

Libraries and Colonial Contexts

A Conversation with Researchers from the Global South

1. Introduction

Librarians and academics from German-speaking countries met at the workshop *Colonial Contexts in Libraries* (Koloniale Kontexte in Bibliotheken) at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin on 6 and 7 November 2023. The objective of the event was to discuss colonial entanglements of collections and to open up perspectives for a contemporary and responsible approach to colonial heritage in libraries.¹ In addition, international experts were invited to contribute video statements on new perspectives and give impulses to the debate. For this issue of *o-bib*, these statements were converted into a virtual interview in order to share them with a wider audience. The organizers of the workshop would like to thank Albert Gouaffo, Werner Hillebrecht, Naazima Kamardeen and Mutanu Kyany'a for their thought-provoking contributions and hope to continue the debate in near future. Here is a short introduction of the experts and the interviewer.

Albert Gouaffo is professor of German Literature and Cultural Studies and Intercultural Communication at the University of Dschang in Cameroon. His areas of research interest are provenance research on cultural property from colonial contexts, memories and post-colonial studies. Due to his collaboration in various projects on holdings from colonial contexts in museums, he is actively involved in the debates on provenance research and restitution and more generally in the debates on coming to terms with the colonial past.

Werner Hillebrecht is an archivist and librarian in Namibia. Since 1992 he has worked at the National Archives of Namibia. In 1995 he moved to the National Library where he initiated their electronic catalog. In 2002 he returned to the National Archives which he led until retirement in 2015. His research focuses on the colonial history of Namibia and since his retirement he has worked as a consultant for history, heritage and documentation, including provenance research. His special interest is the correspondence of indigenous leaders before and during the colonial period.

Naazima Kamardeen is a professor at the Department of Commercial Law, Faculty of Law, University of Colombo. She is also an Attorney-at-Law of the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. Her research interests include intellectual and cultural property, international law, biopiracy and traditional knowledge, trade and investment, environment, research ethics and Muslim personal law reform. In recent years, she has worked on colonial collections, provenance research and restitution processes from the perspective of law and justice.

Mutanu Kyany'a is a digital society expert who is curious about how societies communicate online and about the worlds that are birthed as a result of these online interactions. She is currently the

1 Report on the workshop: Elster, Christiane: Koloniale Kontexte in Bibliotheken. Bericht zum Workshop "Koloniale Kontexte in Bibliotheken" am 6. und 7. November 2023 an der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, in: Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen und Bibliographie 71 (2), 2024, S. 117–122.

Head of Programs at African Digital Heritage, where she has provided leadership in the execution of a holistic digital practice within African cultural heritage for the last six years. Informed by her background in community development and computer science, Mutanu works closely with African communities to assess and adapt digital interventions that centre their needs and realities for the purposes of preserving and promoting their cultures, histories, and identities.

Lars Müller works at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin in a project on digitalization of collections from colonial contexts. In previous positions, he has worked on provenance research with a focus on collections from African countries in European collections. His research interests range from historical educational media to the history of restitution.

For the following interview, the statements have been clustered into three areas.

2.1 Perspectives from the Global South on Collections in German Libraries

Lars Müller: Mutanu, as a representative of the organization African Digital Heritage, can you tell us about the work your organization is doing? What role do materials in German libraries currently (or potentially) play in your efforts?

Mutanu Kyany'a: African Digital Heritage works at the intersection of technology, history, and storytelling. We use digital methods to build an ecosystem where African cultural heritage is not only accessible online but is authentic, usable, and considerate of the wishes, realities and identities of the people of African descent. Access to libraries containing information on pre-independence Africa is particularly significant in the work that we do because lots of this information was either destroyed or was taken back to Europe after independence, creating huge gaps in our home archives. In order to effectively reimagine and redefine the African narrative to one that centres Africans, access to materials in colonial libraries is necessary. This will allow actors such as myself to not only critique said material, but also accurately redocument Africa's histories and narratives.

Lars Müller: That opens up a new perspective for many people who work in libraries in Europe. One can probably assume that there is limited awareness of the interest that people from African and Asian countries or the Americas have in material in German libraries. However, it seems important to point out that this is not a recent development. Namibia began compiling an overview of literature from and about Namibia even before its independence. Can you tell us more about this, Werner?

Werner Hillebrecht: Namibia was under colonial South African rule until 1990. This status was disputed by the United Nations since its inception in 1946. Partly because of this disputed status, South Africa was extremely restrictive with any information concerning Namibia, and even bibliographical information was hard to come by. This led to several converging and cooperating initiatives in the 1980s to rectify this situation. One driving force was the effort by international scholars to research aspects of Namibian history, geography and economy in preparation for the eventual independence. Another factor were the needs of Namibian students in exile who had left the country because South

Africa did not offer higher education opportunities for black Namibians. As a result, there were Namibian students all over the world who aspired to contribute with their studies and academic theses to the knowledge about their country, but had serious problems in finding relevant literature.

