (Farge, 2013, p. 55). The archives were incomplete in relation to local voices in particular. This absence pointed to the denial of the locals’ agency, presence, and even existence, as well as the omission of the function, production, or transaction of III C 14966. By contrast, reading the archive along the grain (Stoler, 2009), what was documented were traces of a colonial apparatus of extracting the material culture from the colonies; this process was logistically sophisticated and financially well equipped. The (minimal) documentation of shipping, transport costs, and the department director’s appraisal and request for more objects show the entanglement of colonialism with museums and academia. This documentation reflects the contemporary department director Felix von Luschan’s ambitions to ‘systematically’ collect ‘to raise an inventory, as it were, of the complete cultural heritage’ (Ankermann & von Luschan, 1914, p. 9).

To complement these fragments, we reached out to experts in different universities and museums. We asked whether they were aware of archival traces that mentioned the circulation of objects in the region (German East Africa and Congo Free State), and in particular, whether they were aware of any, possibly violent, transactions. Whereas all researchers – historians and anthropologists alike – approved Paola Ivanov’s hypothesis that the objects may have circulated via Swahili trade caravans or as diplomatic gifts or trophies, none of them had come across specific sources that could confirm it.
On the circulation of ideas, peoples, and things

The first hypothesis we worked on concerned the circulation of the object itself. We were looking for traces that could prove that people had transported and exchanged objects at the time, both locals and colonisers. The objects could have been acquired by sale, barter, confiscation, or looting, all common forms of acquisition, but we were particularly interested in how the trade was organised around Lake Tanganyika and the functioning of local markets. Paola Ivanov argued that the object might have reached German East Africa through widespread caravans and slave traders. This would imply that the object might already have had the status of commodity then. Research had shown that a market of ‘ethnographica’ was emerging at the time in the same region (Schildkrout & Keim, 1998). Allan Roberts, professor at University of California, Los Angeles, extended the hypothesis by raising the possibility that objects could have been used as diplomatic gifts. He pointed to the prominent figure of the slave trader Tippo Tip, who might have been involved in such diplomatic exchanges. Another possibility was the objects’ movement via European colonial officials and trade or exchange among European colonial staff and ‘explorers’. The curator and anthropologist Barbara Plankensteiner quotes the German ‘explorer’ Hans Meyer, who complemented his ‘travel collection’ with collections or individual pieces by European residents (1998, p. 120). Other than the circulation of the object via Europeans, another option is circulation by those who produced the objects, as well as the circulation of ideas. A prerequisite for all of these kinds of circulations was the pronounced caravan and slave trade in the region. Artists could wander from place to place and produce objects wherever they happened to be. Victims of the slave trade from Congo were transported long distances to achieve higher prices, mainly to Tanzania. Allan Roberts argues that slaves continued to produce objects in different places and that religious practices and aesthetic forms from Congo circulated supra-regionally, citing the Tabwa as an example. The central position of and admiration for the Kingdom of Luba in the region encouraged the circulation of ideas and adoption of their style. The royal aesthetics, expressed through body art, sculpture, and performance, were highly regarded and embraced by immediate neighbours, as well as more distant societies, such as in Tanzania, Zambia, and Malawi. These practices spread because of hierarchical relationships and by force, but also through what Roberts depicts as ‘prestige through association’ (Roberts, 2013, p. 201).

The finding of any source could lead to great excitement, which could subsequently be dampened just as quickly. The finding of a drawing was such a case, which Julien Volper, keeper at the Royal Museum for Central Africa,
referred to in a conversation. Julien Volper had researched the circulation of a Luba mask. He had come across an early drawing by V. L. Cameron from 1877, in which a child is carrying an object on the right-hand side of the image (Volper, 2010, p. 13). In discussion of the image with Pierre Petit, a professor at Université Libre de Bruxelles in Brussels and an expert in Luba culture, he advised approaching the validity of colonial imagery with great caution. Drawings especially, he warned, were often the product of colonial imaginations and risked having little to do with local realities – a risk made all the more probable by the fact that the drawing was by Daniel Oliver and not the book’s author.22

![Image of a slave caravan, with the caption 'Slave-Gang', taken from V. L. Cameron, Across Africa (1877) (Cameron & Oliver, 1877, p. 357)](image)

