Working Through Colonial Collections

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During a research trip to the Republic of Benin in the context of the exhibition Object Biographies in December 2014, our interlocutor Mondicaho Bachalou, a former employee of the museum in Abomey (Benin), talked about the ongoing force of so-called bocio, protective figures that are usually stuck upright in the earth by the entrances of homes, alongside roads, or as parts of shrines.

To stop a bocio, you first have to kill it. Kill it how? You aren’t going to kill it with a knife or a gun. There are things that will prevent you from killing it for good so it has no power anymore. And it’s not dead, you take it in [your museum], it’s alive, in your country. That creates problems. Do you understand?

Mondicaho Bachalou warned us. Despite our definition of the bocio as a museum object, it still had forces beyond our control. It was not ‘killed’ when it entered the museum, and thus, it was not ‘dead’ or ‘frozen’, as material cultural heritage is sometimes referred to, but alive. Despite the West’s conviction of controlling the matter, he seemed to claim, the ignorance of the bocio’s power would harm us at some point.

This chapter discusses the collections as active and agentive matter as it analyses the shifts from subjects to museum objects, and museum objects to subjects. The chapter builds on ethnographic observations from those museum practitioners responsible for conservation. The museum’s obligation to keep things, built on Western conceptions of heritage as stable and durable, is framed here as the attempt to master materiality. Once they enter the museum, things become national cultural heritage and thus subject to particular legal rules and social practices. Museums are obliged to conserve these collections of objects as heritage, ideally keeping objects fixed, stable,
and unchanging in order to enable them to be kept for future generations (see Macdonald, 2018). As Laurajane Smith argues, heritage ‘doesn’t exist’ but rather is ‘a cultural practice, involved in the construction and regulation of a range of values and understandings’ – values that museums have been promoting as being universally applicable and valid (Smith, 2006, p. 11). With regards to ethnological museums and collecting, this ‘keeping’ of cultures is closely related to the practice of salvage anthropology in the nineteenth century. Constructed by contemporary anthropology as traditional, ‘primitive’, and static, particular cultures were perceived by Western anthropologists as ‘endangered’ to change and ultimately deemed to disappear due to the colonial encounter. It has been critiqued how this practice created a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, which further materialised in the knowledge production and exhibitions within museums as part of colonial anthropology.1 How do these values and associated practices, informed by a Western definition of heritage, manifest in the everyday working with objects? Which implications does the obligation and desire to keep have on the working with and circulation of collections?

The practice of musealisation denies the collections other forms of existence and life than those imposed by the museum’s rules and regulations. Constructing these collections as heritage, then, was only possible because of the growing knowledge about chemical conservation techniques at the time. Museum professionals since the nineteenth century have treated collections with pesticides. They adopted pesticides developed for industrial use, such as in agriculture and as part of the war industry, and were adopted for museum purposes (Tello, 2021).2 Very practically, these understandings of heritage continue to be enacted through what I call the paradigm of conservation. This paradigm determines the way in which collections are handled, and thus, researched, exhibited, or thought about.

In this chapter, working through articulates an engagement with the collection’s materiality itself. It shows how both the attempt to turn subjects into objects, the insistence on the paradigm of conservation, and objects’ unexpected agency as toxic assemblages makes the handling of objects difficult and finally impedes their restitution and possible resocialisation.

From subject to object: Musealisation and the paradigm of conservation

Many objects in the Ethnological Museum have a status that resembles more a person, a subject, or a creature than what is commonly defined as a simple object. However, once these objects enter the Museum, the status of a subject
is usually described as having been obliterated. They are turned into immo-
bile museum objects – controlled, restricted, and confined by the museum’s
rules and legal regulations. As Hilke Doering and Stefan Hirschauer write,
conserving objects means that ‘the normal biography of a thing is decelerat-
ed, if not halted completely. Aging and decay are replaced by a fixing of the
actual state, a kind of eternal youth’ (Hirschauer & Doering, 1997, p. 297).3
Other scholars rather compare this ‘eternal youth’ derogatorily to an act of
killing or freezing (and thus depriving the object of its life). The ‘museum ef-
fect’, for example, is considered to have such consequences, ‘a phenomenon
observed by museologists whereby an object is radically dislocated from its
point of origin, wrenched from its context and rendered a frozen work of art
in the surrounds of the museum’ (Alberti, 2007, p. 373).