Lars Müller: So what was actually done to help in this situation?

Werner Hillebrecht: There were four main actors who worked together in exchanging information about library resources: the Library of the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka, Zambia; the British economic historian Richard Moorsom, the Norwegian historian Tore Linné Eriksen, and myself in Germany. Together, we were all embedded in the network of the international solidarity movement for the liberation of Namibia and South Africa. I had the advantage of being able to draw on the rich information resources of Germany, the first colonizer of Namibia, and travelled to dozens of German libraries with Namibian resources – colonial resources from 1884 to 1915, but also literature emanating from the many ties between Germany and Namibia that were not cut short by the First World War. So when Namibia eventually gained independence in 1990, I had compiled a pretty complete inventory of Namibia-related monographs and grey literature in West Germany plus some resources in the UK and Scandinavia, and had also converted the initial catalog cards to an electronic database, NAMLIT. This made it possible to transfer the entire project to Namibia at independence, where it is still continued and currently stands at over 83,000 entries of Namibia-related literature.

Lars Müller: In Germany, we often refer to literature about (former) colonies that were produced in colonial times as the “colonial library”. However, if I understand correctly, Albert, you prefer not to use this categorization and instead talk about a German-Cameroonian Library. Can you explain why?

Albert Gouaffo: The literature produced by the Germans on Cameroon (travel accounts, scientific exploration reports, collections of poems, memoirs, plays, novels, tales and legends, etc.) does not appear anywhere in a work of German literary history. This literature, which was published by German publishers and was as popular in German society as the literature of literary movements such as “Junges Deutschland”, “Vormärz”, and “bürgerlicher Realismus”, has not been acknowledged by German academic critics. This literature is classed as a “colonial library” to mark its trivial and inadequate nature. Germanists in Germany do not consider this literature to be part of their national heritage and therefore a sub-field of national literary history. The reason is simple: this literature is a disgrace today. My understanding is that this literature is intercultural. It was certainly written by the Germans and produced in Germany, but it gives an account of the life of Cameroonians before and during the arrival of the Germans and even after their forced departure on the eve of the First World War. In order to avoid defensive reflexes and treat this shared heritage dispassionately, I propose to refer to this literature as German-Cameroonian literature of the colonial period. This literature deserves a specific space for its study: the Colonial German-Cameroonian Library.

Werner Hillebrecht: I like this approach. We talk of “Namibiana” as the sum of all writings from and about Namibia, including German Namibiana, and used to buy relevant current literature from abroad and include it in the national bibliography. Unfortunately, skyrocketing book prices and deteriorating

exchange rates have made this all but impossible, except for the slowly growing percentage of free open access literature.

Lars Müller: Sri Lanka also started to put together a catalog with cultural heritage some decades ago – focusing on material that was taken during colonial times. Can you give us some insights into this project, Naazima?

Naazima Kamardeen: In the 1970s the then Director General of Museums, Hemasiri De Silva, received a grant to visit museums in several countries across the globe, to study the cultural objects from Sri Lanka that were found in museums, libraries and other collections in those countries.² While he personally examined many of the nearly 5,000 objects, in some instances he depended on the recommendation provided by the curators of those museums. The catalog that he produced remains the only definitive volume that at the very least documents these objects, even though it makes no mention of ownership or the conditions of transfer. Unfortunately, this catalog was not updated since then. No other work was undertaken to improve or expand on this undertaking. The material in libraries abroad is not even found in Sri Lanka anymore and could be instrumental in fitting the pieces of lost history.

2.2 To whom does this material from colonial contexts in German libraries belong? And how should we deal with this material?

Lars Müller: When discussing the dislocation of cultural heritage during colonial times which is now housed in European libraries, museums, or private collections, there is a strong call for restitution. This issue is closely connected with the question of who the legal owner of these objects is. Can you give us your perspective on this as a researcher in cultural heritage and property law, Naazima?

Naazima Kamardeen: The mainstream narrative on this posits that the colonizers had a “right” to remove objects from the vanquished nation, or that in any case, the laws against retrospectivity operate to deny the former colonized the right to ask for their return. This has been reinforced by the view that the return is done on moral, as opposed to legal, grounds (as in the Dutch Restitution Policy). The legality of the taking of colonial cultural property can be challenged on several grounds, including the fact that this was not war booty, or that cultural property should have been spared from being looted. Since ownership is a matter to be decided by law, and since the law of the time governing the movement of these objects has had no input from the former colonized, this law does not represent the views of both parties. But the former colonized are not given an opportunity to challenge this status quo.