**Research results: Speculation and fragmentation**

External secondary sources and experts further confirmed Paola Ivanov’s hypothesis on the circulation of people, things, and ideas in the region. Nevertheless, the results remained speculative as a result of insufficient evidence. The scant particular traces of how the object might have been acquired were diffuse in time and space (Cameron & Oliver, 1877; Meyer, 1913 in Plankensteiner, 1998). Direct evidence in relation to III C 14966 didn’t exist. Whereas the research is summarised in a short paragraph here, virtually and physically, it ranged widely: in the attempt to reconstruct and understand past relationships, new relationships were constructed in the present, and people and things linked and were reshuffled in different ways. The research involved the bringing together of sources that were spatially spread and materially diverse, locating them in their historicity. We physically and virtually moved through offices, computer screens, the archive, the library. These movements enabled different encounters with the available materials:
historical documents in their fragility; scans of the historical inventory, flattened on screens; digitally assembled information; printed scans of historical originals, which turned into ‘originals’ themselves via the stamps and notes added to them. The time-consuming research process left us with archive transcriptions, a collection of publications, and email correspondence with external experts. We manoeuvred within the boundaries of the restricted sources and resources that the Museum provided. The diversity of data was linked through the database. Through the transfer of the physical to the virtual, or from one digital source to another, the museum’s temporalities, spaces, and materials were assembled and blurred into a virtual whole, the data base entry of IIIC 14966.

Unequal access to sources

The Ethnological Museum’s collections and archives remained largely inaccessible to outsiders. This complicates any form of knowledge production from the Museum’s outsides to take place. The Museum’s public database was exemplary. Of the approximately 495,000 data sets that have been inventoried in the Ethnological Museum, only 71,500 data sets were accessible online in 2019. What was published online, what was not, and why, was not traceable on the website. In conversation, Boris Gliesmann confirmed that the database had a showcase character, focusing on the Museum’s ‘masterpieces’. This meant, in turn, that users – be they academics, curators, artists, activists – were victims of the Museum’s priorities, as well as its understanding and definition of what was considered ‘presentable’ or not.

When one typed IIIC 14966 on the SMB’s digital platform, the provided information was minimal (see figure 4.1 in chapter four for a screenshot of the database’s surface for comparison). The ‘collector’, the ‘producer’, and the different regional and cultural classifications were indicated. Date and mode of acquisition of the stool were lacking. As for all entries, the information was only available in German. Whereas the archives were freely accessible on location, access to the Museum’s complete database and thus its collections were reserved to museum staff. Functioning as gatekeepers, the museum curators were responsible for – among an overwhelming amount of other tasks – responding to requests addressed at the Museum. The fact that the curators’ names and contacts were not identifiable on the Museum’s website further restricted access. An updated inventory catalogue, or a simple listing of the Museum’s current collection, didn’t exist. Access to the collection thus remained reserved to those who had the financial, linguistic, and symbolic capital to access it from within the Museum.
Inequity in the production of knowledge

Analysing this process of provenance research shows an inequity concerning where and how knowledge about the object was and could be produced. In other words, conditions for producing knowledge depend on where the resources (financial, personnel) and sources (library, archives, collections) are concentrated. In view of the lack of or limited access to both collections and archives, the disparity of access doesn’t only show a difference and asymmetry, but an inequality, even injustice. Pointing to unequal distribution here, I don’t aim to question the validity of expertise in Western institutions nor to reduce their position to their geographical location solely. Rather, I want to indicate the ongoing disparity of who is consulted, who is given a voice, who is given access, and thus the right and opportunity to write these histories and to own the resulting knowledge. In the conventional paths of provenance research I was involved in, this concentration of knowledge within the Museum was encouraged because there was no attempt to complement the analysis of established European, colonial sources located in museums and universities and the consultation of ‘experts’ in these same organisations.26

The dissemination, accessibility, and sustainability of provenance research results were further challenged by the insufficiency of the Museum’s database system to record the available information: concerning the research on III C 14966, the research ultimately resulted in a paper folder, securely stored in the curator’s office. Initiating the research translated thus into monopolising and basically owning the research and its results, involuntarily or not. Through this lack of systematic documentation, the curator’s role was thus further valorised as centralising the knowledge on the collections. The Museum’s power and authority has thus been conspicuously upheld – with the Museum keeping and owning the collections, as well as centralising and controlling the knowledge produced around them. This unequal distribution and concentration of knowledge further raised questions of sustainability and about the transfer and documentation within the Museum. In a context with more project-based funded provenance research, there was the risk of losing knowledge with the departure of staff. Knowledge transfer seemed urgent in the current digital context, as the documentation of email exchanges seemed all the more difficult and ever more dependent on the curator’s personality and stance towards the issue. Transcending this access policy was thus especially possible for ‘insiders’ – curators and researchers acknowledged for their museum research. Any kind of ‘outsider’, and notably those unable to speak German and decode the Museum’s mechanisms, faced important restrictions.
The invention of masters