When I depicted the museum storage as a ‘graveyard for objects’, in-
sisting on the fact that the museum objects were ‘dead’ and ‘deactivated’ in
museum storage, the department’s storage manager strongly disagreed. He
referred to the objects as not being ‘dead’ but rather being ‘kept’ – situating
conservation not as a passive activity of the museum, but as an active, crucial,
and resource-demanding part of museum work.

The bocios as an example for the paradigm of conservation

Throughout our work on Object Biographies, working with the objects re-
vealed the limits the paradigm of conservation imposed, particularly in
relation to the bocios. In the exhibition, we wanted to address the multiple
transformations and trajectories of the bocios throughout their lives, espe-
cially highlighting their status as ‘stored museum objects’, inaccessible and
invisible to a general public.

Vis-à-vis the role and signification of a bocio, the argument of the
‘deactivated’ was significant in a particular way. Their use endows them
with a psychological potency and role. In her monography on bocio, the
American art historian Suzanne Preston Blier situates the potency of the bo-
cio between art, psychology, and political power. Etymologically, a bocio re-
fers to its liminal status between that of an object and subject, between life
and death. As ‘empowered (bo) cadaver (cio)’, it ‘comprises any activating
object (bo) taking the shape of the human body, more accurately a “cadav-
er” (cio)’ (Preston Blier, 1996, p. 95). An incarnation of a person, a bocio is
a figural sculpture through which power is anthropomorphised and visual-
ised. The bocio thus enables residents to somehow gain a sense of control
of sometimes onerous social, political, and physical conditions. It helps to
respond personally and socially to the wrongs they are going through and to
dissipate attendant anxiety around hardship and loss. This is why, Preston Blier claims, the figures were especially significant during the slave trade, which shaped the lives of people in the region of *bocio* production for several centuries (Preston Blier, 1996, pp. 26–27).

The *bocio* in our exhibition *Object Biographies* would serve as an example to both shift attention towards the Museum’s politics of access and storage and as a point of departure for an exploratory research and cooperation project. We wanted to visually implement our argument by installing the objects in their storage setting. More particularly, we planned to display the objects in the exact way in which we had first encountered them, together with the Beninese art historian Romuald Tchibozo, our collaborator on this section of the exhibition. Probably arranged by the former storage manager Hans-Joachim Radosuboff or his assistant (see chapter five), the *bocio* – ‘visible’ and ‘aesthetically arranged’ – had literally been hanged. With strings attached to their heads, around their bodies, and with object labels wrapped around their necks, the figures were dangling inside the museum storage cupboards. This image of the lynched object, deprived of life by its move to the museum and kept like this for decades, seemed just too literal of an embodiment of what we were investigating: we wanted to address the effects of turning things considered and lived with as subjects into museum objects. However, one conservator was shocked when we talked about our plans: the way of storing the objects was *obviously* derogatory according to basic standards. The conservator claimed that there was a risk of losing a good reputation if colleagues were to see that the objects were stored *like this* in the Ethnological Museum. The following day, we found the objects arranged in new boxes, wrapped in silky, acid-free paper, laid down horizontally to prevent any damage from hanging, and protected from light. Regretfully, but understanding of the conservator’s professional impetus, we would exhibit them that way.4