Lars Müller: The question to whom this material belongs does not focus on manuscripts alone but also includes other kinds of library collections. African Digital Heritage makes a strong argument

2 De Silva, Pilippu Hewa Don Hemasiri: A catalogue of antiquities and other cultural objects from Sri Lanka (Ceylon) abroad, National Museums of Sri Lanka, Colombo 1975.

for digitalization and access. But there are also some problems associated with it. How would you, Mutanu, describe the main obstacles to appropriately digitizing material from colonial contexts?

Mutanu Kyany'a: To whom does a material belong if it contains national records but does not sit in the said nation? Whom does the material belong to if said material is then digitized? As cultural heritage practitioners in Africa and the Afro-diaspora on one hand grapple with the intricacies of digitization, and on the other champion for it, it is critical that stakeholders in the sector ensure that we do not transfer the erasure, misrepresentations, and 'othering' contained in physical collections to digital collections. This can be done by ensuring that as we invest in the digitization itself, we have also invested in the proper cataloging of accurate, inclusive and respectful metadata. Data that holds regard for not only the authors and collectors, but also the subjects of the materials. This way, then, we honor the author, the collector, and the subject, too!

Lars Müller: The question of restitution and return is different for printed material in libraries than for manuscripts. Your concept of a Cameroon-German Library suggests that this literature belongs to Cameroon as well. Could you elaborate on the meaning this literature holds in present-day Cameroon, Albert?

Albert Gouaffo: From today's perspective, this literature can be interpreted as colonial heritage for Cameroon. It is a literature that was not written by Cameroonians, but whose backdrop is Cameroon and Cameroonians. This literature provides information on how Cameroonians lived before and during the arrival of the Germans. It also provides information on how the Germans liked to see Cameroonians: as manual labourers and not as equal and thinking people. How this came about is now part of a form of restitution of knowledge to Cameroon in the post-colonial era. This literature can be used today in both German and Cameroonian schools. An analytical grid adapted to the texts has yet to be developed.

Lars Müller: Next to questions of returning items, there are other aspects which challenge the practice of libraries that hold the material. By building your own catalog, you took some authority off German libraries to decide on the cataloging of literature. How did you address misconceived or racist descriptions in the NAMLIT Project, Werner? In Germany, there is a debate about perpetuating colonial ideologies in cataloging, so I'm curious about the approach Namibia took in this regard.

Werner Hillebrecht: Well, we all know of the N-word and the K-word. In Namibia and South Africa, we have the H-word, which is deeply offensive. Of course, in a bibliographic description, you cannot avoid the word "Hottentot" if it is part of a title, which is unfortunately quite common in older works, even in scholarly literature where the authors should have known better, because it was always an offensive term. In the 1980s, I still found it quite often as a keyword in library subject card catalogs, but in electronic catalogs it should be easy to eliminate as a keyword. If it is used for the larger historical group of cattle and sheep herders with click languages in Southern Africa, one has to speak of "Khoikhoi". And if it is used for the subgroup of Khoikhoi who still exist as a vibrant community in Namibia and the Northern Cape, one should use "Nama". Case closed. A very different example is the content re-evaluation of historical literature. A very specific German phenomenon is the abundant

literature calling for the restitution of German rule in those colonies that the empire lost with the Treaty of Versailles. The term “colonial revisionism” has been coined in recent times. But at the time when this type of literature was created, the term was not used for cataloging, and you will not find it with this keyword in any historical library catalog. So, re-cataloging in NAMLIT with an autopsy of the original works resulted in ca. 350 titles being newly described with this term.

2.3 Where to go from here – and how?

Lars Müller: This all leads to the question of where we should go from here. With NAMLIT, you created a database of literature related to Namibia, Werner. And in Germany, there are several digitization projects underway. What do you think the next steps should be?

Werner Hillebrecht: With the technical tools that are available today, digitization is much more than making a book available elsewhere. The list of relevant colonial books that are not physically available in Namibia is rather small. I can tell because I used the bibliography compiled in Germany to catalog existing Namibian collections. This situation came about because of the continued existence of a German-speaking settler community in Namibia, and will be different for other former colonies. The visible gaps are rather in areas like yearbooks and colonial newspapers, where we invariably have incomplete collections. My favorite example is the annual bibliography compiled by the librarian of the German Colonial Society,³ which even in German libraries is rarely available without gaps, and a complete digitization would be an invaluable resource for all former German colonies. But nowadays, one can do much more with digitization. Let me mention the memoirs of the German governor of Namibia, Theodor Leutwein. There are many copies in Namibia, and even a modern reprint can still be bought. I can’t recall how many times I have been requested by Namibians to have it translated into English, but translations are time-consuming and expensive, and even an OCR was beyond our reach, because the book is printed in “Fraktur” gothic type and our attempts to purchase a software to do OCR on Fraktur were not successful. Nowadays this seems to be a routine operation, as we can see in the books digitized in Bremen.⁴ But we still don’t have the software. In connection with much improved translation software, translation of this much-requested book should be much easier, although still requiring a final edit by human intelligence. The same applies to a number of books that, despite their colonial bias, are indispensable information sources but remain inaccessible without knowledge of the German language. Need I say that the translation software in question is not delivered to Africa? We may use the online service to translate bits and pieces, but no larger jobs. Colonialism is alive and well.