Provenance research on museum collections, within and beyond museum’s archives, is often a frustrating endeavour, as the preceding sections show. Sources are scarce, and documentation is scattered. IIIC 14966 is an exceptional object with regards to provenance insofar as art historians and anthropologists identified a ‘producer’ for this and similar objects, the ‘Buli workshop’. Generally speaking, those who are the origin of and have produced the objects in ethnological collections remain anonymous. Implicit in the lack of the contemporary documenting of producers, and individuals more generally speaking, was a denial of individual creativity in societies considered localised, collective, nature-bound, and isolated as cultural entities by colonial governance and complicit knowledge production.

IIIC 14966 belonged to a group of objects, to which the Belgian anthropologist Frans M. Olbrechts had attributed a particular author since the 1930s, the ‘master of the long-faced style’, also known as the ‘Buli Master’. The ‘Buli’ style is characterised by what has been described as outsized long hands and faces, also depicted as ‘Disneyesque’ by the prominent British anthropologist William Fagg (quoted in de Grunne, 2011). The Buli Master was named after the village where two sculptures were acquired (Vogel, 1980, p. 133; Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 61). Olbrechts is acknowledged as the founder of the method of morphological analysis when it comes to collections of African origin. His method consisted of stylistic criticism and comparison, identifying the artistic styles of different objects kept in Western museums. This retrospective identification and attribution of ‘masters’, ‘workshops’, or simply ‘artists’ continues to be used extensively and increasingly.27

The paradoxes of naming

The fabrication of provenance by inventing an object’s maker, the ‘artist’, have paradoxical consequences. Mary Nooter Roberts describes these politics of naming as ‘both an appropriation of identity and an imposition of it. To withhold a person’s identity may be a form of protection or of subjugation. To impose a name may be a form of repression or of elevation’ (Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 56). This paradox of naming was reflected in the reception history of III C 14966.

Challenging the alleged anonymity of African artists and showing an interest in the artist’s style and characteristics reflects a political standpoint. It testifies to the contemporary attempt to counter colonial epistemologies, to write African art history, and to recognise individual creativity and artistic
genius within African cultures. Olbrechts built his thinking on the anthropologist Franz Boas’s concept of culture areas and his conviction of racial equality, a conviction that rejected evolutionist theories dominant at the time. Paired with art historical methods aimed at identifying artist’s ‘hands’ (Giovanni Morelli, nineteenth century), this theoretical background allowed for the recognition of individual artists in the study of groups and societies that had long been denied individual authorship and style by Western academia. Predecessors of stylistic classification, such as Eckart von Sydow, had already worked with III C 14966 (von Sydow, 1923). That ‘von Sydow’ was prominently marked in the object’s first historical inventory highlighted the importance of the shift of perception concerning African artefacts, as well as the object’s continuous recognition as ‘art’ (Petridis, 2001, p. 123). The Buli Master was the first individual artist to be retroactively assigned to a group of African objects, followed by the invention of a number other ‘masters’, such as the Master of the Cascade Headdress or the Warua Master, all proposed by Western scholars, dealers, and collectors (Nooter Roberts, 1998, p. 61).

The reassessment of ‘anonymous’ to authored and singular pieces of art, however, has contributed to the transformation of the museum’s collection to ‘another exceptional resource of the colony’ (Van Beurden, 2013, p. 483). Objects identified as ‘Buli’, and III C 14966 in particular, have been outstanding examples of processes of value production interlinking museum, market, and academia. In its more than hundred years in the Museum in Berlin, III C 14966 has been exhibited in museums and private institutions in Europe (Paris in 1964, Maastricht in 1991, Paris in 1993, and Brussels in 2001), the United States (New York in 1990), and South America (Rio de Janeiro in 2004, Santiago in 2013). Publications and the Museum’s photo archives show how the object’s exhibition and international publication history have continuously confirmed its exceptional reception, which had started with its denomination as ‘art’ upon its arrival in the Museum in 1902 by Felix von Luschan.