The *bocio* would be part of a collaborative research project, sketched and realised together with Romuald Tchibozo. Considering the *bocio’s* low purchase value, we thought that it would be possible to make the objects part of the research project. We suggested taking them to Benin and Togo.5 When negotiating the issue, however, the responsible conservator explained that the objects needed to be packed in expensive, so-called climate crates (*Klimakisten*) when travelling. These would protect the objects from any damage and temperature change, such as when using air freight. The *bocio* needed to be accompanied by official museum staff to ensure their ‘appropriate’ treatment, as well as their unpacking and repacking on location. The conservator calculated the costs of this move at several thousand euros. This sum far exceeded our project budget. We decided to take
Figure 7.1 – 7.2 'Lynched' bocio in the museum storage, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Margareta von Oswald
Figure 7.3 Extract from the video installation: Preparing bocio to be photographed, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Anna Lisa Ramella

Figure 7.4 Extract from the video installation: Marion Benoit taking photographs of the bocio, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Anna Lisa Ramella
Figure 7.5 Example of the object images taken by Marion Benoit for the research trip, *Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, photographer: Marion Benoit

Figure 7.6 Extract from the video installation: Working with the images in Benin with Gimaxè Gabin, photographer: Anna Lisa Ramella
Figure 7.7 Installation view of the bocio in the Object Biographies exhibition, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Marion Benoit
Figure 7.8 Installation view of the bocio in the Object Biographies exhibition, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Jens Ziehe
high-resolution images of the objects instead. Despite the importance of
the objects’ physical presence on-site and their particular materiality, we
followed this common, internationally established but limiting way of deal-
ing with museum regulations.⁶

Working within the paradigm of conservation, the translocation of
things from one context to a museum context translates in their definition
and treatment as museum objects. Their previous status, function, and role
– possibly also as a subject, a living being – are overshadowed by their in-
tegration in a regime defined and determined by the museum’s rules and
regulations. These regulations impose particular limits on the way these ob-
jects can be handled on the museum site, but also restrict their circulation
and mobility more generally speaking. Being a museum object entails being
denied other forms of lives – and thus implies the difficulties of engaging
with the plural kinds of relationships people and things can establish.

The call for the restitution of museum objects housed in Western
museums has been voiced with more pressure recently, especially after the
release of the ‘restitution report’ in 2018 by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte
Savoy (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). Regardless of whether this call will be reasserted
in the future, within the paradigm of conservation, the exploration of the
multiplicities of possible thing–human relations that already exist or are to
be developed remains unlikely, or at least controlled and limited. Even if
restitution is imposed, to break with the Western understanding of herit-
age, to ‘resocialise and resamentise’, as Sarr and Savoy suggest, sometimes
seems even more difficult. Once a museum object, always a museum object.

At the same time, the process of musealising things also entails that
they themselves might have become dangerous for their surroundings. The
products once used to protect the objects have turned the objects into active
subjects that humans need protection from.

From object to subject: Entwesen and becoming agentive through
toxicity

Visitor: In which storage areas is it especially dangerous to work without
protection?

Storage manager: In all of them. You are always obliged to wear protec-
tive workwear when you approach the objects. In theory, it’s OK to work
in the storage areas when the cupboards are closed, but as soon as you
start rearranging objects, it becomes dangerous.
Visitor: So you shouldn’t spend more than eight hours in these rooms?

Textile restorer: You shouldn’t work more than eight hours anyways!7

As a consequence of the objects’ treatment with pesticides and heavy metals, the Museum’s collection has become poisonous. The official German term for the practice of disinfecting is entwesen, which can literally be translated as ‘de-being’. The term describes the attempt to erase anything living within the object. However, the process of entwesen implies not only the taking away of lives. Through the process of disinfecting and treating the collection with poisonous substances, the objects are endowed with another, and not only metaphorical, toxic and disturbing kind of subjectivity and agency. In the following, I show how repeated treatment with chemicals transformed the objects into poisonous agents – these treatments have not only had effects on the objects’ substance but also constitute a danger for those who work with the objects. The objects’ new composition has an impact on their present and future sociability, restricting the way in which one can work, live with, and resocialise the objects. Following up on the question of what the objects do, instead of what they represent or symbolise, the chapter’s last section discusses the transformation, effects, and potential agency of the object’s very materiality in the museum’s everyday.

