

# MUSEUM COOPERATION BETWEEN AFRICA AND EUROPE

## A New Field for Museum Studies

*Thomas Laely, Marc Meyer and Raphael Schwere (eds.)*

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Cooperative initiatives between the so-called Global South and North often aim at levelling out the economic, epistemological, and political imbalances that colonial domination caused. To this end, cooperation between museums has become a way of tackling sensitive ethical questions surrounding representation as well as the rehabilitation of non-Western knowledge systems that were displaced by the universal claims made by Western «empirical, «scientific» knowledge» (Shelton, p. xvi). The edited volume «Museum Cooperation Between Africa and Europe. A New Field for Museum Studies» is motivated by the will to share knowledge between nations and communities, between museum institutions and the staff members of these respective institutional bodies, as set out in the Code of Ethics for Museums of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) (Laely et al., p. 3). However, cooperation is also a highly diverse, contentious, and often upsetting process that can challenge cultural preconceptions and normative assumptions. The editors identify five key fields of cooperation between Africa and Europe where such challenges generally arise: motivations, actors, cooperative practice, difference and inequalities, and normative rationales (p. 5). As the editors state, «the current hegemonic heritage discourse is still predicated on a Western museum model» shaped by the «culture and development» approach» and influences policies both in African and European museums (p. 4; see also Loumpet, p. 43). This volume addresses precisely these challenges as they apply to sincere and equitable museum partnerships. It includes essays by curators and leading scholars of international museum studies in and beyond Africa. The book is an outcome of the eponymous conference at the Ethnographic Museum in Zurich (1-3 December 2016) and offers twelve of the presented papers as essays, arranged in four sections. The first and second sections of the volume focus on the history of the colonial museum and the role of community museums, while the third section

discusses how most museum collaborations seek to enhance local and international «accessibility of collections from Africa» (Laely et al., p. 15). The fourth section offers a platform to criticize and evaluate museum cooperation.

The first and second sections spell out the colonial history of most European collections, detailing the political, cultural, and economic violence inherent in the history of many objects and collections. However, such power imbalances are not a thing of the past but continue into the present. Kiprop Lagat's essay on the *Hazina* exhibition – a cooperation between the National Museums of Kenya and the British Museum – offers a detailed discussion of how the imbalances in economic and power structures continue to challenge even those cooperations that seek to redress such historical injustice. While these cooperations create new opportunities, they can also perpetuate dominant power structures, not least because the idea of sharing knowledge is frequently misunderstood as a unidirectional transference of technical skills. By contrast, museum cooperation requires that both cooperating partners acknowledge and engage the other's expertise. Ciraj Rassool lays out this argument in one of the forewords to the book. It is echoed in George Okello Abungu's scathing critique of the universalist «arrogance» (p. 34) of Western museums, and reflected in the general decolonial inclination of most essays in the volume.

One reason that such disparities persist can be found in the fact that many African museums are politically and economically neglected «at home», as Emery Patrick Effiboley and Amoah Labi discuss. This is why community museums established and supported by international networks seem to offer an alternative for local and often marginalized constituencies, albeit only at first sight. As Rosalie Hans shows, there is a danger in the casting of «museums as tools for sustainable development» as is often the case when they involve

actors such as UNESCO, ICOM, and ICCROM<sup>1</sup> (p. 74). These projects often fail due to a perpetuated inequality in the distribution of power as well as the funding agencies' lack of sensitivity for the local context.

The contributions by Jesmael Mataga, Nelson Adebo Abiti and Michaela Oberhofer will be of particular interest to many readers. In their essays, they discuss the productive results of decentering knowledge away from established museum practices and towards an embrace of the cultural requirements, knowledge, and practices of «source communities» as well as their representatives in African museums. They offer instructive insights that open up theoretical perspectives based on empirical research and experience.

Mataga presents the case of the Mukwati walking stick following its repatriation from a private collection in London to the descendants of its original owner (Mukwati), who in turn entrusted it to the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences for «safekeeping» (p. 64). He recounts how these legitimate heirs requested that the museum follow their prescriptions with regards to the performance of rituals and the observing of taboos when handling the walking stick. In doing so they helped release the museum from its concentration on materiality and place a much stronger emphasis on culturally informed museum practices. As the author emphasizes, this process is key to «decolonizing museum and heritage site management» (p. 60).

Abiti's contribution, «The Road to Reconciliation», focuses on the post-conflict situation in northern Uganda, where victims and perpetrators had to find a way of living together. His approach to the topic of reconciliation as a curator almost completely excluded museum objects and instead relied on a performative mode of contemplating heritage. As the result of a lengthy procedure, which included an ongoing conversation between Abiti, the international peace institutions, and the elders of the communities, the most appropriate way to tackle these issues consisted of acts of remembrance, mediation, and the performance of ceremonies. These included documenting cultural sites collectively and discussing these as an integral – albeit rarely monumental – part of Uganda's cultural heritage.

Michaela Oberhofer discusses how «[c]ollections can generate connections» (Silvester, p. 125) and mutual learning in rich, complex, and engaging ways. She uses the cooperation

between the Museum Rietberg in Zurich, where she is the chief curator of the Africa and Oceania departments, and the Palace Museum in Fouban as a case study to discuss the challenges that are often overlooked when considering cooperation between equal partners: What differences emerge between the partners in the attribution of meaning and value? Or, can the paradigms of good practice applicable at an art museum in Switzerland also be applied to a royal palace museum in Cameroon? In her sensitive and complex discussion she shows that «Western notions of museum, restoration and authenticity are not useful as exclusive points of reference in museum cooperation» (p. 196). The palace museum, in addition to conserving and displaying objects, also maintains them for regular use at festivities and festivals. As such it must be considered a «living museum» (*op. cit.*). By contrast, the museum in Zurich needs to take a very different approach to restoration, as the objects here are removed from use and highly protected. Accordingly, restoration measures may be quite different in practical and aesthetic terms.

To varying degrees, all the contributors address the complexity and challenges that arise from the five key fields of cooperation between Africa and Europe as identified by the editors. The book shifts the debate away from questions of representation and towards the generation of shared knowledge. It is here that the volume sees a promising, alternative path for tackling the politics of cultural ownership and display. As such, it continues and consolidates the efforts of earlier publications. Moreover, its unique focus on the cooperation between European and African museums allows for a more nuanced reflection of specific modes of practice with several stakeholders. And while it is unfortunate that neither the cooperation between the editors and two Ugandan museums nor their highly reflexive exhibition – *Sichtweisen. Visionen einer Museumspartnerschaft*<sup>2</sup> – is featured, this volume makes an indispensable contribution to decentered reflexivity and knowledge production in museum cooperation between Africa and Europe.

<sup>1</sup> International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property.

<sup>2</sup> Ethnographic Museum Zurich, 13.04.2018 - 06.01.2019.