

Book Review

Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe. A New Field for Museum Studies

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The restitution of African objects in European museums has been widely debated after French President Macron's important call in November 2017, based on the report on the 'Restitution of African Cultural Heritage' by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy. The publication 'Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe' does not provide solutions to the manifold issues raised in this debate, but shows a number of useful ways forward for working with contested colonial collections across the two continents.

From the Tyranny of Developmentalism to a new Paradigm for Euro-African museum partnerships

The book, edited by Thomas Laely, Marc Meyer and Raphael Schwere and published 2018 at Transcript (Germany) and Fountain Publishers (Uganda), focuses on African and European museums engaging in cooperative projects and programs. Reality shows that only a few intercontinental museum collaborations "live up to the demands of postcolonial critique" (p. 4). Instead, projects often reproduce colonial dynamics and reinforce relations of dependence. The European partner in this context usually plays the role of funder, teacher/trainer (for example in conservation and restoration) and curator. The African partner is the receiver and learner. Mutual respect and equality in devising and managing shared projects can often not be detected. Rather, a co-production which creates new knowledge, including the transformation of both partners' perspectives, practices and institutions, remains the exception in contemporary museums' partnerships between countries of the two continents. The potential of collections "to express the multiple ways of perceiving, knowing, interpreting and co-existing on a culturally diverse planet" is missed (p. xvi).

The book brings together contributions from multi-disciplinary as well as African and European experts on Museology, Heritage Studies, Cultural Management, Postcolonial Theory and African Studies. It is based on discussions which were held at the conference 'Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe: Opportunities, Challenges and Modalities', hosted in 2016 by the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, where museums academics and professionals exchanged their experiences and expertise in museum collaboration between Africa and Europa. The editors Thomas Laely, Marc Meyer, and Raphael Schwere have additionally based their publication on the outcomes of a transcontinental project between three museums in Africa (Uganda) and Europe (Switzerland) – the Uganda National Museum in Kampala, the Igongo Cultural Centre in Mbarara, and the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich in Switzerland. By doing so, they underline a clearly practice-oriented approach.

Structure & Content

The articles reflect on various cooperative practices implemented or used by museums. For example, they share experiences and visions on African-European museum cooperation and thus debate critical questions such as "[H]ow to address and repair histories of disconnection between artefacts and society, how to rethink the work of museum in mediating relations between objects and individuals, and how to reconsider partnerships between African and European museums"? (p. xxi).

The book is structured into four sections, each comprised of two to three chapters:

PART I. Mapping the field – the history and context of Museum Cooperation between Africa and Europe

PART II. Local communities and international networks – relations of partnership?

PART III. Accessibility of collections from Africa

PART IV. Critique and evaluation of museum cooperation

Part I. Mapping the field

The first two articles in PART I (ch. 2 and 3) by George Okello Abungu, archaeologist from Kenya, and Germain Loumpet, museologist, archaeologist and anthropologist from Cameroon, critically analyze today's museum cooperations between Africa and Europe by presenting a brief historical overview, from the colonial period over restitution debates that began in the 1970s until today's considerable efforts regarding the involvement of communities of origin and ethnic groups. Furthermore, the Western museum model introduced to the African continent in colonial times is discussed critically as Loumpet - in contrast to Labi (ch. 11) - sees no museological tradition in Africa before colonial times.

Part II. Local communities and international networks

The contributions to the second topic are from Jesmael Mataga, a Zimbabwean professional in heritage management, Rosalie Hans, a museum professional and researcher specialized in African museums and cultural heritage, and Nelson Adebo Abiti, a curator of ethnography and history at the Uganda Museum. The collaborative work with communities of origin in African and European museums is the central issue here – in order to establish a multi-perspective way of narratives and knowledge production around artefacts and cultural objects. To Mataga, the involvement of source communities and the integration of their local knowledge (for example based on oral history) in museum work to explore the different narratives of heritage can overcome the European dominance of interpretation and leadership (ch. 4).

Hans highlights that once they enter into an international collaboration African museums have various interests, needs and purposes, which differ severely from the standard Western model. For example, instead of focusing on the collection and its conservation, African museums often prioritize post-colonial self-conception, cultural reassurance and reconciliation work. The local adaption of museum work is therefore overdue (ch. 5).