**Killing to preserve: *Entwesen* and the objects’ new forms of agency**

Killing or paralysing an object doesn’t only seem to occur when taking it out of its original context, where it might have ‘lived’, and imprisoning it behind glass or placing the object in anonymous storage. The killing also becomes physical and literal, because conserving means killing. Today, conservation is ensured by either freezing the object or closing it off from oxygen. The disinfection takes place either in the ‘freezing chamber’ (Gefrierkammer) or the nitrogen tent. In both places, objects persist for some time, isolated from their surroundings, to eradicate those living beings that might harm them.

Historically, however, the objects were literally intoxicated by the application or injection of pesticides and heavy metal compounds. Even though this method was common in all Western museums, ethnological objects were especially vulnerable, because they consist mainly of ‘natural’ materials, such as wood, leather, textiles, or feathers. These materials are extremely fragile and prone to infestation, but few are aware of this history. Catherine Hawks described that, while in the natural sciences, information about conservation techniques has been widespread, it has been ‘naively’ assumed that
organic material in ethnological and historical collections could survive without being contaminated (2001, p. 8). Research by the Ethnological Museum’s conservator Helene Tello suggests that two-thirds of the Museum’s collections are contaminated and that the objects were treated ‘extensively and continuously’ with heavy metal compounds and pesticides from early on, some of them even in their place of production (Tello, 2006, pp. 12, 136). The documentation and archival traces of the use of pesticides and heavy metal compounds are scarce, but guidelines for pest control date as early as 1898 and 1924 (Tello, 2006, pp. 36–39). Tello’s research equally shows that the objects that were subject to relocation – such as those stored secretly in Leipzig, in temporary storage spaces during the war, and in particular in Celle – bear additional traces of treatment (Tello, 2006, pp. 44–47).

After complaints from museum staff, an analysis in 2001 by an external company assessed the effects of the objects’ contamination. Based on random samples, the company analysed the quality of indoor air, the composition of dust, and the concentration of pesticides within selected objects. The results of the analysis confirmed that the health risk for museum employees was ‘relatively high’ (Tello, 2006, p. 67). As a consequence, before entering the collections, visitors and researchers were required to sign a document to confirm that any visits were at their own risk. Different materials represent different degrees of contamination and thus risk. Textiles, for example, are especially charged with chemicals, while metals are less apt to absorb them. Usually, the collections are kept within closed cupboards, reducing the degree of pesticides and heavy metals in the air. Once the cabinets are opened, however, researchers, curators, or conservators need to protect themselves, wearing full-body suits and breathing masks.

Despite the results of this analysis, the degree of protection depends on the museum as well as on the will (or lack thereof) to protect oneself. In the Ethnological Museum, older generations of staff didn’t take the new obligations seriously but rather joked about them. When I commented on the fact that the textile conservator didn’t wear any protection, she just dismissively turned away from me, smiling. She was close to retirement and had breathed among dresses, puppets, carpets, or flags her entire life. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff confirmed this attitude. ‘I didn’t die from it. If the DDT made me infertile, I wouldn’t know, because I don’t want children anymore in any case.’

The presence of pesticides and heavy metals was clearly felt when working in the storage. The rooms were charged. Headaches and nausea were recurrent after the visits, especially for infrequent visitors. ‘You get used to it after a while’, the storage manager claimed. The particular smell within the storage, which consisted of old traces of camphor, the lack of air
conditioning, the narrow rows, and the artificial lighting made working in
the storage space a unique experience, losing a sense of time and place. The
treatments had, however, not only an effect on those working with them but
also on the objects themselves. As Helene Tello writes:

> It is an undeniable fact that damage such as fading or changing of col-
> ours, yellowing of paper, black spots and/or blooming on works of art or
> in entire collections are residues of former treatments with pesticides.
> Hence, besides destruction, these pesticides must be considered an ad-
> ditional potential cause of damage by conservators in their daily work.
> (Tello, 2006, p. 136)