3 Brose, Maximilian (as from 1907: Henoch, Hubert): Die deutsche Kolonialliteratur im Jahre ..., Berlin 1897–1916 (covering the years 1883 to 1915). Volumes 1 and 2 were published in the annual ‘Koloniales Jahrbuch’; volumes 3 to 7 were published as special issues of ‘Beiträge zur Kolonialpolitik und Kolonialwirtschaft’; volumes 8 to 19 were published as special issues of ‘Zeitschrift für Kolonialpolitik, Kolonialrecht und Kolonialwirtschaft’.

4 Between 2017 and 2019, the Bremen State and University Library digitized titles on German colonialism with partners from the Johann Christian Senckenberg University Library in Frankfurt/Main and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Free access to these titles is offered in the “Digital Collection of German Colonialism” (Digitale Sammlung Deutscher Kolonialismus), <https://brema.suub.uni-bremen.de/dsdk>, last accessed 17.07.2024.

Lars Müller: While NAMLIT has a considerably long history, Albert, I'm curious about how you would start such a project from scratch. If we take the example of creating or reconstructing a German-Cameroonian library, how should we envision this project?

Albert Gouaffo: The German-Cameroonian Colonial Library is a German-Cameroonian matter. History is history. Germany should stand by its history if it is serious about coming to terms with its own colonial history as agreed to among political parties. An inventory should be made of the colonial documents scattered throughout the libraries. Interdisciplinary and collaborative research projects should then be designed to systematically catalog this literature. Classical methods of literary studies are difficult to apply to this type of literature. It is about texts between literature and anthropology. Cameroonian literature from the German colonial period in Cameroon and Germany remains a research desideratum. The author Max Dippold has already done some groundwork in this respect by compiling an initial repertoire of German written material on German colonial Cameroon in 1971.⁵ This work needs to be continued. German librarians are first called upon to make an inventory and then a collaborative research team will be appointed to create a taxonomy of the texts and then research them scientifically. We need appropriate funding for these projects which also takes into account the payment of Cameroonian partners.

Lars Müller: You also mentioned collaboration in working on these collections, Mutanu, but you noted that it goes beyond just accurate, inclusive and respectful metadata. Could you elaborate on that?

Mutanu Kyany'a: I am a strong believer that digitization isn't just about the "project work" itself, but also about what happens after. After materials have been digitized and can be accessed online, practitioners need to ensure that communities and actors, first, know about the digital archive, so that they can contribute to and critique the archive. Running collaborative programs with communities that feature as subjects of said material would be a good place to start. It is through said communities' interactions with the archive that we get to rectify accounts of misinformation or misrepresentation found in the archive. However, practitioners need to ensure that this collaboration is beneficial for all parties involved, and that everyone is doing both the thinking and the labor. Provisions for re-use of digitized material could also be another avenue to explore as it not only reels in a larger audience pool, but also gives life to the archive, ensuring its longevity.

Lars Müller: One of your main interests is provenance research, Naazima. While there are many projects with museums in this field, collaborative provenance research in libraries is still relatively new, at least in Germany. What lessons do you think we can learn from existing projects before developing initiatives in this field?

Naazima Kamardeen: I firmly believe that collaborative provenance research must be done, with a framework or methodology that is designed by all stakeholders in collaboration with each other, and not where one party sets the agenda and the others must just perform the tasks. People in the countries of origin should have a say in the selection of collections, the methodical framework and

5 Max Dippold: *Une bibliographie du Cameroun. Les écrits en langue allemande*, Burgau 1971.

underlying assumptions. This should happen at the planning stage. This will impact greatly on the trust and acceptance of research projects. The past experience of research projects such as the PPROCE project⁶ taught us that we are all new to the idea of such collaboration and that the colonial mentality continues to follow us even in this regard.

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⁶ Pilotproject Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPROCE), <https://www.niod.nl/en/projects/pilotproject-provenance-research-objects-colonial-era-pproce>, last accessed 17.07.2024.