Chapter 6 by Abiti presents a case study of a collaboration between the Uganda National Museum, the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage and local communities in northern Uganda. By engaging in post-conflict reconciliation efforts these partners successfully fostered dialogue in the local communities and integrated local cultural institutions.

Part III. Accessibility of collections from Africa

PART III is introduced (ch. 7) by Cynthia Kros, historian and heritage specialist from the University of the Witwatersrand/South Africa, and Anneliese Mehnert, assistant curator and researcher at the Anthropology and Archaeology Museum/University of South Africa. Both emphasize the urgently

needed multitude of voices and perspectives in collaborative museum work. By describing Namibian collections held in Finnish museums, Jeremy Silvester, director of the Museums Association of Namibia, points out the untapped potential of knowledge production when European museums with African cultural heritage collaborate with various stakeholders on the African continent in a multidirectional process. In this context, past, present and future need to be reconnected in a cultural dialogue as constituted by museum collaborations in order to reflect on the effects of colonialism up to the present day and to contribute to contemporary self-efficacy of African societies (ch. 8).

In chapter 9 Kiprop Lagat, director of culture in Kenya's Ministry of Sports, Culture and Heritage, highlights that – contrary to popular opinion – many African museums are indeed able to protect and preserve valuable objects as well as host international loan exhibitions by Western museums. Katrin Peters-Klaphake, a German museum professional and researcher, illustrates the power of objects to connect different actors including their diverse views and perspectives (ch. 10).

Part IV. Critique and evaluation of museum cooperation

The last section deals with the future of museum cooperation by evaluating the current practice. It is made up of three chapters by art historians Kwame Amoah Labi and Emery Patrick Effiboley as well as Michaela Oberhofer, curator for Africa and Oceania at Museum Rietberg (Switzerland). Labi shows that the preservation and exhibition of arts and cultural practices is not a unique Western invention (ch. 11). Therefore, African museums must claim their ownership in projects and programs devised by intercontinental museum collaborations. Effiboley points out the indifference or even disregard by African governments for cultural heritage, and therefore the lack of (financial) support for African museums (ch. 12). Oberhofer describes a new practice of restoration between preservation/conservation of the objects (Western model) and the continuous use of artefacts in today's ceremonies and rituals (African model) when European partners support African museums by adapting to their local needs and context (ch. 13).

The conclusion by Cynthia Kros in chapter 14 connects the central outcomes of all chapters. She has written a short summary of recommendations and potential actions for future Euro-African museum partnerships such as increasing local agency, "making loan arrangements more feasible", "using simpler software" and "adjusting the very concept of what a 'museum' is" (p. 226).

Conclusion: Rethinking & Reinventing the Work of the Museum in Europe and Africa

Museums want to be places of dialogue and debate. They can and should protect and disseminate cultural and knowledge diversity. A necessary prerequisite is a radical change in the asymmetrical power relations within museum collaboration between Europe and Africa (p. xix), for example by collaborating with communities whose cultures are exhibited around the world and by establishing a new paradigm of cooperation beyond the traditional 'culture and development' approach. The publication is meant as a starting point "to begin the work of systematically reconfiguring museums" (p. xviii).

To understand our globally entangled and entwined histories, more collaborative academic research on European and African museums and their collections is urgently needed. The publication contributes to this investigation. It addresses not only theories with regard to museum collaboration,

but succeeds to further develop the practice of cooperating with each other in international museum projects. This is a great strength of the book. It also makes it highly valuable and applicable for arts management practice when it comes to international collaboration between unequal partners. Photographs enrich the articles of this book and enable readers to follow the debates, for example when it comes to the African museum landscape. Even though the publication focuses on African-European relations and the museum sector, a reader will also learn to prepare and realize culture and arts collaborations besides museums between the so-called Global North and Global South in a two-way direction of action.

In short, this collection of articles of scholars and practitioners provides valuable insights into their daily work in African-European museum partnerships. This publication is hence not only useful for museum managers but also for all policy makers in the field of culture and heritage politics.