Rethinking the Ethnographic Museum

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1 Introduction

Over the past five years or so, a new official willingness has emerged in European countries to enquire into the ethics of their museum collections acquired under colonial conditions, to face up to a new era of restitution of human remains, and the possibility also of the restitution of colonial artefacts, artworks and documentation, especially those assembled within a 'context of injustice'. At present, these advances have been contained in separate enquiries within disciplines and disciplinary museums. Yet, deliberations have paid insufficient attention either to how these collections were often acquired together, during the same expeditions and often by the same collectors, or to how they were distributed thereafter between collecting institutions and disciplines, and how these disciplines were later reorganized. While it might now seem more reasonable to consider colonial collections of skulls and skeletons as being marked by violence, the time has arrived to reconsider the frameworks of preservation and stewardship that have attached themselves to all aspects of the ethnographic, including the ethnomusicological. Colonialism's violence took the form of plunder, rapaciousness and defilement of the human body through physical anthropology but it was also an unacknowledged and repressed characteristic of the ethnological.

2 Vienna and the Sounds of Violence

Among the significant collections of the Phonogram Archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna are audiovisual recordings by medical scientist and anthropologist Rudolf Pöch, made in Kamelpan in the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland and in Oas and Gobabis in German South West Africa in 1908 during a field expedition to the Kalahari. He recorded songs and speech, expressed mainly in Naro, with an Archiv-phonograph and an Edison phonograph, and he also photographed and filmed occasions and subjects to show hand clapping and dance movements of the feet. This was a time of significant disciplinary development and institutional formation, which brought closer unity between field collecting and scholarly research and which saw the Phonogram Archive itself formed in 1899 as the world's first sound archive

concerned with audiovisual research, documentation and collecting (Rassool 2020).

Looking back at its more than 120-year history, the Phonogram Archive is one of the most important repositories for preserving a large part of the international heritage of orally conveyed cultures before the impact of 'Western civilization'. Its main work has been to generate, collect and catalogue audiovisual research recordings from many disciplines and regions, to ensure their long-term preservation, and to make them permanently accessible. The recordings made by Pöch, which are now part of this audiovisual collection, were initially stored on copper negatives, wax moulds and galvano-plastically manufactured positive discs, as well as on cinematographic film. Between 1909 and 1913, before his appointment as the first professor of anthropology and ethnology at the University of Vienna in 1913, Pöch had worked as a research assistant at the Vienna Phonogram Archive, where he took responsibility for archiving his own collections, making revisions and additions, and working in close cooperation with Erich M. von Hornbostel of the Phonogram Archive in Berlin.

In 2003, on the occasion of the 34th Annual Conference of the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) held in Pretoria, South Africa, the Academy of Sciences published CD and CD-ROM recordings made from surviving negatives of originals lost during the Second World War. This edition contained the historical material of the sound recordings, of language, shouting and music, as well as the image files that Pöch made of the original protocols. At the IASA conference, Pöch was celebrated as one of the pioneers of field sound recording. The intention behind digitization and publication was to make the early holdings of the archive "easily accessible, especially in the countries and regions of their origin" (Lechleitner 2003: 12).

Pöch's Kalahari recordings were included in the 'historical' (1899–1950) collections at the Phonogram Archive and, to underline their 'universal significance', were also incorporated into the UNESCO Memory of the World International Register. The value of these phonographic collections is that they are seen as representations of early audio recordings, in fact the oldest such recordings, or 'sound documents' (*tondokumente*), of Khoisan languages, and of the animated testimonies of the Bushmen and of their polyphonic singing (Lechleitner 2003: 7–46). Rudolf Pöch's 1908 Kalahari recordings were incorporated into an institutional and disciplinary edifice of preservation and an ideology of stewardship and permanent availability through care, digitization and scholarship under the aegis of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. This discourse of museum and archival stewardship and preservation resonated with the celebratory view of the significance of Pöch's work of recording sounds in the Kalahari.