In an essay on decay and transience, Joshua Pollard depicts the change
of an object’s materiality as ‘the transformation of substance’ (Pollard,
2004). While it might prevent or delay the processes of decay, the practice
of Entwesung doesn’t keep the object stable and fixed. The treated objects
transform differently, but in equally substantial terms. Countering the idea
of the immortal and durable quality of objects, the observation of these
processes allows the redefinition of the understanding of objects. As such,
ethnographies of processes of conservation, as the work of scholars such
as Fernando Domínguez Rubio at New York’s Museum of Modern Art or
Tiziana Nicoletta Beltrame at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris shows,
shed light on the way the works’ temporalities are constructed: by observ-
ing attempts to stabilise heritage in a material way, the very notions of the
stable and perpetual destabilise (Domínguez Rubio, 2014; Beltrame, 2017).
The objects become inseparable from those who manipulate them, as well
as from the infrastructures, technologies, digital and physical environments
– the invisible substances that conserve but also transform them. Taking into
consideration the transformative potential of the material, museum col-
lections can be conceptualised ‘as collections of processes rather than as
collections of “objects”’ (Domínguez Rubio, 2014).

Unruly agents: The afterlives of residues

As part of these processes, the substances turn the collections into agents
by rendering them toxic. At the same time, through the continuous and
seething presence of these compounds, the objects disturb the regulated
procedure and supposedly sterile environment of the Museum. Some of the
objects contrasted with what Fernando Domínguez Rubio depicts as ‘docile
objects’: ‘artworks that diligently occupy their designated “object-positions”
and comply with the set of tasks and functions that have been entrusted to’ (Domínguez Rubio, 2014). On the contrary, these objects were unruly, because they were leaving marks, as if exhalating their venomous breath.

The residues of treatments left visible traces. What’s inside the objects, such as the chemical DDT or fatty acid, has been leaking out on the objects’ surface and materialises in the form of a shiny dust. The objects ‘blossom out’ (ausblühen). Sometimes white crystals, similar to ice, appear. To remove the chemicals, visible or not, one ‘aspirates’ (absaugen) the objects, a lengthy and unsatisfying job:11

It’s not like cleaning the living room. You aspirate those tiny objects for hours, the machine is extremely loud and you most probably won’t see the result of your work. It’s also unsatisfying because it’s a superficial treatment. The objects are thoroughly contaminated and the remnants of treatments will continue to leak.12

The removal of pesticides and heavy metals, however, could only ever be superficial because these substance completely become part of the object’s physical and material constitution. Whereas ‘wet methods’ for cleaning the objects would remove dust and soiling from the objects’ surfaces, it would have ‘little impact on the matrix of artifacts’ (Tello & Unger, 2010, p. 37).

During the deinstallation of an exhibition, one conservator suddenly started to swear. An object had unexpectedly left lasting, yellow traces in the form of the sculpture on the expensive neon-lit plinth. This object had come from museum storage to replace an object that would now return. As if it wanted to annoy and leave a trace in the exhibition before being reintegrated into storage, the object left its mark on the exhibition furniture.

‘Damn it!’ the conservator exclaimed, ‘this is the first time something like this has happened! I should have put a piece of protective foil underneath the object. But usually, the plastic of the plinth is resistant!’ The conservator tried to remove the stain but the traces stayed. The conservator explained that these happened to be traces, evaporation (Ausdünstungen), consisting usually of fat that originated in the objects’ patina. Trying different products, the conservator got increasingly aggressive and anxious. Only after rubbing hard could the spot be removed.13

Continuing our work, the conservator explained that there was a diversity of different forms of dust in the Museum that they were working with, which could come from multiple contexts and regions. Dust is a matter, as the anthropologist Tiziana Nicoletta Beltrame describes, that ties elements and entities in the museum together: it is a sign of the objects’ physical histories and treatments, carrying traces from where they have been and what
has been done to them. Dust also allows the insects’ presence in storage and exhibition areas to be mapped: it is a supplier of food for the insects and fungi to nourish themselves (Beltrame, 2016). The conservator pointed out a particularly persistent dust, which drove museum employees crazy. This dust would appear inside the glass showcase, even if the objects were perfectly isolated by the glass, as if the object was sweating.¹⁴

Cleaning the showcases from the inside after the object had been removed, the conservator smiled when mentioning the high number of profession-specific articles that mentioned this kind of miraculous dust, which seemed to appear out of nowhere.