Fabricating provenance, producing value

The subsequent symbolic value encouraged the object’s commodification and translated into financial value. The perceived rarity, both of the object and of the occasion to acquire such an object, is reflected in the record prices that objects associated with ‘Buli’ reached on the auction market. In 1979, one object was sold for £249,000 (Sotheby’s, 1979); in 2010, a similar stool fetched 5.4 million euros at auction (Sotheby’s, 2010a; 2010b).
Disputes over ‘Buli’ have been ongoing. They concern the particularity of the artistic identity (is it one artist, a workshop, a generation?), but also which object is considered ‘Buli’ or not, and thus exceptionally valuable or not.30 The number of ‘Buli’ objects has continuously risen from twelve objects identified by Frans M. Olbrechts in the 1930s to twenty-nine under scrutiny in 2011.31 As the stakes are high, the agents involved in these disputes are diverse. The ‘Buli’ stool sold in 2010 exemplifies the interrelated process of value production, as the auction house not only published a glossy catalogue and released a video praising the object but also entrusted the catalogue entry to François Neyt, professor emeritus in anthropology at Université catholique de Louvain and acclaimed expert in Luba societies. By reason of his academic reputation, he thus automatically authenticated and valued the piece (Neyt, 2010). In Berlin’s Ethnological Museum, the market felt rather absent, notably in contrast to my fieldwork in museums in Paris and Brussels, trade capitals of what dealers continue to call *arts primitifs*. Still, the Ethnological Museum was not exempt from these dynamics. In 2001, III C 14966 went on loan to be exhibited in a bank in the major exhibition *Masterhands* in Brussels, co-organised by the dealer and collector Bernard de Grunne, himself in possession of a Buli sculpture (de Grunne & Bassani, 2001). The disputes about the identity of ‘Buli’ are also ongoing, because naming as a practice is valuable in itself: the acknowledgement of an individual author accentuates the absence of an identified individual – an absence, Sarah Van Beurden argues, that was subsequently occupied by either the collector, scholar, or dealer who had ‘discovered’ the master or the museum in charge of keeping it (Van Beurden, 2013, p. 483).

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

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

**Conclusion**

Provenance research is slow and limited; it risks resulting in no further answers to the questions addressed, but rather, more questions raised. If defined conventionally as retracing the chains of ownership, the results of our research on III C 14966 could be summarised as follows. We assumed that the stool had been acquired by the colonial officer Werner von Grawert in either Ujiji or Usumbara in German East Africa, where he had been stationed. As the object had presumably been produced in or around Buli, a village in the then Congo Free State, it must have travelled long distances to reach German East Africa. The objects might have reached the trade centres of Ujiji or Usumbara via the prominent caravan or slave trade, as diplomatic gifts or as commodities. A specific group of objects, including III C 14966, had been separated out of a group of 108 objects that had been shipped from Dar es Salaam to Berlin. A selection of these objects had been, since their arrival in the Museum in 1902, hailed as ‘art’ by Felix von Luschan, the Africa department’s director at the time. With regard to III C 14966’s itineraries after arriving in Berlin, it has held a special status because of a stylistic resemblance with other objects, a style that had been associated with ‘the master of Buli’ since the 1930s. Whereas the association with a ‘master’ confirmed and generalised the object’s status as ‘art’, the attribution of a singular artist contradicted conceptions of ‘Luba’ authorship, who understand the artist as partaking in a ‘transpersonal identity’ (Nooter Roberts, 1998).

Provenance research discloses collection and museum histories. It points to absences and presences in the archive, which reflect who and what has been given attention and power in the museum’s past – and who has been neglected, silenced, excluded. This chapter not only looked at what
can be found, or not found, as part of provenance research, but focused on research in process. Unravelling research processes shows how provenance research risks, despite its good intentions, to stabilise historically established asymmetries of power; reflected in how knowledge is produced and shared. Provenance research creates value. Beyond IIIC 14966’s particular history of appreciation, knowing through which hands the object passed, which places it travelled, and where it was shown fed back into the object’s financial and symbolic value. The organisation continued to know its collection better, but also profited by profiling itself publicly of doing so. The openly accessible documentation of the collection – its online database – served representational rather than research purposes. The internal museum infrastructures were insufficient to record research results and to document and transfer the knowledge sustainably. As the histories were accessed, researched, written, and shared among Western organisations, the research sustained the hierarchies of knowledge production and thus inequities between the Global North and South – especially because most knowledge produced within the Museum remained there.