In 2008, as part of a multi-institutional Viennese cultural project, the Austrian Research Fund financed the digital assembly of Pöch's "fragmented and almost forgotten estate". In a celebration of his stewardship and heroism, many who gathered around this project saw in Pöch a groundbreaking and pioneering media scholar noted for his phonographic, photographic and cinematographic fieldwork in New Guinea (where he had undertaken an expedition between 1901 and 1906), in the Kalahari and, still later, in prisoner of war camps during the First World War. Teschler-Nicola (2009: 347) went on to describe Pöch as "one of the last to lead multidisciplinary, scientific expeditions on a large scale", and as someone who undertook documentation through "a wide range of media that were state-of-the-art at the time." The project aimed to integrate and reconnect different media formats "scattered across different Austrian institutions".

This preservationist paradigm came unstuck when it became apparent that Rudolf Pöch's sound documentation and collecting activities in the Kalahari had taken place in a climate of heightened violence and colonial disruption in the first decade of the twentieth century. Moreover, Pöch's phonographic legacy of Kalahari recordings needed to be understood as part of the wider multidisciplinary collecting project, key components of which had been carried out unlawfully and through concealment from the authorities. Pöch's expedition conducted on behalf of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Vienna between 1907 and 1909 occurred in the violent and disruptive transfrontier colonial landscape of the Kalahari – the borderland between Namibia, Botswana and South Africa – still in turmoil from the genocide in Namibia.

Spurred by the possibility of their disappearance and extinction, during the expedition, in addition to providing the phonographic documentation, Pöch undertook ethnological and physical anthropological research on the Bushmen, as well as botanical, zoological and geological studies. These generated a large collection of ethnographic material, cultural documentation, skeletons, skulls, corpses and body casts that came to be separated and distributed across a number of institutions in Vienna. Pöch had covered 6000 kilometres of southern Africa and, apart from the 67 phonogram recordings, 1000 metres of film and 2000 photographs that were created, the expedition generated 1500 letters, 30 parcels and 100 boxes. In these boxes and parcels were 1000 ethnographic objects, 4 rocks with historic art images and inscriptions, 80 skeletons, 150 skulls and 2 corpses (Rassool 2015).

Rudolf Pöch's Kalahari recordings need to be reassessed alongside this wider collection of ethnographic objects, stolen rock engravings, and illegally disinterred corpses, skeletons and skulls that cast doubt on the pioneering and preservationist framework for understanding his legacy. The suspicion initially arose

from research into how Pöch and his assistants acquired human remains and rock engravings, which became the subject of a legal inquiry immediately after his departure from southern Africa. As a result of this research and subsequent negotiations between the South African and Austrian governments during 2012, the remains of Klaas and Trooi Pienaar, which had entered the Academy of Sciences collection as corpses, were returned to the Northern Cape in South Africa, where they were reburied at Kuruman (Rassool 2015).

Subsequent research in South Africa and Vienna has resulted in matching the records of the illegal disinterment of the remains of three more named persons from the Kuruman area with skeletons held by the Department of Physical Anthropology at the University of Vienna. In addition, two of the stolen and illegally exported rocks, now with faded art images, have been identified in the collection of the newly rebranded World Museum. When considered against this background, the phonographic records of the African past in Austrian and German museums should not be seen as the sounds of lost or disappearing cultures. Rather, they represent the sounds of violence (Rassool 2020).

3 Ethnographic Contests

As we consider the contested nature of ethnographic objects and other forms of documentation in Austrian, German and other European museums, we also need to consider how much the world has changed since the modern museum and its fundamental features first emerged. The creation of a world after colonialism might have occurred for the most part in political terms. However, we are still deeply immersed in the epistemic struggle to change the colonial frames through which we understand societies and people. The same goes for institutions – such as museums – through which the societies and people of the world have been collected, classified and made knowable. And we all live with the legacies of colonial violence that led to the appropriation of African bodies, artworks and artefacts and that accompanied the birth of the ethnographic museum. Far from being the institution of care as proclaimed by museum discourses, we are learning just how much museums were part of the weaponry of death (Hicks 2020).