‘Museum dust’ was another kind of dust that I encountered, and it was always described derogatively in the Museum – a disturbing dust to be eradicated. In a working session with a conservator in the museum storage, we were looking at so-called Swahili mats, deciding which of them were to be exhibited in the new permanent exhibition. Inspecting several of these mats, the conservator stressed that one of the mats would not be exhibited because of the ‘ugly black museum dust’ it bore. When I asked what this meant, the conservator explained, speculating that this dust presumably came from either ‘Russia, Leipzig, or simply from here. This dust looks very much like dust from a museum to me.’ ‘Museum dust’ in this context referred to the former

Figure 7.9 The yellow traces left by the object and the attempt to remove it with methylated spirits (Brennspiritus), 19 October 2015, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Margareta von Oswald
use of coal stoves, blackening the objects with soot. During our tour with Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, we learned how ‘museum dust’ could become a source of conflict.

When Peter Junge [curator for African collections 2001–2014] wanted to give things on loan, sometimes we had war. The conservator’s priority was always to know whether an object was apt to be put on loan [aus-leihfähig]. Sometimes, I said to Mr Junge. ‘No, this object looks dingy [schäbig], we can’t give it on loan.’ And he answered, ‘But these are just signs of use!’ No, this is not a sign of use. This has been damaged when it was in Leningrad or Leipzig. This is our fault. Not the African’s traces. And that’s why we can’t give it on loan. We are making fools of ourselves! And then Junge told the conservator to come. I basically threw myself on my children, protecting, shielding them from any harm.

The objects’ ‘signs of use’, also described as ‘wear and tear’, are essential in ethnological collections. As a proof of ‘ethnographic authenticity’, value is attributed to the objects. The signs of use are judged to be an integral part of the objects’ identity. The object is supposed to physically carry the magic it is imagined to transmit. As Hans-Joachim Radosuboff pointed out, judgements of the ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ came into conflict with the traces of the collection’s museum career, traces that were devalued and made to disappear.

At the same time, however, the conflict points to the simultaneous agencies, the ‘vibratory quivering of material’ (Beltrame, 2016) that is dealt with in the museum. The ongoing attempt to control the object results in the paradigm of conservation overshadowing the object’s former subjectivities and spirits while endowing it with new kinds of agency – toxic and disturbing – which significantly impact museum employees’ work conditions. Conservation then always remains an attempt: Mondicaho Bachalou highlighted that the bocio wasn’t dead, but very much alive, creating problems.

**Conclusion**

Commenting on the much-discussed and controversial ‘restitution report’ in an interview, its co-author Felwine Sarr came back to the significance of objects in Africa for their former owners.

All the objects that came from Africa had a meaning, a role in the community. These artefacts were not objects, they were subjects. They have an identity, they emanate power and the ability to act. In the cosmology
of Africa, they brought the invisible into the visible. Rituals gave them influence. The identity of these objects changed when they entered museums. They were given a new identity. This metamorphic identity made them hybrids. They encompass both Europe and Africa, they stand at the border between the two cultures. This now defines their very essence. (Felwine Sarr quoted in Bloch, 2019).18

Whereas Felwine Sarr argues from a purely historical and symbolic point of view, this chapter has shown that museum objects are physically, and thus irreversibly, an amalgam of their different histories. The making and returning things into museum objects has had material, lasting, and irreversible consequences on objects’ physical and symbolic constitutions and identities. As ‘hybrids with a metamorphic identity’, as Felwine Sarr characterises museum objects, the layers of histories are living and working within the objects, added through human (creative) intention, encouraged by the different materials, liquids, and chemicals that they have absorbed, shaped by the technologies and environments that surround them. Observing the objects’ life of ‘being kept’ in the Museum shows how much the objects are subject to change, if only through the objects’ transformation of substance.