It is thus not only the laying open of the histories that count. Whom does the research, gained knowledge and subsequent value serve? In order to go beyond mechanisms of further appropriation, it is the way in which scholars research, document, share, and disseminate the knowledge they produce within museums that requires further attention. Recent academic and political projects – including in the Ethnological Museum – demonstrate this ambition; ambitions hindered so far, however, by the lack of a structural rethinking and support.32
Notes

1. I was allowed to be present at the conversation between the two Africa curators, Paola Ivanov and Peter Junge, and the researcher Friedrich von Bose, 31 October 2013.

2. In February 2019, the account was the following: III A 5,700 (out of which 3,650 were indexed); III C 45,600 objects identified (out of which 26,700 were indexed); III D 7,450 objects identified (out of which 4,315 were indexed); III E 21,900 objects identified (out of which 19,330 were indexed). Additionally, there were 2,500 objects without object numbers, as well as some permanent loans, objects not owned by the Museum (Fremdbesitz), historical documents (Zeitdokument), and numbers of so-called duplicates (Dublettennummern), email from Boris Griesmann, 11 February 2019.

3. Conversation with museum staff, 26 November 2013, and during a tour of the depot, 1 November 2013 (see also von Oswald & Rodatus, 2017, p. 214).

4. The objects to be displayed were prioritised in the ongoing research on provenance in the Museum. In the responses to the ‘little request’ (kleine Anfrage) of the Green politician Claudia Hermann, the city’s mayor gave assurances that the objects’ provenance was to be researched ‘in depth’ as well as exhibited in ‘several exhibitions’; see Claudia Hermann, ‘Kleine Anfrage’, 28 June 2013 (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2013a). This claim was reinforced in January 2015 by Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Monika Grütters (Deutscher Bundestag, 2015, pp. 2–3). In 2018, as a reaction to Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr’s ‘restitution report’, Hartmut Dorgerloh confirmed that ‘looted art must always be returned’ (Hunt, Thomas, & Dorgerloh, 2018).

5. The precise figures communicated by Griesmann consisted of 6,840 objects for the entire Museum and 1,457 for the Africa collection (email 11 February 2019). This number contradicts the number communicated by the director of collections Lars-Christian Koch in 2018. Koch claimed that the number of objects on display in the Humboldt Forum from the Ethnological Museum and the Museum for Asian Art would be twenty thousand, doubling the number of objects that had been displayed in Dahlem, with ten thousand objects on display from the Ethnological Museum and two thousand objects from the Museum for Asian Art (Kuhn, 2018b). A year later, Griesmann confirmed that nine thousand objects from both the Ethnological Museum and the Museum for Asian Art were officially to be exhibited in the Humboldt Forum (email 15 January 2020).

6. ‘Documented’, for him, meant the identification and subsequent integration of the related (internal and museum) historical sources in the database, as well as situating the object in the current state of the art of the literature. Interview with Boris Griesmann, 8 November 2016.

7. This concerns only the period of my research period in the Museum, 2013–2015. With the foundation of the Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH in 2015, more staff were employed, also to support curators. Since November 2019, there are four permanent researchers with permanent contracts, who are responsible for provenance research, with two researchers – Kristin Weber-Sinn and Julia Binter – being responsible for the African collections alone.

8. E 1555/1902; E 1494/1902.

9. In the long run, this will change, as the Museum will scan and make publicly available all of its archival files up to 1947. See also note 45.

10. Only the archive of the Museum für Vor-und Frühgeschichte was still accessible on site, but, as I was told, disposed of more staff than the Ethnological Museum to look after it.

11. Still undefined at the time, the definite move of the archive to the Central Archive has now been planned. It is accompanied by the cleaning and digitisation of what are understood as the archive’s historical files (up to 1947), with the aim of making them accessible online in 2021, https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/bibliothek-und-archiv.html, consulted 2
February 2019. At the same time, this entailed that the files were only accessible as microfiche at the Central Archive and that the physical files would be kept afterwards in a ‘silent archive’ (stilles Archiv), protecting them from any further damage through physical interaction.