I want to suggest that the frames of the stewardship of collections for future generations are insufficient to maintain and defend the old museum. New, powerful approaches argue in favour of restitution and understand the museum as a process and as an interrogative project (Karp and Kratz 2015; Rassool 2006; Silverman 2015). These approaches need to accompany urgent programmes of restitution through which African artefacts and artworks are to

be returned. But restitution is not just the geographic reorganization of collections. It represents new possibilities for rethinking what we mean by museum. It is in these restitution claims, consultations and negotiations that the new concept of 'museum as process' will be found as a way of settling the dilemmas of the unsettled (and unsettling) objects in the modern museum of coloniality.

As I have argued before, the museum is not only an institution of modernity and ordered citizenship, but is the primary institutional form of empire and coloniality (Rassool 2015). It was made and is being remade and adapted through both sides of colonialism's history – by a rapacious and violent empire of plunder and pacification, as well as by empire as 'benevolent colonization', humanitarianism and trusteeship over people and things. This was a simultaneous expression of collecting, documenting and governing (safeguarding and preserving) things and people through appropriation and stewardship. While it has become more widely accepted that collecting human remains and conducting research in physical anthropology were part of the violence of colonialism and racism, it is important also to re-examine the humanist and caring associations of collecting and preserving material culture.

Ethnography has come to mean many things at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is part of the discipline of anthropology, which also embraces folklore and ethnology (*volkenkunde*, *völkerkunde*, *ethnologie*), each with its own colonial and postcolonial histories, and research methods based on closely observed, detailed and long-term field-based research. While different anthropologies have undergone significant self-scrutiny and reassessment since at least the 1970s, this self-analysis has been uneven between different colonial histories, and between the academy and the museum.

In the German-speaking world, despite their shared historical methods of collecting skeletons, material culture and other forms of cultural documentation, collections were separated and spread across different museums. This is because the Germans divide anthropology into *ethnologie* and *anthropologie*, with the former denoting social and cultural anthropology and the latter physical anthropology. As a consequence, human remains and evidence of the material culture from the colonial era have artificially occupied separate spheres of debate and policy formulation in Germany.

In Germany and Switzerland, ethnographic museums have begun to rebrand themselves as museums of world cultures, while remaining museums of the arts and material cultures of the societies of former colonial empire. Others, such as the Tropenmuseum in the Netherlands (incorporated in 2014 into a bigger structure of a National Museum of World Cultures), had chosen to turn its museum methods on itself, making its own histories of collecting the focus of its 2008 museum renovation project (Faber et al. 2007; Van Dartel 2010). In

France, the shift at the Musée du quai Branly, founded in 2006, was to elevate non-Western works of primitive art and *arts premiers* into masterpieces, aestheticized by placing dramatic spotlights on individual objects in a generally dark environment as a “homage to peoples who [had] suffered conquest”. This museum’s fine art displays, “remarkable examples of ... masks and statues from Africa and Oceania”, among other things, sought to confirm “the equal dignity of the cultures of the world” (Riding 2006).

In October 2010, in its new location in Cologne, the renovated Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum reopened with a new exhibition called *People in their Worlds*. Perhaps the major feature and programmatic concept of the new museum was the attempt to reflect on colonialism and racism as an important context for understanding the museum’s history and the biography of its collection. Equally important was a significant effort to reflect on the knowledge producing effects of every aspect of museum work from collecting, classification, conservation, collections management and display. Notwithstanding these important moves, the exhibition was marked by a sense of contested authorship, between curators and designers, where the creation of stage-managed spaces of scenographic exhibitionary settings saw the ‘narrative dramaturgy’ of design being dominated by a design company. This served to displace any effort to enquire epistemically into colonial legacies of collecting and knowledge making (Rassool 2014).

The Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt adopted an interrogative method of working with its collection through having artists living and working in the museum, engaging with artworks and artefacts from the collection, interpreting them and intervening in their biographies through creative work. As part of the process of exhibition-making, museum spaces were turned into laboratories of engagement and debate, with artists, curators, scholars and lawyers engaging in interrogation, interpretation and exchange. These proceedings of a museum of process were a way of helping to shape the museum’s meanings. In refusing to abide by the logic of the ethnographic, the Weltkulturen Museum began to position itself as a postethnographic museum, a museum that enquires into what the appropriate museologies would look like after colonialism (Deliss and Mutumba 2014).

These ethnographic meanings have travelled and continue to travel together, between the academy and museum, between research and collecting, publication and exhibition. Between the 1960s and 1980s, major reassessments took place in scholarship on African and other societies of the work of the disciplines of anthropology and history in producing knowledge about African societies, as well as of the disciplinary division between them. While the rise of African nationalism and independence movements on the African

continent were important impulses in the growth of African history, anthropology underwent a period of self-assessment in an attempt to turn its back on colonial legacies. These disciplinary reassessments were uneven between different societies and colonial histories, between former colonizing societies that had faced African national liberation struggles and those that had not, between the academy and the museum and between different parts of the former colonized world.

The major challenge is to shift from an understanding of colonialism as time and place and as a formal system of rule to an appreciation of coloniality as an epistemology, as a politics of knowledge. This would enable a much wider understanding of coloniality as embedded in deep structures of knowledge, in the character and shape of disciplines in the museum and the university. Colonialism would then be appreciated as more than merely a topic of history, as was the approach in the exhibition on German colonialism held in 2016 at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, notwithstanding how powerful this exhibition was. German museums and universities have continued to be marked by coloniality in peculiar ways through the persistence of nineteenth-century disciplinary systems and classificatory divisions.

As ethnographic museums in Cologne, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hamburg and elsewhere have been undergoing processes of renovation, this has sometimes seen an openness to rethinking the work of the museum itself. Some ethnographic museums have laid emphasis on provenance research on their artefacts and artworks from colonial contexts, and on partnerships with and loans to museums in source societies. These approaches have tended to emphasize the entangled histories between former colonized societies and their former colonizers (Thomas 1991), as well as methods of co-curatorship and object sharing (Schorch and McCarthy 2019). This constituted a neocolonial embellishment upon the assertion by European museums in the early 2000s that they were universal museums that preserved collections on behalf of humanity.

Such emphasis on 'entanglement' might as well represent the perpetuation of neocolonialism. In reaction, following the report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy to French president Emmanuel Macron (Sarr and Savoy 2018), we are witnessing a growing commitment to the restitution of African artworks and artefacts. Some curators in German ethnographic museums, for instance, have expressed support for restitution, while curators in small ethnographic museums in Britain (such as the Horniman and Pitt Rivers), have stressed the *necessity* for restitution, especially in the light of how central museum collecting was to the project of colonial pacification in the late nineteenth century (Hicks 2020).

Perhaps Berlin has been the setting for the most significant contests over collections of colonial human remains, the ethics of colonial collections, and the persistence of colonial urban traces. Partly because of political pressure from German and African activists, museums in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany have already embarked on projects to return African human remains, sometimes victims of colonial violence, or corpses or skeletons illegally removed from graves. This commitment started with returns to Namibia and is set to continue with returns to Rwanda, as well as other African societies that Germany had colonized such as Tanzania and Togo. And yet, German museums still need to face the implications of the fact that in many cases the scientists who had collected these remains, at the same time assembled material culture and documentation (film, images, sound recordings) as part of multidisciplinary expeditions. These collections had become separated from each other into separate disciplines and museums, and possibly also into contexts of injustice and liberal humanism. The time has indeed come for these to be considered together, with human remains of missing persons, and with artefacts also being, in some ways, missing ancestors. The time has come to depart from the paradigm of liberal humanism.