The object thus counters simple understandings of the ‘here’ and ‘there’, the ‘us’ and ‘them’. Through its materiality, it defies understandings of identities as singular or pure. Rather, to put it in Paul Basu’s words, the object can be understood as intrinsically ‘in-between’ worlds and systems of knowledge production (Basu, 2017). The object challenges notions of authenticity and of the original, as it incorporates the multiplicity of existences it has gone through, being part of both African and European universes. With a view to the virulent discussions on restitution, return, and the rearticulation and reanimation of ethnological collections and archives, this chapter raises questions about the paradigms in which the object will be and can be thought about and worked with. The implications for restitution for contaminated objects then depend on those who request the return, who are free to decide whether and how to handle these objects. Central here is the question whether the paradigm of conservation will continue to be privileged in the treatment and definition of the museum’s collections. This includes interrogations on whether the museum’s primary goal should be to keep things for future generations, or rather if its aim should be to use its collections for present ones. Do these two options exclude each other? And if not, how can the paradigm of conversation be made compatible with the objects’ former uses and roles, and thus with the option to be resocialised in ‘ecologies’ that are ‘necessarily plural’, as Sarr and Savoy suggest (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 27)?
Notes

1. For an insightful overview on the relation between ethnographic collections, modernity and toxicity in museum collections, see Arndt 2022.
2. I thank Eva Ritz for highlighting this point to me.
4. Field notes from conversations on 18 and 20 July 2014.
5. The objects had been sold to the museum in 1967 by ‘Dr. Otto A. Jäger’, a collector about whom we couldn’t find more information. We speculated that the contemporary curator Kurt Krieger had been obliged to buy the collector’s entire collection for 24,000 DM, as it was only the collection’s masks that were subsequently exhibited in a temporary exhibition entitled Gelede masks from Dahomey (Gelede­Masken aus Dahomey) (1967). Compared to the masks, whose prices went up to 1,500 DM apiece, the bocios were comparatively cheap, costing between 45 and 50 DM at the time.
6. In many collaborative museum projects, one sees people on-site working and dealing with images, instead of material objects. The promotional image for the collaborative project Tanzania–Germany: Shared Object Histories? (2016–2019), which worked with the Ethnological Museum’s East Africa collections, was just one example of such image use, see https:/ /www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/research/tanzania-germany-shared-object-histories.html, consulted 12 October 2019.
7. Dialogue from field notes, 19 November 2013. The hourly guidelines also have to do with the health and safety aspects of the FFP 3 masks the museum staff uses; staff should only work with these masks for a certain amount of time and then take a break or do work that does not require a mask. I am grateful to Eva Ritz for this precision.
8. The document confirmed that ‘[t]he contamination with PCP (pentachlorphenol), lindane and DDT (dichlorodiphenyl-trichloroethane) as well as the elements arsenic and mercury has been determined’ (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2017).
9. In 2015, Tervuren’s Royal Museum for Central Africa, no protection was used when entering the collections, and staff were didn’t know about the degree and kind of chemicals used on the objects.
13. Field notes from 19 October 2015.
14. The traces within show cases can also come from evaporation, blossom-out, and precipitation (Ausdünstungen, Ausblühungen, Niederschläge), either originating from within the objects (not only from pesticides, but also fats, oils, or colouring), but also from unsuited materials used in the construction of the show cases (wood material, colours, seals).
15. Field notes from a restoration session, 20 March 2014.
16. My translation from the German: ‘Und so habe ich mich quasi schützend über meine Kinder geschissen.’
17. The ‘wear and tear’ is quoted here from an interview with the Belgian collector Marc Felix (Corbey, 2000, p. 174). See also the monograph by Christopher B. Steiner on the trade in African art for definitions of ‘ethnographic authenticity’ (Steiner, 1994, pp. 100–103).
18. My translation from the German.