12. See for example field notes from 22 July 2014.
13. Field notes from discussion with Boris Gliesmann in response to a first draft of the chapter, 16 April 2018.
15. Boris Gliesmann, field notes from 23 February 2015.
16. A lot of the letters were written by anonymous museum staff as copies of original letters or dictated. Still, exceptions in individuals’ handwriting existed.
17. One letter stayed in my memory: the department’s director, Felix von Luschan, ironically commented on an offer to the Museum to buy several objects, in red. His depictions of the prices as ‘exorbitant’ and exclamations indicating ‘Aha! I knew that already!’, describing the person as the ‘great Unknown’ literally made me laugh (E 1078/1900). Paola Ivanov and Kristin Weber-Sinn, on the contrary, depicted their encounter with archival files linked to colonial wars as causing ‘shock and anger’ (Ivanov & Weber-Sinn, 2018, p.118).
18. The consignment was split and III C 14966 arrived with other highly valued objects in the collection directly from Ballenstedt in the Harz region, where Werner von Grawert resided at the time. Today, sixty-six of these objects are still in the Berlin database. Twenty-two objects were given to the Linden-Museum Stuttgart as Doubletten (doubles), and Herr Gliesmann assumed that the twelve missing objects could be considered lost.
19. My translation from the German: ‘Wo es sich aber nicht nur um die Beschaffung einzelner Gegenstände handelt, da sammle man systematisch, d.h. so, dass die Sammlung ein möglichst erschöpfendes Bild der Kultur des betreffenden Stammes gibt. […] Diese sind also in erster Linie zu sammeln; es ist gewissermaßen ein Inventar des gesamten Kulturbesitzes aufzunehmen.’
24. Visitors and researchers had access to the files through the Museum’s library. The Museum’s curators, however, had priority of access to the files. They could keep the files for longer periods of time and had the privilege of reading and keeping the files in their offices or working in the archive space itself.
25. In August 2021, scans of the Museum’s historical inventory books were made accessible online.
26. This lack of a search for sources ‘elsewhere’ was justified by us as a team of researchers by reference to a lack of time, networks, contacts, or a presumed absence of local institutions and experts, as well as by the difficulty of working and doing fieldwork in war-torn Congo. Research including fieldwork existed, but was dated (Nooter Roberts 1991). Pierre Petit had equally done fieldwork in the 1990s, but had not published his dissertation. Since then, I was told, fieldwork had been difficult due to the political circumstances in the DRC.
In an interview with the art consultant and expert in the art market for African art Bruno Claessens, he confirmed the explosion in ‘masters’ in the last two decades, notably in relation to the auction market, Antwerp, 5 November 2015.

This list of exhibitions is not exhaustive. It includes examples of exhibitions I could trace in the Museum’s database and archive (loan procedures). Early publications include those of prominent scholars Carl von Eistein and Eckhart Sydow, as well as an exhibition and publications by the German artist collective Berliner Secession (Einstein, 1921; von Sydow, 1923; Berliner Secession, 1932), and exhibitions in London, Paris, and New York, among others. See for example Fagg (1964), Fagg (1966), Koloss, Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin, Metropolitan Museum of Art (1990).

‘[…] schönen Denkmäler afrikanischer Kunst’, E 1494/02.


In his initial analysis, Olbrechts identified twelve sculptures as originating from the Buli Master, confirmed by the British anthropologist William Fagg in 1948 (quoted in Pirat, 1996, p. 56). In 1980, the art historian Susan Vogel identified twenty objects authored by the master; in 1996, Claude-Henri Pirat produced a catalogue raisonné with nineteen identified Buli pieces. In 2011, Alisa LaGamma mentions twenty-nine objects that have been scrutinised for evidence of belonging to the Buli legacy (Vogel, 1980, p. 133; Pirat, 1996, pp. 56–57; LaGamma, 2012, pp. 263).

I point in particular to the work of Yann LeGall, currently part of the project “The Restitution of Knowledge. Artefacts as archives in the (post)colonial museum” (TU Berlin/University of Oxford), who has been prioritising modalities of sharing knowledge and authorship with research partners throughout his entire research trajectory. The ‘German Contact Point for Collections from Colonial Contexts’, https://www.cp3c.org/, is part of the political projects to render museum collections in Germany more accessible. Similarly, the database ‘Collections from Colonial Contexts’, part of the German Digital Library, (https://ccc.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/), is designed as a research tool. For example, however, the collections of the State Museum Berlin only figure in fragments as part of this database with 795 objects accessible from their entire collection, consulted 12 December 2021.