Notwithstanding the shifting climate of museum debates in Europe, with increased acknowledgement of violence and growing willingness to conduct restitution work, the cultural authorities in Berlin have pressed ahead with the formation of the Humboldt Forum. The latter brings together collections of the Dahlem Ethnological Museum with those of Asian art. However, in drawing on a seemingly unproblematic nineteenth-century intellectual history, the Humboldt Forum is set to perpetuate the colonial idea of grouping together the material culture and art of those described as 'non-European'. The Humboldt Forum is also a project of belatedness, of being part of reimagining Berlin as a major European city, and of reasserting Germany's position as western.

4 The Postethnographic Museum

The transformation of museums may involve research into the ethics of acquisition, through provenance research, as well as an enquiry into the relationship between collections and living, historical cultures, including one's own: it also involves a deep, critical, historical investigation into the knowledge systems surrounding objects and collections, in an approach that questions colonial categories. The work of Hamilton and Leibhammer (2017) has shown how important this is for 'untribing the archive' in the case of South African collections and documentalities. We are also learning about the extent to which

museum labels and documentation have concealed the violence of the acquisition of many artefacts and artworks.

The postethnographic museum points to the possibility that the modern museum as the world has known it, which emerged as part of the making of the modern person, and coincided with the colonization of the world, has outlived its value. This postethnographic museum can only be the outcome of a sustained engagement with the basic museum work of collecting, conservation, exhibition and education in ways that enter into battle with the colonial concepts of race and ethnic group that seem naturalized and frozen. In general, it is critical to think about the connections between the administration of people and the administration of artefacts in the museum, and simultaneously to rethink society as well as the museum.

In considering how the museum is changing we need to understand how old collecting museums have been challenging themselves and how new, interrogative museums, understood as process have begun to expand museum horizons to embrace the downtrodden, the oppressed and exploited of the world whose experiences might previously have been confined and contained through colonial ethnography and even a denial of coevalness. This focus on local and deep histories of oppression, displacement and survival, while guarding against the triumphalism of nationalism, needs to consider the ways it offers new understandings of what museums are as well as the possibilities for new museologies for the twenty-first century.

Posing questions about the museum should not merely be about expunging its rapacious histories, and shoring up the vestiges of a remaining benevolence, framed as preservation and stewardship. The most progressive edge of such reformed, benevolent museum is the 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997, based on Pratt 1991), as produced through co-curatorship and of science and 'indigeneity' working together. This model of a reformed museum retained the classificatory order and hierarchy of empire, but relied on greater participation by 'source communities', with the museum placed on a more 'ethical' footing. Rather, it requires questions posed about the syndrome of preservation itself.

This age of an ethical engagement with human subjects and of a new ethics of collecting has seen the emergence of new programmes to prevent museums benefiting from the illicit traffic in artefacts and a significant move by many museums of culture and nature to 'cleanse' themselves of their human remains and other 'sensitive collections', deemed to have been acquired unethically or in a context of injustice. Sometimes these changes have taken the form of a partial 'cleansing' through merely moving the store of human remains or sensitive collections, and creating cultural centres jointly managed by science and the indigenous. Such processes of reform might have created more socially

responsive and ethically grounded museums, but they have left the empire of the museum intact.

Transforming the museum means embarking on projects of restitution, not just as return but also as a methodology of rethinking what we mean by museum. It also entails understanding the history of the museum as the locus of empire and coloniality in all its forms, and to embark on the difficult work of interrogating its collecting histories and epistemologies. The museum needs to be reconceptualized outside evolutionary frames and the impulses of preservation and atonement. The postcolonial museum may indeed require the inauguration of the postmuseum itself.

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